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The Eagle in South Arabian Iconography

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Abstract

The eagle occupies a unique yet limited position in South Arabian iconography. The first representations of the eagle appeared only at the end of the first millennium BC. Local coinage featuring eagles gradually became more widespread, particularly in the Ḥaḍramawt, albeit in limited quantities.

To understand the mythology of the eagle, it is worthwhile to consider the writings of Greek and Latin authors, who often equate it with deities. These writings may well have influenced artists in the Greco-Roman Middle East, particularly in Syria and Nabatea. Eagle representations may adorn sanctuaries or tombs. In South Arabia, the question of eagle divination remains unanswered.

The battle between the eagle and the serpent, illustrated in many texts, was only timidly depicted in iconography at the start of the Common Era. It then appeared on a few plaques, the exact location and meaning of which are still unknown.

Keywords

South Arabia Art – coins – Ḥimyar – Ḥaḍramawt – eagle – snake

النسر في أيقونات جنوب الجزيرة العربية

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الملخص

يحتل النسر موقعًا فريدًا وإن كان محدودًا في أيقونات جنوب شبه الجزيرة العربية، وبدأت أولى أشكاله بالظهور في نهاية الألفية الأولى قبل الميلاد. وتدرجياً، أصبحت صور النسر أكثر انتشاراً على العملة المحلية، وخاصةً في حضرموت، رغم أنها ظلت محدودة العدد.

ولفهم أساطير النسر، من المفيد الإشارة إلى كتابات المؤلفين في اللغات اليونانية واللاتينية، الذين كانوا في كثير من الأحيان يجعلونه نظيراً للآلهة. وقد تكون هذه الكتابات قد أثرت على الفنانين في الشرق

الأوسط الإغريقي الروماني، وخصوصًا في سوريا وبلاد الأنباط، كما زُيّنت الصروح أو القبور بأشكال النسـر. وفي جنوب شبه الجزيرة العربية، يبقى السؤال عن استخدام النسـر في العِرافة بدون جواب. وظهرت المعركة بين النسـر والثعبان، والتي تَرَدُّ في العديد من النصوص، بشكل خجول في الأيقونات مع بداية التاريخ الميلادي، ثم ظهرت لاحقًا على عدد قليل من اللوحات المعدنية، التي لا يزال مكانها الدقيق ودلالاتها مجهولي الهوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الفنون في جنوب شبه الجزيرة العربية - النقود - حمير - حضرموت - النسـر - الثعابين

Introduction

The eagle is a generally admired animal with a dual symbolism, royal and warlike. In classical Greece, however, the eagle appeared above all as the symbol of the Great Persian King. It was only after Alexander's victory over the Persian Empire in 331 BCE that the symbolism of the sovereign eagle was developed within the Hellenistic monarchies.

In Greek mythology, the eagle is an attribute of Zeus, the king of birds and the bird of kings, who carries thunderbolts and is the only animal residing in the heavens, as the lion was the lord of the earth among animals. Hence, the eagle was the lord of the sky.

The eagle is a Persian emblem and symbolizes the Great King. Subsequently, the Greeks adopted the eagle as an emblem of the Great King, without seeking to compete with him. However, the Hellenistic rulers restored the eagle's prestigious image, which was featured on their coins.

In Roman history, on the other hand, the image of the eagle was closely associated with Urbs/Roma from the very beginning of Rome's history, with the bird's symbolism being recycled, as it were, as political regimes changed. Of the double image of the eagle as both king and warrior, the first faded after the monarchic period, while the second came to the fore. Finally, no doubt partly under Hellenistic influence, the image of the eagle once again became a symbol of personal power under the Empire. It is also the bird most often associated with power, strength, and endurance – qualities that have been used over the centuries as symbols of rulers of almost all countries, nations, and cultures.

The question of how the ancient pre-Islamic people integrated this symbolism remains unanswered. Was there an *"interpretatio arabica"* or even *"south arabica"* of Greek or Roman divinities by the inhabitants of Arabia? What is the meaning of these representations of eagles and eagles associated with snakes from the beginning of the 1st century BC?

Part I: Eagles on Coins

While the eagle adorns coins as early as the 6th century BC (600–550 BC) in Ionia (western Asia Minor), its appearance in South Arabia does not predate the 1st century BC.

To the contrary, while the owl is represented on coins as early as the 6th century BC in Asia Minor, the earliest example is probably an electrum coin found under the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, dated circa 640 BC. From the Greek island of Samos comes an electrum coin with an outstretched winged eagle, dated to around 640 B.C. (Babelon 1894: 153, pl. III).

Then, Tetradrachms are known from Athens, dated around 490/480 BC. Other fractions of Tetradrachms with owls and various denominations on the Attic standard, imitating originals from the 4th or occasionally 5th century BC. Athens, appear to be attributable to Qatabān, and sometimes to Saba', with a possible precedence to Qatabān (Munro-Hay 2003: 43). The reasons for this chronological gap – yet to be specified – seem to be linked to the power of Athenian trade.

Eagle coins are rare in South Arabia, primarily known from Ḥaḍramawt and from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, according to rare private collections and the Vienna and Mukallā museums. In Nabatea, around Petra, early in the first century AD, many coins depict eagles and architectural elements featuring eagles.

The golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), native to the Greek world, is often seen on ancient coins. The earliest known depiction of an eagle on a coin dates back to around 600–550 BCE: an electrum hekete (or “one-sixth stater,” 1.86 grams) from an uncertain mint in Ionia, on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea. The bird appears with wings spread in a stance called “eagle displayed” in heraldry (Fig. 1). Another unique coin also features a pelleted design border. It was struck on a different weight standard (2.58 grams) and is noted as “one of the earliest attempts in numismatic art to represent a bird in flight.”

Hellenistic rulers extensively used the eagle in their coinage. The eagle appears on the coins of the kings of Macedonia and on the reverse of Alexander's tetradrachms. This image is repeated on the coins of the Antigonids, Seleucids, and Lagids. The eagle thus became the dominant motif of the Lagid type.

1.1 *Hellenistic Coins*

1. Old coins with an eagle. Alexander, circa 330 BC.

Alexander III ‘the Great’. 336–323 BC. AR Diobol (9mm, 1.28 g, 6h). Amphipolis mint. Struck under Antipater, circa 332–326 BC. Head of Herakles right, wearing lion skin. Two eagles confronted each other standing on the exergue line.

