

The Mesopotamian Origins of the Hittite Double-Headed Eagle

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ABSTRACT

The figure of a double-headed bird is represented in many cultures around the globe, and in various time periods. “The double-headed eagle has been a royal symbol throughout its history until the present day” (Deeds 1935:106). The history of the use of the double-headed eagle in various contexts since the Crusades has been well documented. It has been used as a heraldic emblem of many royal houses, and is still a state symbol in some countries. However, ancient Near Eastern cultures had used the double-headed bird motif millennia before the Crusades. One striking example is that of the Hittites, for whom it was a “royal insignia” (Collins 2010:60). This paper explores the Mesopotamian origins of the double-headed eagle motif as used by the Hittites.

Keywords: double-headed eagle, Hittite, comparative iconography

INTRODUCTION

There has been little research on the use of the double-headed eagle motif before the Common Era. Some research has been done on double-headed animal imagery (Mundkur 1984), but generally it is part of a broader study (e.g. Mollier 2004). Rudolf Wittkower, in his study of the eagle and snake motif, gives passing mention of the double-headed eagle in a footnote, indicating that it was out of the scope of his article and directing the reader to “relevant material” in other articles (Wittkower 1939:Note 10).

That the double-headed eagle motif appears on Hittite monuments in central Anatolia has been cited since their discovery by Charles Texier in the early 19th century. Modern historians have simply claimed that the monumental art of the Hittites was so impressive that it was copied by later peoples for their coats of arms. But that is the end of it—or the beginning of the double-headed eagle image—for them. In 1923 Arthur C. Parker, an American anthropologist and historian wrote an influential article, “The Double-Headed Eagle and Whence it Came,” in which he acknowledges a Mesopotamian precursor to that of the Hittites.

Although Balaji Mundkur’s 1984 article “The Bicephalous ‘Animal Style’ in Northern Eurasian Religious Art and Its Western Hemispheric Analogues” was specifically a study of double-headed animals, it was broad in scope, including animals as well as birds, and was not focused on iconography: “Aboriginal zoomorphic art of northern Eurasia and the New World...need not exhibit visually striking resemblances” (Mundkur 1984:474). Mundkur was more interested in interpretation—in cross-cultural “primordial religious attitudes” across a very wide geographical area.

Two of Mundkur’s points served as the foundation for the present investigation. First, that “bicephalous, or double-headed, images constitute a widely distributed class of objects of great variety about whose primordial relationships we know little” (Mundkur 1984:451). Exploration of those “primordial relationships” was one of the aims of this project.

The second point is “the potential of comparative iconography in view of the antiquity and extremely wide geographical distribution of bicephalous images” (Mundkur 1984:452). Even though our subject, the double-headed eagle, is not as broad as that of Mundkur (double-headed animals in general), its antiquity and geographical distribution are no less significant. There is great potential for comparative iconography for the double-headed eagle in the ancient Near East. This project was originally to be a survey of different types of the double-headed eagle in the ancient Near Eastern context, as well as a study of the development of it, modeled after Bernard Goldman’s article “The Development of the Lion-Griffin” (1960), which explains the development of the lion-griffin from the second millennium to the seventh millennium BCE. However, because of space and time constraints we will simply show that the origin of the double-headed eagle motif used by the Hittites lies in Mesopotamia (Alexander 1989:157).

The original plan of this research was to address three questions: (1) to explore the possibility of a continual line of transmission of the use of the bicephalous eagle from Bronze Age Mesopotamia to the present; (2) to investigate the origin(s) of the bicephalous eagle as a motif; (3) to find the meaning ancient cultures associated with the

bicephalous eagle. However, that plan changed and the following will simply illustrate the use of the double-headed eagle motif by the Hittites, and explore Mesopotamian influences on the motif.

BACKGROUND

The Double-Headed Eagle

The double-headed eagle motif has been used as an emblem by countries, nations, and royal houses in Europe since the early medieval period. Notable examples include the Byzantine House of Palaiologos, the Holy Roman Empire, the House of Habsburg, and the Ruriks and Romanovs of Russia. The Russian use of the double-headed eagle motif (dating from the adoption of it by Ivan III in 1497), though iconographically modeled after the Byzantine, was likely in imitation of the Hapsburgian (Alef 1966). Various successors, both states and rulers, of the Byzantine Empire, Holy Roman Empire, and Russian Empire adopted the double-headed eagle in their own coats of arms. Prior to its use in the Byzantine period, the double-headed eagle had been used by the Seljuk Turks and others. The use of the double-headed eagle between the time of the Hittite Empire and the adoption of it by the West deserves more research, but is out of the scope of this paper.

