

Vulture

I. Introduction. V.s were highly respected birds in the ancient Orient, especially the proud griffin v. (*Gyps fulvus Hablizl*), but also the bearded v. (*Gypaetus barbatus* [L.]) and the Egyptian v. (*Neophron percnopterus* [L.]). The symbolic meaning of the v. has its roots in both ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian tradition (see SCHROER 1995 for an extensive discussion and examples from Palestine/Israel back to the Middle Bronze Age). The v. as a carrion eater is found in two symbolic contexts, namely accompanying human death (and rebirth) and in war and battle. Since the Neolithic Age, human bodies were left to the v.s for defleshing in the Near East. Perhaps people saw supernatural powers at work in this (see the so-called v.-shrine at Çatal Hüyük [MELLAART 1967: 166, 169 and pl. 45–46, 48–49]). In both Egypt and Mesopotamia v.s were frequently present in scenes of battle since the 3rd mill. (see, for example, the so-called Battlefield Palette from Abydos [PORTER/MOSS 1981: 105, no. 5] or the V. Stela of Eannatum [BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982: 124f; for an overview see RÜHLMANN 1965]). The natural association of hunting lions and v.s devouring the remains adds up to a topos of terror, but also to an apotropaic symbol.

The association of v.s with goddesses but never gods seems to date from an early age. V.s are clearly gendered as female. In some species there is no distinction between males and females, be it in appearance or behavior such as caring for their young. Interestingly, this led to the speculation that there were only female v.s and that the wind was responsible for their fertility. This line of speculation can definitely be found in early Christianity, but very likely dates back to ancient Egypt (WINTER/WINTER 1995).

In Egypt the griffin v. has been associated since the 3rd mill. with both the maternal goddess Mut and with →Nekhbet, the protector of Upper Egypt (see for an early example Nekhbet, who is breast-feeding king Sahure from Abusir [PORTER/MOSS 1974: 331]). The word “mother” (→Mother [Egypt]), the name of the goddess Mut, but also the word *nr.t* or *nrw* “terror” is written with the sitting griffin v. Death and birth or rebirth belong to the domain of the v. goddesses. On Egyptian stamp seals the v. of Nekhbet appears at an early date, but overall glyptic representations are rare (WARD 1978: pl. 12: 305, 309–312; WIESE 1996: 141, pl. 32:660; HORNUNG/STAEHELIN 1976: 273, no. 409; 377 no. B 28). At the

beginning of the Middle Kingdom apotropaic armed lions and v.s are depicted on magical knives for the protection of mother and child (ALTENMÜLLER 1965, 1986). On these apotropaica the griffin v. represents the powerful goddess Nekhbet. The Egyptian visual imagery of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age primarily show the v. in the realm of the dead. On papyri from the Book of the Dead dating to the 11th and 10th cent., the v. can be found repeatedly in connection with solar symbolism, i.e., together with Kheper (→Scarab), the falcon head (→Falcon, →Falcon-headed gods)/solar disc (→Sun, →Solar deities), or the head of the young sun god in the flower, suggesting the rebirth of the dead into a new life (NIWINSKI 1989: figs. 83, 87; SCHROER 1997: fig. 5). V. goddesses, sometimes →Isis and Nephtys as lamenting women in the shape of v.s, flank the bier where they assist in the judgment of the dead (PIANKOFF/RAMBOVA 1954: I 54, fig. 39) and provide hope of mercy. On pectorals in the form of v.s the dead are placed under the bird’s wings (see ALDRED 1980: fig. 65). In the Late Period amulets in the shape of v.s appear.

In Syro-Palestinian glyptic, especially on cylinder seals, v.s are shown either as emblem animals or representatives of the Lady of Upper Egypt, Nekhbet, although less frequently than the falcons of →Horus. They are shown *en face* with their wings spread over a scene and the long neck bent to a horizontal position, or they are depicted flying entirely in profile, often carrying protective *shen*-rings in their talons. Following Egyptian conventions, they fly above rulers or appear in scenes of sovereignty (TEISSIER 1996: 93–95, figs. 175–182; Otto 2000: 260). The heraldic, frontal view suggests that v.s not only guarantee protection but are also some kind of royal emblem animal.