2. Ptolemaic coins with eagles

Although the image of a single eagle (the badge of Ptolemaic royalty) appears on the vast majority of ancient Egyptian Ptolemaic bronze coins, a two-eagle symbol is the second most common reverse type. It should also be noted that the Ptolemaic coins feature eagles, either singly or in pairs. Artistically, Ptolemaic coinage closely followed contemporary Greek currencies. A commonplace symbol of the Ptolemaic dynasty is an eagle standing on a thunderbolt, first adopted by Ptolemy I Soter. The two-eagle reverse type first appeared circa 262 BC, during the



FIGURE 1
A one-sixth stater from
Ionia. 600–550 BC



FIGURE 2
A tetradrachme of Ptolemy II
Philadelphos

reign of Ptolemy II (253/252–249/248 BC) (Fig. 2), and continued to appear at various times until the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty under Cleopatra VII (51–30 BC).

1.2 *Nabatean Coins with Eagles*

There are numerous 1st-century coins featuring an eagle. Obodas the second (96–87 BC), king of the Nabateans, struck coins with an eagle on the reverse. The following six kings struck coins with eagles: Obodas I (96 BC–87 BC), Obodas II (62 BC–60 BC), Malichos I (60 BC–30 BC), Obodas III (30 BC–9 BC), Syllaeus (9 BC–8 BC), and Aretas IV (9 BC to + 40 AD), the last of whom also struck coins with an eagle on the reverse.

1.3 *Arab Coins with Eagles from Eastern Arabia, Failaka and the Gulf*

Five small coins from Failaka (an island near Kuwait) belong to the so-called “Arab” silver coinage of North-East Arabia. They come from Hellenistic Fort F5, dated to the 3rd century BC. (Hannestad 1984: 59–65).

Here is just one example:

Inventory KM 1788. Silver; diameter: 7.5 mm; weight: 0.21 g; fit: 3 h; broken blank

Av – On this side, a head can be clearly seen facing slightly to the right; the hair appears to be made of large curls falling to the sides, unless they are ear pendants.

Rv – This side shows an eagle standing to the left (Callot 1990: 225).

Abiel Coinages of Eastern Arabia

In the third century BCE, an eastern Arabian ruler began to produce marked imitations of the coinage of Alexander III (‘The Great’) replacing Alexander’s name in Greek on the reverse of the coinage with a formula in Aramaic consisting of the name Abiel plus the name of Abiel’s father; at least five individuals are mentioned, indicating there were several successive (?) rulers named Abiel. (Alfen 2010: 548)

The coins of ET4 (Epigraphic Tradition 4) were the earliest, dating to the end of the third century BCE., for example, because they seem closest to the prototypical Alexander issues in style and in the use of the eagle on the outstretched arm of the deity on the reverse rather than the horse protome found on the other two ET. “These arguments, however, are purely speculative: IGCH 1765 shows that the ET1 tetradrachms could be dated to the mid-third century BCE, and are also contemporaneous with vertical S2 tetradrachms, which, like the ET 4 coins, have an eagle on the reverse and not the horse protome of ET 1–2.” (Alfen 2010: 564) (Fig. 3).

NS16



FIGURE 3
Alfen 2010: 564, pl. 41

According to Alfen (2010: 590), in the epigraphic tradition 4, in the Numismatic Style 16, tetradrachms feature the head of Herakles facing right on the obverse, wearing the pelt of the Nemean lion, and the reverse depicts a throned figure facing left, holding an eagle on its outstretched right hand. An Aramaic inscription appears to the right, left and below the figure. This small coin is made of good-quality silver, and its weight (0.21 g), though low, qualifies it as a half-obol. The presence of the vertical shin on the reverse naturally links it to the so-called “Arab” series (Callot 1990: 225).

1.4 *South Arabian Coins with Eagles*

Coins with an eagle appeared in Asia Minor and southern Italy as early as the 6th century. Actually South Arabian coins do not feature eagles before the 1st century BC. At least since the 2nd century BC, South Arabia was in contact with Ptolemaic Egypt, and some coins may have been seen or even imported, such as the one from Tamnaʿ. Later, during the first century BC, Yemeni merchants trading with the Nabataeans, and Petra in particular, were aware of Nabataean coinage with eagles. They would therefore have been inclined to mint coins with eagles. These South Arabian coins are mainly found in Ḥaḍramawt, but, to the best of our knowledge, are absent from Sabaeen coinage.

Ptolemaic coin from Tamnaʿ (Bayḥān Museum). 3rd century BC. Bronze coin, about 70–80 g., diam.: 4 cm. Ptolemy III Evergetes (247–222 BC).

Obverse: Head of Zeus Ammon. Reverse: An eagle standing on a thunderbolt, with a cornucopia in front of it. Legend: Basileon Ptolemaion. The holes in the middle are characteristic of Ptolemaic bronze coins. (Fig. 4).

1.4.1 First Century AD Coins in Ḥaḍramawt

A. Southern Ḥaḍramawt 1st century AD. AE: 47 mm, 71, 46 g. Shaqar Mint. Head facing right, hair in ringlets. M (South Arabian) to left Sayīn.

Eagle with wings spread, standing to the right on the ground line, Shaqar (mint name) to the left; *Ys²h* to the right. Unpublished. Earthen dark brown patina, some pitting. (Classical Numismatic Group LLC 99. Lot 75). (Fig. 5).



FIGURE 4
A Ptolemaic III Evergetes bronze
from Tamna. Bayhân Museum
(CREDIT: FRENCH
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
MISSION 1980)



FIGURE 5
Coin from Southern Ḥaḍramawt
(CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC
GROUP LL99. LOT 75)

B. Munro-Hay 1.9a. Issue with obverse male head (Munro-Hay 2003: 130 and fig. 468).

“Obverse: Curly-haired male head, the hair depicted as irregularly-spaced dots, facing right. Reverse: Figure of Zeus seated on a three-legged stool 4 (or backed throne) facing left, with an eagle on its outstretched right hand, the left holding a long scepter. Weigh and diameter; 0.28–0.41 g; 0.61–1.1 cm” (Munro-Hay 2003: 131).

C. Munro-Hay 4–6i-iii (Munro-Hay 2003: 189)

Ill. 4–6i, n° 257; App.: Pl. 5, 2–8; 3.1–4, 4.1–2 et 5.1–5.

Obverse: “In a beaded inner border and outer circle (only sometimes visible), a long-necked head with ringlets facing right, with the name S¹YN to the right, and the Sabaeen M letter to the left. Reverse: An eagle with partly spread wings standing on a line. To the left, the letters S²QR are written vertically; to the right, the letters YSHH are also written vertically.