The Hittites

The period from the 19th-18th centuries BCE is referred to as the Assyrian Colony period, during which the Assyrians set up trading posts to gain raw materials from Anatolia (Macqueen 2003:18). This was a peaceful period; the Anatolians prospered, and the Assyrian traders took Anatolian wives (Macqueen 2003:19). After some new population migrations, and the Old and Middle Kingdom periods, the Hittite Empire flourished during the 14th-12th centuries BCE. The influx of new people, with the “resistance to syncretization,” resulted in the Hittite pantheon having very many deities, and Hittite religion having influences from many sources (Beckman 1989:99). The fall of the kingdom was related, either directly or indirectly, to the so-called Sea Peoples (Beckman 2007:111).

The Hittites apparently engaged in falconry (Canby 2002). This is evident from texts and from imagery from various sources, including those portraying a double-headed eagle (“hawk”) described below. Images of falconry include portrayals of the *lituus* (Hittite: *kalmus*), an implement for hunting hares (Canby 2002:170).

METHODS

The methodology for this project consisted of a literature review, combing sources for any images or mention of double-headed eagles, and seeking chronological and geographical patterns. One of the most fruitful sources was Edith Porada’s *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections* (1948). Dozens of manifestations of the double-headed eagle motif were found, keeping in mind Bernard Goldman’s words, “As is to be expected in a large collection of objects, one or two features may be lacking in some examples without disrupting the homogeneity of the group” (1960:321), but only a few exemplary cases are in this report. The Discussion section discusses possible stylistic origins for the double-headed eagle motif. This was perhaps the most tantalizing part of the entire project.

RESULTS

Bird or animal headed deities were popular motifs in the ancient Near East. The double-headed eagle was a common motif of Anatolian art of the 2nd millennium BCE (Alexander 1989:154). A royal insignia of the Hittites (Collins 2010:60), it was used for centuries prior to the Empire period (Alexander 1989:157). We have taken examples of the Hittites’ use of the double-headed eagle motif, from monumental architecture and from seals, and related characteristics and influences of them. General characteristics include (though not present in every example):

- Supporting figures
- Grasping prey in talons
- A twisted band

Supporting Figures

The double-headed eagle supporting a figure is a new element in Hittite art (Alexander 1989:154). Animals acting as a totem or symbol for deities are a common motif throughout the ancient Near East. The animal displays or represents attributes of the deity, which it is shown supporting (Figure 5 shows other animal supporters). For example, the Hittite Storm God is seen standing on his bull, as both are related to fertility. The double-headed eagle, however, is not restricted to supporting deities, and also appears supporting human figures (Alexander 1989:156 and n. 9; Figure 1). This is an indication of the use of the eagle as a personal (or family) symbol.



Figure 1. Partial Hittite seal impression (from Alexander 1986:Figure 3)

The theme of the double-headed eagle as a supporting element was not forgotten with the end of the Hittites. Figure 2 shows an example from the Neo-Hittite period (1200-800 BCE). This stele shows the double-headed eagle supporting what appears to be a king being served while sitting at a table (Ingholt 1942:472). It was found at Level F of the site of Hamath (modern Hama, Syria).



Figure 2. Basalt stele from Hama (Ingholt 1942:Figure 10)

Grasping Prey in Talons

The double-headed eagle grasping two animals in its talons is a feature of Hittite art originating in the Colony period, with single-headed eagles. It has been seen on seals and in ivory (Alexander 1989:154; Figure 3). This motif is very prevalent in the imagery of cylinder seals from Mesopotamia, especially the Early Dynastic period.

The Twist

Twisted lines are a common element in Hittite art. An interesting interpretation is that the twist motif “derived from the symbolical representation of two interlaced snakes” (von der Osten 1926:406). Figure 3 shows a single-headed eagle with animals in both talons, above a twist (von der Osten 1926:114).