The supposedly oldest representation of a v. from the Levant dates from the Chalcolithic Period: the top of a standard in the form of a stylized flying v. stems from the treasure cave at Nahal Mishmar west of the Dead Sea (BAR-ADON 1980: 102f, no. 154). The hoard find, the precious material, and the function as a head of a scepter or standard suggest that the v. was a mighty, perhaps heraldic-martial, symbol of the ruling class. It thus takes its place next to the heads and horns of →caprids so dominant in this period, not only at Nahal Mishmar but also on an ostrakon from Tuleilat el-Ghassul (SCHROER 1995: fig. 1c). From the Early Bronze Age (see the seal impressions from Hazor [BEN-TOR 1978: 28, no. IIC-8] and

Tell el-Handaqq, Jordan [CHESSON 1998: 29, 31, fig. 12 left]) onward, and most importantly during the Middle Bronze Age (SCHROER 1995: fig. 2d-i, 4b; to be added are the following Middle Bronze Age stamp seals: KEEL 1997: Asor no. 6; OREN 1973: 246f, fig. 51:28 from Beth-Shean), glyptic representations of the v. frequently show the animal sitting on top of a →lion, thus underlining the association with war and terror. Since the Middle Bronze Age a connection between the goddess and the terror-evoking lion and (sitting) v. can be traced. Also, groups of figurines with the goddess, lion, and v. can be found outside of glyptic art, e.g., at Nahariya (DOTHAN 1956: pl. 4; see SCHROER 1995: fig. 4). Whenever the lion and v. are armed with knives, they are related to the motifs of the Egyptian magical knives protecting mother and child.

In the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age the iconography of the v. is much less coherent than in the Middle Bronze Age. A comprehensive catalogue of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age finds from the Levant is outside of the scope of this article. Only the glyptic art of Palestine/Israel is catalogued as the v. seems to be missing on other media. There are no v. amulets known from Palestine/Israel at present.

II. Typology

II.1. Phenotypes

Crucial for the iconographic identification of a bird as v. are the long, naked neck and the bald head. However, in many cases the distinction from falcons can be difficult. The following differences may be helpful in distinguishing the two: the spread wings of the v. are larger in comparison to the body than those of the falcon; sitting v.s are long-legged; their tail almost touches the ground in a curved line and is never spread backward like that of falcons. Unlike the v. the neck of a falcon is stout, wide, and feathered; its beak is short, triangular, and strongly curved, provided the depiction is exact. Since the birds on Philistine pottery do not fulfill the last comparative criterion they are not covered in the following discussion.

V.s are usually represented as *sitting* (1-3, →Astarte 9*, →Hare 8*) or *flying en face* (4*-11). The flying position is most often artificial, i.e., the bird is depicted in frontal view with spread wings and extended talons. This heraldic pose is already known in the older Egyptian art and influenced by it in Old Syrian art, with the difference that in representations from Palestine/Israel the neck is not bent to a horizontal position. In some rare instances the v. is

shown flying in profile (12*) or with spread wings, either landing or taking off (13).

II.2. Associations

1. ASSOCIATED WITH DEITIES/DEMONS (1, →Astarte 9) 2. ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS 2.1. Scarab (7) 2.2. Horned animal (11-13) 2.3. Lion (3) 2.4. Hare (→Hare 8) 3. ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANS 3.1. King (2-5) 3.2. Worshipper (6)

1. ASSOCIATED WITH DEITIES/DEMONS. As a representative of →Nekhbet a v. is depicted next to a summit of deities (→Astarte 9*) including a winged goddess, perhaps →Astarte, the Egyptian gods →Ptah, and possibly →Resheph. Most likely a single sitting v. flanked by ankh signs on a scarab from Shechem (1), probably dating to the Late Bronze Age I, represents →Nekhbet as well.

2. ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS

2.1. Scarab. The heraldic v. appears below an Egyptian solar symbol, the winged Kheper (→Scarab) (7*); see also possibly a piece from Egyptian Tell Basta [BUCHANAN/MOOREY 1988: pl. 10: 290]). Most likely this constellation evokes the care of the v. goddess →Nekhbet for the dead and her involvement in their sunlike rebirth. The isolated heraldic v. without any indication of the protected entity may invoke protection for the king or more likely for the dead (8-10).

2.2. Horned animal. V.s are sometimes associated with goat-like animals or deer. A cylinder seal from Tell Deir 'Alla shows from above a flying v. next to a reposing deer (11). A v. obviously just taking wing is depicted on the side of a rectangular plaque from Gezer (13). A four-legged beast with its head turned back, most likely a →caprid, is on the verso of the same plaque. Only in one case is the animal a lactating dam, the very picture of divine care (12*; KEEL 1980). Leaves or →twigs in the scene may invoke a connection with the goddess of vegetation, known from the Middle Bronze Age.