Robin identifies the coin (Robin 1994), following A. Jamme, as belonging to YS²HR¹L. He identifies this name with a *mukarrib* of Ḥaḍramawt called (in a text where the name is in fact unclear), Yashhur¹l Yuhar¹ish (*Ys²hr¹l Yhr¹s²*) son of Abiyaša¹, dating him provisionally to c.25 BC–AD 75).¹ (Fig. 6).

¹ Robin 1994; Munro-Hay 2003: 189–190, Pl. IX n° 257. Dessin Walker 1952: 626.



FIGURE 6
A bronze coin from Shabwa
(MUNRO-HAY 2003: N °257,
PLATE XI N ° 13)

4-6iii: Same obverse and reverse. Weight: 4,34-5,00 gr; c. 1.9-2.7 cm. Plate IX Figure 259-260 (Fig. 7).

D. Sedov-13. Coin of Type 3: Head with hair in ringlets/eagle with open wings. Mukallā Museum. (Sedov and Aydarus 1995: 19).

A. V. Sedov and Aydarus recorded coins with eagles at Mukallā Museum (Type 3=Sedov-13). Shabwa; bronze; 18.85 g; 4.7 cm dia.; regular thin flan, partly broken off at top.

- Obv.: Male head facing right with hair in long ringlets; on the left, behind head – letter M = M (reversed); on the right, before face, downwards – two last letters of Ḥaḍramī inscription *SṬYN* (the first letter obliterated): double dotted and linear borders, obliterated on the top.
- Rev.: Eagle standing right on a curved line with open wings; on top left, behind eagle's head – traces of Ḥaḍramī inscription *S²QR* (visible); on right downwards – traces of Ḥaḍramī inscription *YS²H* (only the first letter is visible) (Sedov and Aydarus 1995: 19-21). (Fig. 8).



FIGURE 7
Bronze coins from Ḥaḍramawt
(MUNRO-HAY 2003, PLATE IX,
N^o 259–260)

E. Sedov-14. Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, Shibām; bronze; 15.0 g; 4.4 cm diameter; regular thin flan, partly broken at the top. MuM 119; 110%. Obverse: Similar to no. 13, but with an outline design; the middle letter of the Ḥaḍramī inscription S¹YN was missing in the mold, with a linear border. Reverse: Faint traces of an eagle; inscription on the left obliterated; inscription on the right downward is clearly visible (Sedov and Aydarus 1995: 21).

A. V. Sedov “noted that Walker overlooked a perfect and datable parallel in the representation of the eagle with open wings, facing right, on the coinage of Nero minted at Antioch c.49 AD. (23). In our opinion, this similarity suggests that the initial appearance of Ḥaḍramawt type 3 coins should be dated earlier, perhaps around the middle or the second quarter of the first century AD. This is supported by the presence of a number of these coins in the ‘lower’ period of Biʿr ‘Alī (Qāni)’.

The Mukallā Museum specimens probably come from a relatively late series of Type 3, which should be dated between the late 1st century (Cat. nos. 13–14) and late 2nd or even early 3rd century AD (Cat. nos. 15–18).

F- Sedov 2019. 7

Recently, A. V. Sedov published a collection of 38 coins from the Ṣan‘āʾ market. Among them is a bronze coin from the Ḥaḍramawt series, head/eagle, type 4.0, of Yashhur‘il Yuhar‘ish. (*Ys²hr‘l Yhr‘s²*) (?), 1st cent. BC.

Obv.: traces of head r. big. SA (South Arabian) letter m (reversed) on left, legend or right reads *sr(y)n*, traces of linear border around (?); rev. crude outline of eagle open wings standing right on horizontal line, legend on top 1 *sqr*; legend



FIGURE 8
Bronze coins from Ḥaḍramawt
(SEDOV AND AYDARUS 1995:
19, N ° 13)

on r. downwards reads $Ys^2(h)$, traces of line border around (?). (Sedov 2019: 280, photo: 278)

In South Arabia, coins featuring an eagle appear to be scarce. No numismatist has yet provided a satisfactory answer to the question of whether these coins originated mainly in Ḥaḍramawt, or if they date to the 1st century BC–2nd century AD period (often during the reign of Yashhur'il Yuhar'ish ($Ys^2hr'l Yhr's^2$) at the end of the 1st century BC). Aside from the political and economic rise of the Ḥaḍramawt kingdom, an example is the discovery of series head/eagles from circa the 1st century BC at Sumhuram (Sedov 2019: 209–210).

Part 2: Eagles as Decoration

The Eagle's Connection to Cities and Mythology

While the eagle is associated with war in Roman mythology, it is also linked to the fate of the deceased warrior. Numerous eagles are depicted on tombs on the heights of Petra and Hegra. It is hardly surprising, then, that eagles are often associated with heights and mountains. The legitimate eagle inhabits mountains, preferably high mountains,² while the *bastard eagle* inhabits plains or marshes. This mountain animal is characterized by

² Yemen's mountainous terrain provides a favorable biotope for eagles. A few species of eagle, such as the Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*), Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax*), and Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*) have been recorded in Yemen, or at least migrate there on their way north. The Barbary Falcon (*Falco pelegrinoides*), resident in the South West Arabian mountains, could be mistaken for an eagle in iconography.

its ruggedness but also by its valour. Greeks and Latins often mentioned mountains as a habitat for birds of prey (Normand 2015: 180).³

According to Aristotle (384–322 BC) in the ‘History of Animals’, mountains give birds a reputation for strength. Aristotle also states that the *pygargus* eagle flies in mountains and forests because of its bold character (Louis 1964: 618 b 18–22).⁴

One of the most intriguing issues regarding the depiction of the eagle in Arabia, especially in the southern regions, is tracing its origins and the spread of this motif. However, the clues provided by epigraphy and local artwork are very tenuous. Only one inscription from Shabwa (*RES* 4698) offers any guidance. This text (see below) states that the NSR eagle was imported from the north (S²MT). “In this text, the verb *ʿtw* meaning to ‘bring’ is well attested, as is *s²mt* ‘north.’ The preposition *bn* in a local function requires no further justification, the eagle that had been imported for him from the North. The fact that this eagle depiction is a – undoubtedly quite expensive- import from the Roman-Hellenistic north, and that this is explicitly recorded in a dedicatory inscription by the ruler, is entirely consistent with the representative function of such texts” (Sima 2000: 129).

In this case, we should look for the various representations of eagles in the Greco-Roman Eastern world. Let’s start with the Nabataean cities with which South Arabia traded: Petra, Khirbet et-Tannur and Hegra.⁵

2.1 *The Eagle in Nabatean Art*

At Petra.⁶

Wādī Umm Dfaylah. 1051(51). XXXIV. 1–6.