Figure 3. Hittite stamp seal (von der Osten 1926:Figure 26)

Alaça Hüyük

The Hittite walled city of Alaca Hüyük was important as a ceremonial center during the 14th-13th centuries BCE (Alexander 1989:151). The double-headed eagle is prominently displayed on the eastern section of the Sphinx Gate grasping two prey animals, likely hares (Figure 4). Both sections of the Sphinx Gate display the double-headed eagle supporting figures, although the inside face of the western section has been worn down so that the image is not as visible (Alexander 1989). The figures supported by the double-headed eagle, once thought to represent deities, are now considered to be the king (on the east pier) and queen (on the west pier) (Alexander 1989). The king supported by the eagle is holding a short *lituus* (possibly as a royal emblem), and the eagle’s necks have neckbands, making the whole an “obvious reference to the practice of falconry” (Canby 2002:179). The figural and stylistic types shown in much of the art at Alaca Hüyük were later used at Yazilikaya (Alexander 1986:120).



Figure 4. The eastern pier of the Sphinx Gate at Alaca Hüyük, showing the double-headed eagle grasping two hares (Alexander 1986:Plate XXXIXa)

Yazilikaya

Yazilikaya is a natural rock sanctuary in the vicinity of the Hittite capital of Hattusas (modern Boğazköy) dating to the 14th-13th centuries BCE. It is naturally divided into two chambers, subdivided by scholars into three. The limestone walls of this sanctuary show 65 male and female deities, carved in relief, by the order of king Tudhaliya IV. The deities are of the Hurrian pantheon, which had been adopted by the Hittites. The function and meaning of Yazilikaya has been debated since its discovery in the early 19th century (Güterbock 1975). Among the reliefs is the image of the double-headed eagle, supporting figures 45 and 46 in Chamber A, thought to represent the daughter and granddaughter of the Tešub, the storm god (Alexander 1986:121; Figure 5). Interestingly, one of the deities (no. 32) at Yazilikaya is portrayed carrying a *lituus* (Canby 2002:171; Collins 2010:Figure 13). Also of note is the discovery in Chamber C of the bones of a hare, a golden eagle, and a kestrel, which had been burned and cleaned (Canby 2002:166).



Figure 5. The central scene of the shrine of Yazilikaya Chamber A, with the double-headed eagle supporting two goddesses (Akurgal 1973:Figure 151)

Seals

The typical Hittite seal is of the conical type (see Figure 6). Old Hittite period seals stylistically followed those of the Colony period (Macqueen 2003:101). These early seals had a simple design of either geometric shape or animal and/or human figures. Later, a decorative border was added to the central design. The double-headed eagle appears in seals from throughout Hittite history (Alexander 1989:154). A possible function of the double-headed eagle on seals could be to protect the bearer of the seal (Porada 1993:577).

Figure 6 shows an example of a Colony period stamp seal from the Assyrian trading colony at Hattuša bearing the double-headed eagle over a twist. This seal can be compared with one from the Old Hittite period, which places the double-headed eagle above two lions, separated from them by a twist (Özgüç 1947:236). Both can be compared to Figure 3, with the single-headed eagle grasping its prey, above the twist.



Figure 6. Double-headed eagle on a stamp seal from the Assyrian trading colony of Hattuša (Bittel 1970:Plate 7)

Figure 7 is an Imperial period seal, showing the typical central motif, surrounded by a circular border. There is at least one double-headed eagle (bottom left), with another probably on the right.



Figure 7. Drawing of a Hittite seal from Ugarit; Imperial Period (Macqueen 2003:Illustration 85)

Cylinder seals. Cylinder seals, common in Mesopotamia, are the main design influence on the Hittite stamp seals. Figures 8-10 are cylinder seals, all probably from the Colony period, from southeast Anatolia or Syria. Figure 8 shows a very different double-headed eagle. The seal impression has imagery with Mesopotamian themes and motifs. However, note the similarities to that in Figure 9. The double-headed eagles in each exhibit elongated necks and wide tails, with long, thin legs.



Figure 8. Seal impression from Alalakh (Tell Atchana); from Assyrian Colony period (Collon 1987:Illustration 142)



Figure 9. Seal impression of unknown date and provenience; likely lower Anatolia (Porada 1948:Plate CXXXVI, 901)

Figure 10 shows another very different style of the double-headed eagle. This one has feline-looking heads (see Discussion), but the image is more realistic than those in Figures 8 and 9.