2.3. Lion. A unique lion-scaraboid (3) seems to continue the old connection of a →lion and sitting v. The identification of the second, similarly sitting bird on the seal is unclear.

2.4. Hare. →Hare 8* seems to depict a v. pursuing a fleeing hare, not quite in keeping with the bird's carrion-eating habits. In the lower register of the seal a lion attacks a gazelle. Both scenes seem to hint at the threatening, uncivilized world, whereas the register in the middle with the watchful →griffins flanking a stylized →tree invokes the stability of the ordered, habitable world in the midst of threat.

3. ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANS.

3.1. King. A sitting *v.* (2) protects with its wings and a shen-ring (?) the cartouche of Amenhotep (1426–1400). *V.s en face* with ankh signs in their extended talons protect the throne name of Thutmose III (1479–1426) (4*) or the names of other kings (5).

3.2. Worshipper. On a scarab from Acco (6), two men worship two flying *v.s* presented *en face* between them, perhaps representing →Nekhbet and Mut according to Egyptian tradition. Their divine status is likely further underlined by the guardian symbols in the two lower registers: two opposing →sphinxes and below them two →falcons, each flanked by a →uraeus.

III. Sources

From the Late Bronze Age onward *v.s* are only represented on stamp seals in Palestine/Israel. From the 11th to the 7th cent. they are documented mainly in the North. However, considering the small group of heterogeneous pieces, this distribution is not necessarily conclusive.

IV. Conclusion.

The glyptic of the Middle Bronze Age in Palestine/Israel knows the *v.* as an apotropaic symbol (together with the →lion) and in connection with the →tree goddess in her role as the →Mistress-of-animals (KEEL 1995: § 559) and her regenerative symbols (→twigs, →caprids). Near Eastern and Egyptian (magical knife) influences are obviously intertwined here. In Old Syrian glyptic the symbolism of the *v.* is dominated by Egyptian influence stressing the *v.* goddess →Nekhbet as protector of kingship.

Most Late Bronze Age evidence from Palestine/Israel indicates a connection between the *v.* and Nekhbet (1, 6–7*, →Astarte 9*). This connection continues into the Iron Age. The association of the *v.* with solar symbols seems to stem from the Egyptian Book of the Dead and is most likely also linked to Nekhbet. Iconographically the Egyptian background is no longer the only symbolic meaning of the *v.*, especially in the Iron Age. The *v.* stands for the untamed fauna (see also →Hare), and appears in one case (3) with its old partner, the lion. Its association with goats and deer in the Iron Age (11, 13), once with a lactating dam (12*), may bear witness to the resumption of a Middle Bronze Age tradition (SCHROER 1995: fig. 3a). This would be another indication of the continuous existence or revival of old Canaanite traditions during the Iron Age.

V. Catalogue

1 Scarab, light-blue stone, Shechem, ca. 1540/1450–1400. HORN 1962: fig. 2:36 2 Rectangular plaque, enstatite, Tell el-‘Ajjul, 1426–1400 (Amenophis II). KEEL 1997: Tell el-‘Agul no. 266 3 Lion scaraboid, faience, Megiddo. 1100–1000. SCHUMACHER 1908: pl. 26:0 4* Scarab, enstatite, 16.6 x 12.4 x 6.6 mm, Acco, 1292–1150. Jerusalem, Israel Antiquities Authority, 73–173. KEEL 1997: Akko no. 57 5 Scaraboid, bone, Lachish, 900–750. TUFNELL 1953: pl. 44:106; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: fig. 267a 6 Scarab, enstatite, Acco, 900–700. KEEL 1997: Akko no. 195 7* Scarab, blue paste, 12 x 9 mm. Tell en-Naşbeh, 1150–700. Berkeley CA, Pacific School of Religion Museum, 2312. McCOWN et al. 1947: pl. 54:1 8 Round plaque with domed back, black stone, Tell en-Naşbeh, 1000–800. McCOWN et al. 1947: pl. 54:56; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: fig. 267b 9 Scarab, composite material, Achzib, 9th cent. KEEL 1997: Achsib no. 64 10 Stamp seal impression, clay, Tell Amal, 800–600. LEVY/EDELSTEIN 1972: fig.7:19 11 Cylinder seal, Tell Deir ‘Alla, ca. 1540/1450–1400. FRANKEN 1992: fig.3–9:2 12* Scaraboid, Megiddo, 7th cent. Jerusalem, Israel Antiquity Authorities, 34.1483 (missing). KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: fig. 318a 13 Rectangular plaque, black stone, Gezer, 14th cent. KEEL 2004: pl. 16:2

VI. Selected bibliography

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