A series of six niches is accessed by a few-step staircase, one of which contains a figurative relief. “This relief depicts an eagle with outstretched wings, beneath which is carved a betyl resting on a trapezoidal base.” According to some authors, this may represent Baal Shamīn. 1st century. AD. (Nehmé 2012: XXXIV. 1–6)

The Khazneh tomb, whose style is influenced by Alexandria’s architectural art, is thought to have been erected around the 1st century BC and to be the tomb of King Aretas IV, who died in 40 AD. The upper half-fronton ends at the façade corners and shows acroteria with eagles.

At Khirbet at-Tannur, there is an eagle acroterion with an open wing and a thunderbolt. Area of the Temenos Gate. Date: ca. 1st century BC–1st century AD. Dimensions: 58,6 cm wide, 45,5 cm high. Jordan Museum, Amman Department of Antiquities. Inventory: JP 507 (Mc Kenzie 2013: 104, fig. 164–165). (Fig. 9).

3 I have translated some of the French texts into English; may the authors please forgive any clumsiness.

4 Aristotle. *The History of Animals*. Book IX,

Part 32: “*It is bold enough to fly to mountains and the interior of forests. The other eagles seldom visit groves or low-lying land. There is another species called the ‘plangus’; it ranks second in point of size and strength; it lives in mountain combs and glens, and by marshy lakes, and goes by the name of ‘duck-killer’ and ‘swart-eagle.’ It is mentioned by Homer in his account of the visit made by Priam to the tent of Achilles. ... It alights on high places by reason of the difficulty it experiences in soaring up from the level ground; it flies high in the air to have the more extensive view; from its high flight it is said to be the only bird that resembles the gods. Birds of prey, as a rule, seldom alight upon rock, as the crookedness of their talons prevents a stable footing on hard stone. The eagle hunts hares, fawns, foxes, and in general all such animals as he can master with ease. It is a long-lived bird, and this fact might be inferred from the length of time during which the same nest is maintained in its place*” (Translated by D’Arcy, W. Th., 1910, § 9.32.1 and 9.32.2).

5 We have deliberately left out the cities of Ptolemaic and Greco-Roman Egypt.

6 I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who helped me with my iconographic research: Gatier Pierre-Louis, Sedov. A. V., Thibaud-Fournet Pauline, Yule Paul, and Pascale Linant de Bellefonds.



FIGURE 9
Acroteria with an eagle
(AMMAN MUSEUM, JORDAN,
REF. FIG; 165A)

2.2 *Eagles as Gods in South Arabia?*

How did the South Arabs view the eagle? Their frequent depictions suggest they held it in high regard. The term *ns^{hr}* undoubtedly refers to a deity in many inscriptions from different periods and locations, cataloged by W. W. Müller (Müller 1994).⁷

We are only retaining three texts:

The inscription YM375= YM 1064 records:

1. Yasaq'il, son of Barīrum,
2. the Baramer, dedicated
3. the *Niswar* (deities) (the person named) 'Ammšafaq
4. when he was a priest ... (Müller 1994: 92)

The inscription CIH 552 (Müller 1994: 97) states: "Gaddna'am dedicated (this) to the (God) Nasrum." Additionally, the inscription RES 4048 indicates that unknown benefactors built their house Bāqilum with the help of their masters and placed it under the protection of "Attar šāriqān ... the gods 'Attar, Nasrum, and Waddum (Müller 1994: 98). Nasr also designates a month name in the Middle Sabean period (*d-ns^{hr}*), as mentioned in the texts: CIH 126/5; RES 4646/19; Gl 1533/12, and CIH 609/8.

An inscription (RES 4698, see above) establishes a special relationship between Sayīn, the main god of Ḥaḍramawt, and the eagle. Yada'īl Bayān, king of Ḥaḍramawt, son of Yada'ab Ġaylān, king of Ḥaḍramawt, from the lineage of 'Umaynum, dedicated and offered to his Lord Sayīn dhū-Alīm, the Eagle of an eagle that came to him from the North, and he (it) dedicated it to Him. (RES 4698), For the French translation, see Pirenne 1990: 74–75.

- 1- Yada'īl Bayyin, roi de Ḥaḍramawt, fils de Yada'ab
- 2- Ġaylān, roi de Ḥaḍramawt, fils de 'Umaynum a consacré

⁷ I am grateful to Christian Robin and Mohammed Maraqtan for pointing out this reference to me. W. W. Müller's article does not associate any of the inscriptions with an iconographic representation of an eagle.

- 3- et offert à son Seigneur Sīn dhū-Alīm l'aigle de Ṣalfāʿān
 4- aigle qui lui est venu par achat et qu'il Lui a dédié.

J. Pirenne later cites J. Ryckmans, who affirms that the Shabwa deity Sīn is identified with the eagle Nasr, and adds: "le roi a dédié à son dieu Sīn, aigle de ṢLFʿHN (?) l'aigle qui lui est venu par suite d'un achat." According to Chr. Robin, this text can be understood in two ways:

- either "... dedicated ... to his lord Sayīn dhū-Alīm, (who is nicknamed the Eagle of Ṣalfāʿān, an eagle ...,"
- or "... dedicated ... to his lord Sayīn dhū-Alīm the Eagle of Ṣalfāʿān, an eagle ..."

In the first, more plausible interpretation, Sayīn himself is described as an eagle (Robin 2012: 79).

On the Ḥaḍramawt coins, depicting a man's head with the Sayīn legend, and on the reverse an eagle with outstretched wings grasping a snake with its talons (Walker 1952: fig. 1) the eagle and the name Sayīn do not appear on the same face. Hence, these coins are insufficient to prove identification.

2.3 *Iconography during the First Three Centuries AD*

2.3.1 Two Limestone Bas-Reliefs of Eagles with Outstretched Wings

These are elementary, stereotyped motifs without relief. Limestone; Left bas-relief: 48 cm width, right: 30 cm. Some letters only visible: 'mn/ ... (W. W. Müller). Ṣanʿā' Museum. Radt 1973: n° 41 a. B. Taf.: 14. (Fig. 10).

2.3.2 Restitution of an Eagle above a Stone Base

An inscribed base dedicated by the *mukarrib* of Qatabān, Shahr Hilāl (*S²hr Hll*), son of Yadaʿab, (Inscription *RES* 3540, Wien Museum, no. 715) is surmounted by a square stone plate with a horizontally cut half-sphere fitted with five small mortises (NAM 2407). J. Pirenne restores a bronze eagle with talons attached by tenons (*CIAS*, II, 2 1986: C82/r3/47.10 or II.265) (Fig. 11).