Figure 10. Seal impression from Syria; unknown date (Porada 1948:Plate CXLI, 936E)

DISCUSSION

There are two paths down which this research could continue. The first is the purely artistic, following the iconographic sources of inspiration or models for the double-headed eagle image. The second is the meaning associated with the image. In my research I have not been able to recognize any reasons for cultures to adopt the double-headed eagle motif, but those reasons must surely be related to the meanings, which the cultures associated with the image. As Rudolf Wittkower noted in his study of the eagle and serpent motif, it is not enough to know the history of a symbol. There should be an “attempt to understand the significance of a particular symbol in a given context” (Wittkower 1939:293).

Just as Goldman makes the distinction between *eagle-headed* and *lion-headed* griffins (Goldman 1960:321), we must be careful not to disregard differences between various double-headed eagle and related images, even though we expect that the inspiration(s) for the double-headed eagle may be drastically different from the double-headed eagle itself. For example, the lion-griffin started as a lion-headed eagle centuries before (Porada 1993:570). It is

evident from Akkadian cylinder seals that “the four-legged lion griffin split off, as it were, from the lion headed eagle” and the meanings attached to each changed accordingly (Porada 1993:571). Interestingly, Figure 11 clearly shows a griffin and a double-bird-headed figure on the same seal.



Figure 11. Drawing of Mittanian seal; 15th century BCE (Porada 1993:Figure 40)

Inspiration for the Image

Our results show that the double-headed eagle motif used by the Hittites was first used in Mesopotamia. However, while we have examples of the use of the motif in Mesopotamia, we still have little indication as to the origin of the motif itself. Interesting correlations, if not origins, include:

- Eagle and snake symbolism
- Double-headed deities/kings
- Double-feline heads

Eagle and Snake Symbolism. Studies have been conducted on the symbolism behind the eagle and snake motif throughout the world (for an old example see Wittkower 1939). While this may not be directly related to a study of the double-headed eagle motif, two interesting ideas should be mentioned here. First, there is a Babylonian seal impression from the third millennium BCE, which displays a single-headed eagle grasping two snakes in its talons (Figure 12). Second, as noted above, the idea that the Hittite twist was derived from intertwined snakes is interesting.



Figure 12. Drawing of a Babylonian seal impression; 3rd millennium BCE (Wittkower 1939:Plate 49d)

Double-Headed Deities. Imagery of double-headed gods is a common occurrence in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world (for an early study see Deeds 1935; Figure 11). The artwork from the Early Dynastic period of Early Mesopotamia has many double-headed king figures. Figure 13 shows a double-headed winged figure with a humanoid body (possibly representing a deity).

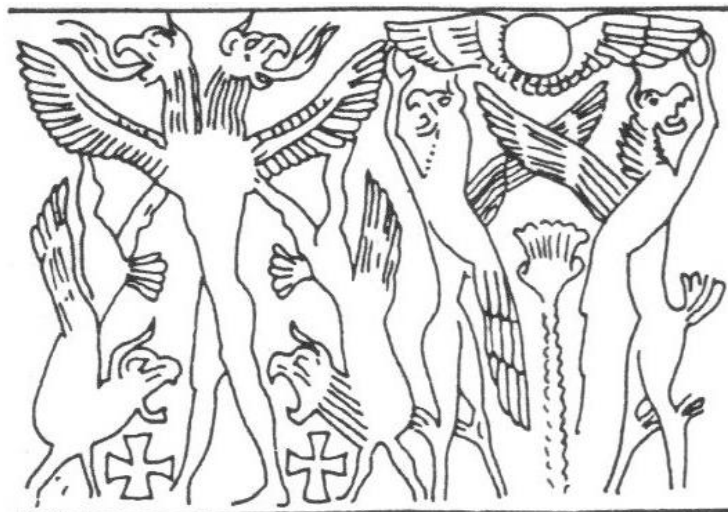


Figure 13. Seal impression from Ashur; seal of an Assyrian king of the 14th century BCE (Collon 1987:Illustration 276; also Deeds 1935:Figure 10)

Feline Heads. The double-headed eagle image may have been inspired by double-headed feline images. Figure 14 is of an impression from a cylinder seal found at the site of Acem Hüyük, an Old Assyrian trading colony in central Turkey. It shows apparently feline heads, with stylized wings and no body. Compare this with Figure 15, which also has no body, but, along with the notably feline heads, has front limbs and a tail. This is a representation of Aker, an Egyptian double-headed feline god. The original clay impression was found in the royal cemetery at Abydos, and dates to ca. 3150 BCE (MacArthur 2010:132). Both can also be compared with Figure 10.