2.3.3 Wādī Ḍura'. Tomb 2. ʿAtaq Museum

A parallelepiped ivory box with a flat lid and four interior compartments, one side of which is decorated with a central eagle framed by wine scrolls and a row of dentils; it was initially covered with gold leaf. Dimensions: Length: 15 cm, width: 15 cm, height: 12 cm.

(Breton and Bāfaqīh 1993: 34, pl.: 6, fig. 11 and pl.: 31, fig. 96) (Fig. 12).

2.4 *Late Himyarite Eagles (5th–6th Centuries AD)*

Having suggested relations with North Arabia, it would be appropriate to mention contacts with the Arabian Gulf, and from there, via Gerrha, with the Parthian-Sassanid world. Some plaques depict eagles with outstretched wings and elongated necks, showing some similarities – albeit distant – with motifs from Parthian and Sassanid art. Eagles with outstretched wings are well known in Sassanid art, especially jewelry and silverware.⁸

For example: a Sasanian silver bowl, circa 4th–6th century AD. "The rounded bowl decorated on the interior with a central medallion with an eagle facing right, its wings spread, the feathers with hatched chevrons and stippling, enclosed by eight smaller medallions each with different types of birds in various poses arranged in facing pairs,

⁸ Please refer to the Sasanian silverware of State Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburg.



FIGURE 10
Two eagles with outstretched wings
(RADT, 1973:N°41 A.B.TAF.: 14.
SANA'A MUSEUM).

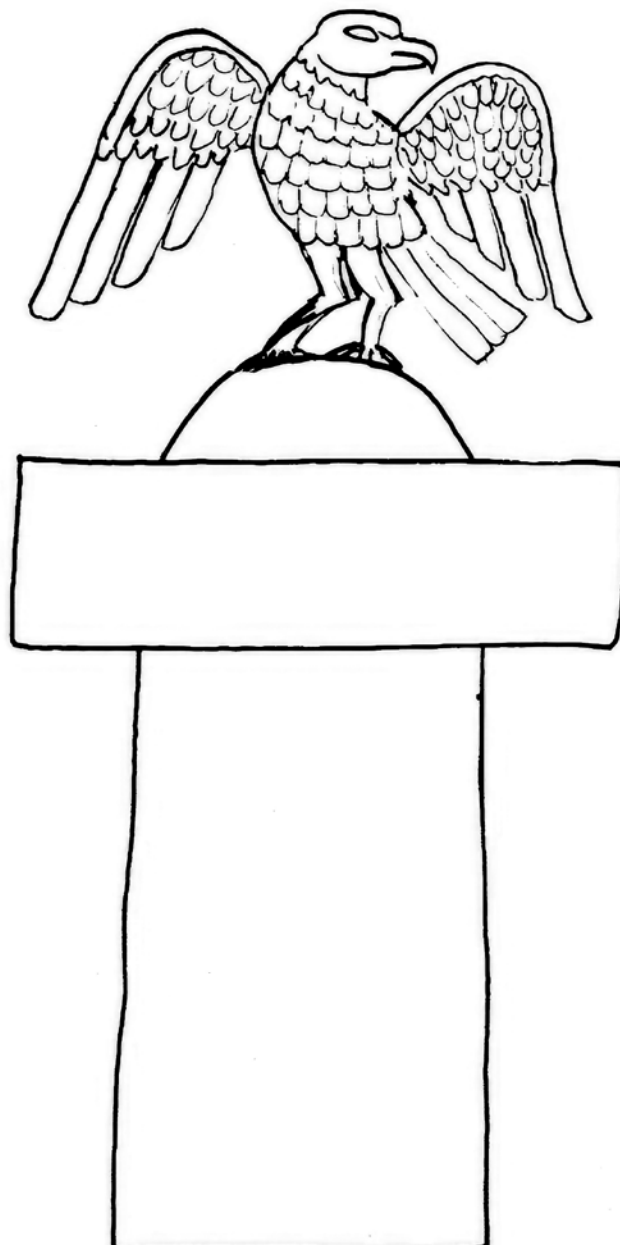


FIGURE 11
Restitution of an eagle statue
(CIAS, .T.2, 1986:47.10/R3/C82).

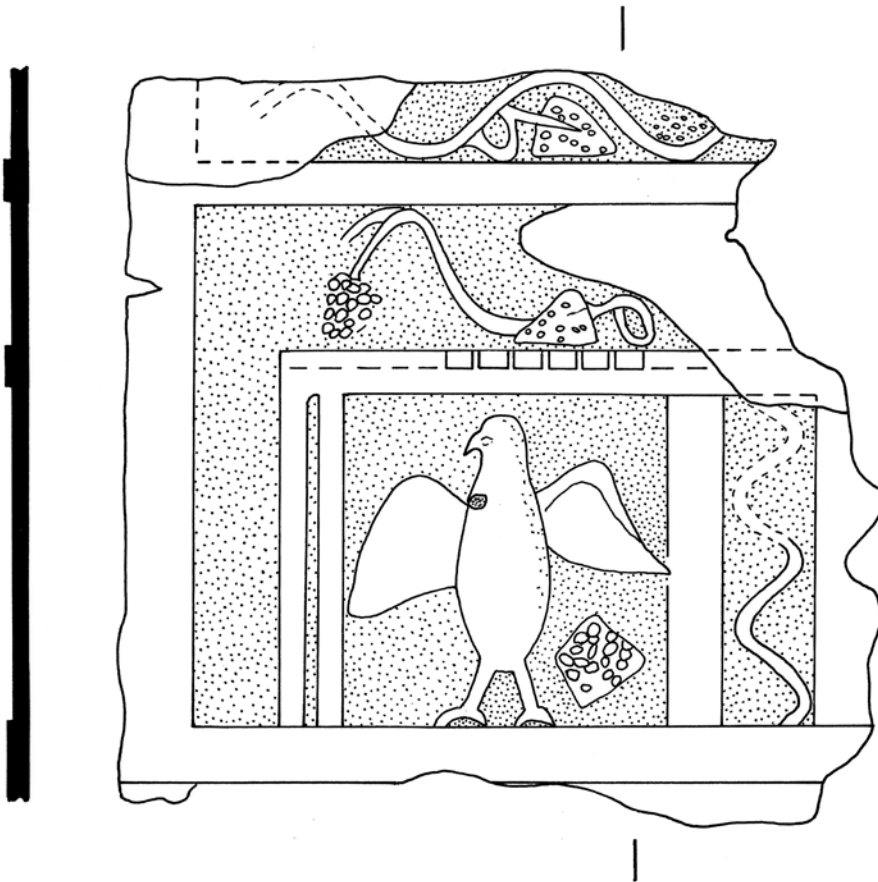


FIGURE 12
Wādī Ḍura'. Ivory box with an eagle
(BRETON AND BĀFĀQIH 1993:
PL.31, FIG. 96 DRAWING:
J.-F. BRETON)

the rim offset on the interior." Dimensions: 6.13/16 in. (17.3 cm) in diameter (Christies.com catalogues / lot-1818657) (Fig. 13).

In Yemen, motifs from Himyar are dated by Paul Yule to the 3rd to 6th centuries. Their style is very distinctive, featuring a new stone engraving with radial lines that resemble the cloisonné technique used in medal-making.

2.4.1 Bayt al-Ašwal, Dated 250–400 AD, 44 cm Wide

The under-surface of the relief and others like it show eagles with outspread wings, which were carved at the same time as the ladies and share with them a common rectilinear meander moulding. Thus, the four ladies grace the façade of an entrance and the eagles the underside of the lintel. (Yule 2007: 138, fig. 99) (Fig. 14)

2.4.2 Mašna'at Māriyya, 11 km West of Ḍamār

An arch-stone, approximately 2 meters tall, depicts two eagles with their wings spread, facing each other, between monograms representing personal and tribal names. Notable features include medallions with radiating lines that form the birds' breasts, the detailed cloisonné-like depiction of feathers, and the narrow, channelled edges of the wings (Yule 2007: 142, fig. 104). The monograms situated between the two vultures may date from the 5th to 6th century AD (see Fig. 15a).

2.4.3 Ḥaddat Ġulays, 1 km North of Raydān

A relief contrasting with a façade, "Its stiff icon-like style lies in the naturalistic Roman eagles which once gave direction in the local style." "Typical at this time are the linear style and the 'vulture' swan-like neck." Dimensions: 65 cm. (Yule 2007: 145, fig. 105) (Fig. 15b). Possibly contemporary with the Mašna'at Māriyya relief.



FIGURE 13
A Sasanian silver bowl.
Circa 4th–6th century AD
(CHRISTIE'S. LIVE ACTION 9380
ANTIQUITIES. LOT 511)

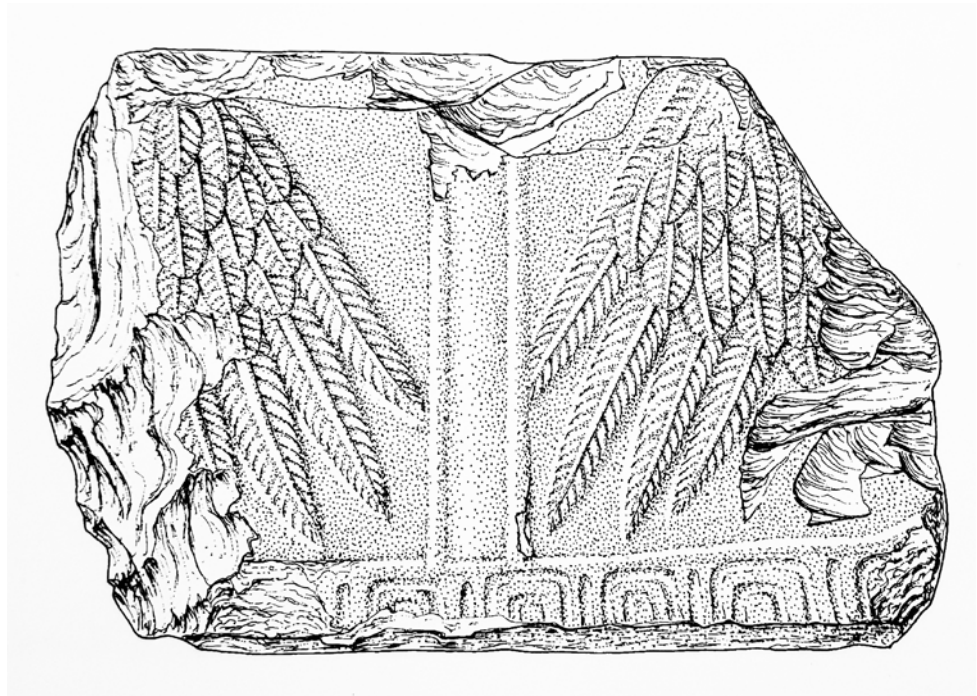


FIGURE 14
Bayt al-Ašwal Relief with an eagle
(YULE 2007: 138, FIG. 99)

2.4.4 Late Ḥimyarite Ring Stone, Cut from Banded Brown Chalcedony. A Long-Necked Bird of Prey, Probably an Eagle, Grasping a Bull's Head (Bucranion) by the Horns. Inscription: *Whb*. Sasanian Iconography (Yule 2007: 145, Fig. 106).⁹

2.4.5 Fragment of a slab with an Eagle from Zafār
Location: Zafār, Bayt Sāliḥ. Limestone. Dimensions: 37 cm; width preserved: 27 cm.

⁹ See also: impression of the early Sasanian seal stone (Yule 2007: 91, Fig. 60).