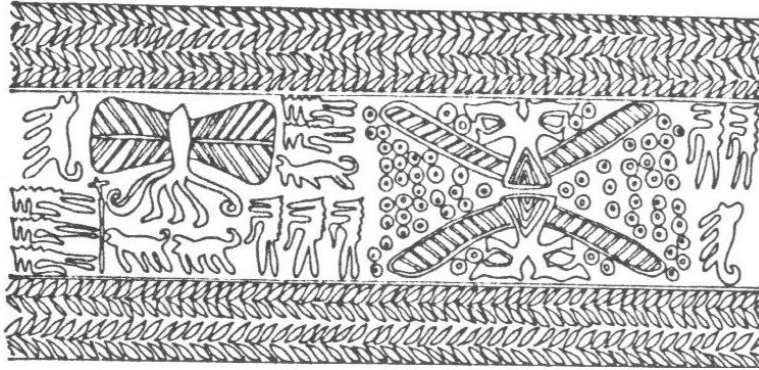


Figure 14. Seal impression from Acem Hüyük; Assyrian Colony period (Collon 1987:Illustration 150)

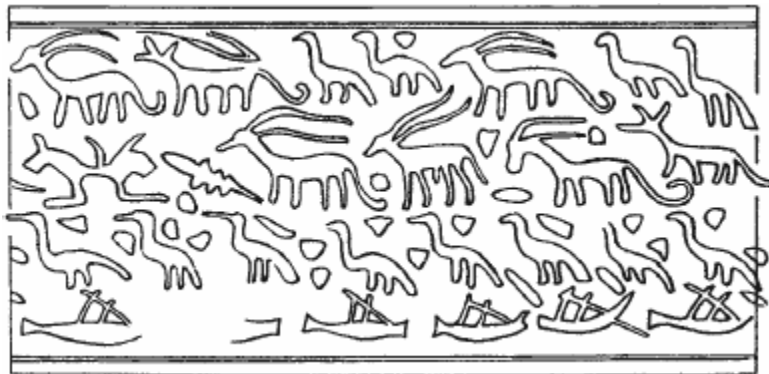


Figure 15. Seal impression from Abydos; 4th millennium BCE (after MacArthur 2010:Catalog Number 75)

Meaning of the Double-Headed Eagle

Difficulty exists in the understanding of the meanings of images in different periods of the ancient Near East, in part due to the “interweaving of meanings belonging to different periods” but associated with similar images or motifs (Porada 1993:571). The double-headed eagle is no exception. As we have shown there are many different portrayals of the image and different possibilities for its origin(s). Answers to the question of meaning lie in a more chronological study of the images, and in a realization of the cultural context of each image, which could not be adequately done in this paper.

Sumerian literature may shed light on the origin of the double-headed eagle in Mesopotamia. Of particular interest are the Sumerian thunderbird Imdugud, and the morphology of its representations. This thunderbird is also called Ningirsu or Ninurta (Jacobsen 1987:327 note 11). It is shown in some cases as a lion-headed bird grasping antelopes in its talons. The similarities with the double-headed eagle are obvious, and with the study of Sumerian literature to go along with it, perhaps there is a link between the griffin and the double-headed eagle.

CONCLUSIONS

“Bicephalous, or double-headed, images constitute a widely distributed class of objects of great variety about whose primordial relationships we know little” (Mundkur 1984:451). This is not the case in the ancient Near East, where the class of objects showing the double-headed eagle is much narrower, namely sculpture and seals, along with Hittite monumental architecture. Recognizing that much of Mesopotamian culture transmitted northwest from the southeast (Sumer) over time, and that the use of the double-headed eagle followed the same route, the relationships of the objects are generally understood, even if the meanings behind the iconography are not.

FURTHER STUDY

This paper merely scrapes the surface of the research potential related to the double-headed eagle motif in the ancient Near East. Other directions for research, even if not necessarily related to the double-headed eagle, include:

animals as supporting elements, including griffins; the motif of birds grasping animals, including Imdugud; flames (or tongues) emanating from the mouths of certain animals (see Figures 11, 13, 14).

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