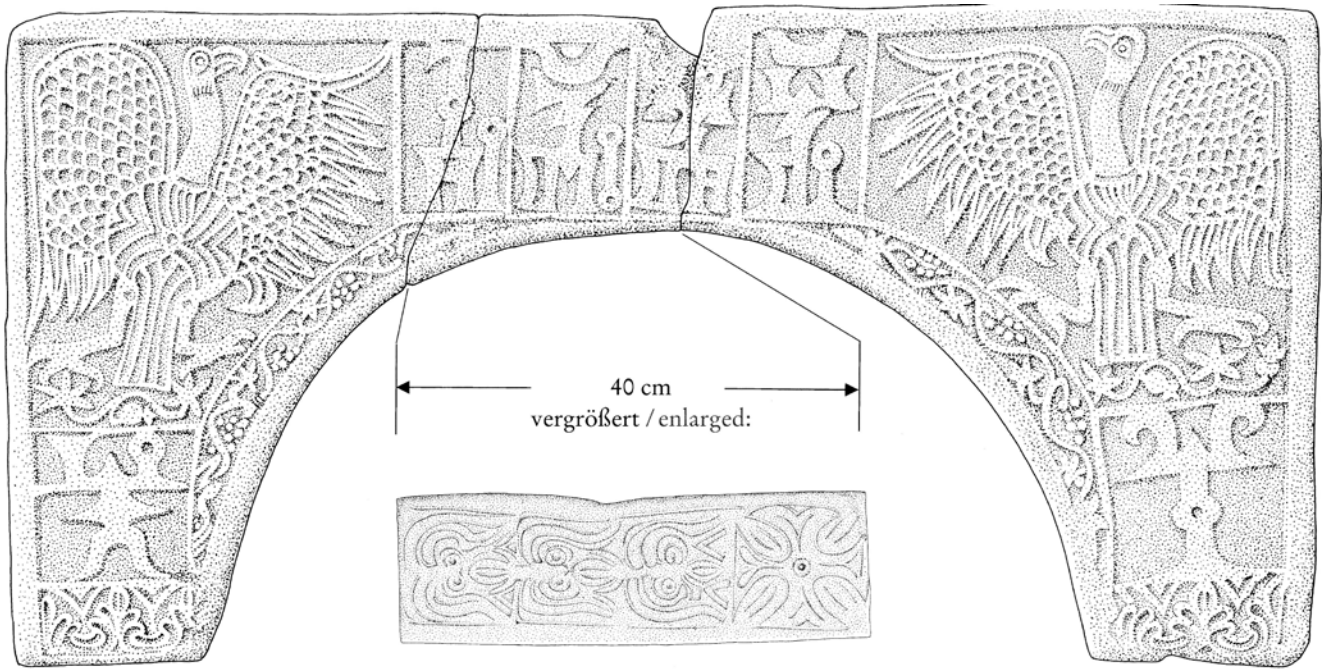


FIGURE 15A
Arch-stone from Maşna'at Māriya
(YULE 2007: 142, FIG. 104)



FIGURE 15B
Plaque with an eagle
(YULE 2007: 144, FIG. 105)

Fragment of a frieze with an eagle. The eagle has outstretched wings and a large human eye. The relief is bordered at its top and bottom by a Greek key pattern (Costa 1976: 451, Plate XVII, n^o 152).

2-4-6 Another fragment is a large frieze or lintel decorated with rectangular panels, each featuring an eagle with outstretched wings. "The panels are divided by simple triple moldings and the whole is framed by a Greek pattern." Grey limestone. Dimensions: 30 × 40 × 35 cm (Costa 1973: 196, Pl. XVII, 3).

Part 3: Eagles with Snakes

3.1 *Mythology: Snake versus Eagle among Greek and Latin Authors*

The extraordinary battle between these two creatures is present in literature and art from the ancient world, both in the West and the East. The snake is an imposing prey for the eagle. The struggle between the two animals highlights the eagle's strength.

The Greek noun δράκων and its Latin equivalent, draco, are terms Greek and Latin authors have often understood in two different, if not opposing, ways. When referring to a real snake, drakon is commonly considered a generic term. When referring to a mythical snake, however, it is often translated as "dragon," a term derived from it via the Latin language.

Greek myths attribute an essential role to snakes, which can be studied from the dual standpoint of their genealogy and function. Most snakes in Greek mythology are presented as primordial beings and sons of the Earth. They often act as guardians of territory, watering places, springs, trees, treasures, and magical objects. These two characteristics – primordial nature and guardian function – help explain why the serpent is often the antagonist of both the gods and heroes (Trinquier 2008: 221–255).

The eagle is depicted as a warrior fighting a worthy enemy in a battle he may not win (Normand 2015: 289). It is worthy to quote here Claudius Aelianus (c.175–c.235 AD), commonly Aelian, a Roman author and teacher of rhetoric who flourished under Septimius Severus. The passage of Aelian (*Characteristics of Animals* 17.37) describes exactly the mythical fight of an eagle with a snake:

§17.37 "Some men, sixteen in all, reaping beneath a blazing sun and oppressed with thirst, dispatched one of their number to fetch water from a spring nearby. So the man went off with his reaping sickle in his hand and the pail for drawing water over his shoulder. On arrival he found an Eagle wrapped in the powerful grip of a snake (drakôn). The Eagle, happened to have swooped upon it but failed to achieve its design and could not, as in Homer, carry their food to its young ones. Instead of that it fell into the serpent's coils and so far from killing was likely to be killed. So the husbandman knowing that the Eagle was the messenger and minister of Zeus and knowing too that the snake (drakôn) was an evil brute, cut the beast in two with the aforesaid sickle and released the Eagle from that inescapable grip that bound it." (Scholfield 1958; Hercher 1864–1866: 2.26)

Another paragraph by Aelius testifies to the superiority of the eagle, capable of putting the most intrepid animals to flight (Normand 2015: 291, note 406).

§ 2.26 At no time does the Eagle need water or long for a dusting-place; he is on the contrary superior to thirst and looks for no medicine for weariness from any outside source, but scorning water and repose it cleaves the atmosphere and gazes with piercing eye from the vast expanse of heaven on high. And at the mere sound of those rushing wings even that most intrepid of all creatures, the great serpent, dives at once into its den and is glad to disappear.

The drakôn shrinks from the fight; no sooner does the servant hear the beating of the eagle's wings than it disappears.

In Greek and Roman literature, the eagle is always portrayed positively, while the snake symbolizes perfidy. The serpent (or *drakôn*) slithers into the eagle's nest to steal or devour its eggs. The raptor's hatred of the reptile is therefore understandable. The *drakôn* is a stealthy creature that steals its prey. However, there are no known cases in the Western world of snakes eating eagle eggs (Normand 2015: 292). Therefore, the snake is merely a pawn. The zoological works of the Ancients, which are not always objective, have helped to shape the image of the eagle as an invincible bird.

Few Latin inscriptions relate to a fight between an eagle and a snake. Here is one, from Apulum in Roman Dacia, which mentions a prodigy, associated with the fight of an eagle and the snake (IDR III/5, 136):

I(ovi) o(ptimo) m(aximo) / Aur(elius) Marinus / Bas(s)us et Aur(elius) / Castor Polyd/ i circumstantes / viderunt numen / aquilae descidis(s)e / monte supra dracone(m) / res validavit / supstrinxit aquila(m) / hi s(upra) s(cripti) aquila(m) de / periculo / liberaverunt / v(oto) l(ibentes) m(erito) p(osuerunt)

To Jupiter, Best and Greatest I(ovi) o(ptimo) m(aximo) /

Aur(elius) Marinus / Bas(s)us and Aur(elius) / Castor Polyd/ i who were present / saw the divinity / of the eagle descend / from the mountain above the dragon (snake?) / the fact was confirmed / the eagle squeezed / those mentioned above, delivered the eagle / from danger / they gladly and rightly made (this vow).

Some Greek authors describe the battle between the eagle and the snake as follows: "In the case of the eagle and snake motif, the general value of the eagle is its relation to Zeus, its possible metaphoric value as a sign of victory and power. The snake is connected to the ground, the earth, and even the underground, allowing for many variations. The Homeric reference to an omen weighs heavily on the meaning of the motif, whether it is the sign of a future victory or defeat, or a reference to *manteia* (prophecy) and divination" (Lissarague 2022: 37).

3.2 *Iconography of Eagles and Snakes in Middle Eastern Art*

The motifs of snakes and eagles circulate across different arts and periods, and their repetition guarantees the stability of meaning, as well as the possibility of memorization. Although there may be some consistency between the works of Latin naturalist authors and iconographic representations, the spread of the eagle-and-snake motif originated in the eastern Greco-Roman world, particularly among the Nabataeans.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been limited investigation into the symbolism of eagles and snakes within Nabataean funerary architecture. In John Healey's publication "The Religion of the Nabataeans" (2001), the eagles positioned above the entrances of the Hegra tombs are likely indicative of the sun or the deity Dushara, perceived as the sky god and guardian of the burial sanctity. While the connection to Dushara remains uncertain, this interpretation – assigning a protective and apotropaic role to these animal representations – appears to be corroborated by their strategic placement on acroteria or centrally within pediments.

3.2.1 Offering of an Eagle. Inscribed Sculpture. Amman Museum, Inv. T. J. 5087

The sculpture in the round depicts an eagle, wings outstretched, confronting a snake ... Only a section of its body remains on the bird's belly. The eagle has lost its leg and the lower part of its wings, especially its left wing, as well as its head and neck. The feathers are carefully rendered. Dimensions: eagle h: 41 cm. On its right wing, the eagle bears



FIGURE 16
Hegra (Madā'in Sāliḥ). Tomb
IGN 24
(CLICHÉ: PAULINE
THIBAUD-FOURNET)

an inscribed headband (4 × 23 cm). One line: "Obaidos, son of Abramos," a well-known Nabataean name (Gatier 1986: 63, no. 49).

3.2.2 Eagles and Snakes at Hegra (Madā'in Sāliḥ)

In the Qasr al-Bint necropolis in the ancient city of Hegra (Madā'in Sāliḥ), the Doric frieze and triangular pediment crowning the door to the burial chamber of the tomb number IGN 24 are dated to AD 35/36. The frieze, featuring triglyphs and rosette-decorated metopes, is surmounted by a triangular pediment whose acroteria support urns and a sculpted eagle. At the center of the pediment is carved the head of a mythological figure, Bès or Humbaba, with two writhing snakes on either side (Fig. 16).

IGN 44 Tomb. The frieze, featuring triglyphs and rosette-decorated metopes, similar to IGN 24, is surmounted by a triangular pediment whose acroteria support urns and a very destroyed sculpted eagle. At the center of the pediment is also carved the head of a mythological figure, Bès or Humbaba, with two writhing snakes on either side. There is clearly a link between a deity (Bès or Humbaba) and the snakes dominated by an eagle.

3.2.3 Eagle and Snake at Khirbet at-Tannur

Khirbet at-Tannur is a hilltop sanctuary located near Khirbet ed-Dharih, the third caravan stop, approximately 70 kilometers north of the Nabataean capital Petra, in use from the 2nd century BC to the 4th/6th century AD. On the central pediment of the Inner Temenos Enclosure façade, "there is a 0.55 m high sculpture of an eagle, grappling with a snake, and standing on a wreath. It is not carved in a panel, and it is unfinished at the back. The wreath contains a plaster bowl. The feathers on the top part of its wings are identical to those on the Nike supporting the Zodiac ring, suggesting it belongs to period 2 (2nd cent. AD)" (Mc. Kenzie 2013: 101, fig. 158–159) (Fig. 17).

3.3 *Eagles and Snakes in South Arabian Iconography*

To what extent did South Arabian artists integrate this mythology, these signs of victory and power, the snake symbolizing the earth, and the eagle symbol of victory? There's not much in the way of answers.



FIGURE 17
 Khirbat at-Tannur. On the main
 pediment of the Inner Temenos
 Enclosure façade, high sculpture
 of an eagle
 (MC. KENZIE 2013: 101,
 FIG. 158–159)

3.3.1 Alabaster Plaque. An Eagle Fighting against a Snake. South Arabia/ Istanbul Archaeological Museum. No dating¹⁰ (Fig. 18).

3.3.2 Şan'ā' Museum YM 269. Probably from Ma'rib. Dimensions: 43,5 cm × 30,5 cm × 4 cm. (Costa 1978: 67, Pl. XVI. b)

Slab with eagle fighting two snakes. The carving, in low relief, depicts an eagle that pecks the head of a snake bitten by a second reptile. "The subject may be connected with a myth of the cycle of life and death in an aspect of an eternal struggle" (Costa 1978: 67) (Fig. 20).

¹⁰ See <https://vici.org>. Archaeological Atlas.



FIGURE 18
Alabaster plaque. An eagle
fighting against a snake. South
Arabia
(ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL
MUSEUM). (HPPTS://VICI.ORG
/VICI/1495)

3-3-3 Another Eagle with Two Snakes. Aden Museum NAM 16.
Bas-relief from the collection of K. Muncherjee (M. 60.1152). Dimensions: H.: 18 cm,
W.: 22 cm, thickness: 5,5 cm. (CIAS, II.2. 1986: R 45//95.II: II-357).

The *Circaetus* eagle ('snake killer') stands erect on its legs with huge claws, seemingly indifferent to the two snake heads threatening it from either side. The snakes' bodies appear directly beside the eagle's claws and just above the lower frame. This makes it difficult to tell whether there are two snakes or one two-headed snake. (CIAS, II, 2: 545//95.II, p. II.357-358) (Fig. 21)



FIGURE 19
COSTA, 1976: 453; plate XXI, n° 161.

3.3.4 Fragments of a Slab with an Eagle from Ḥafār

Location: Ḥafār, Bayt Ṣāliḥ. Grey limestone. Dimensions: 17 × 12.5 cm; thickness: 8.5 cm (Costa 1976: 453, Plate XXI, n° 161). Fragment of a slab with an eagle. Around its chest and under its feet, there is a snake (more likely than a garland, according to Costa).¹¹ (Fig. 19).

3.3.5 Fragment of a Limestone Slab from al-Lisān. The Eagle has Outstretched Wings Fighting an Eagle under an Arch (A. de Maigret, 2012: 124, Fig. 126)

¹¹ The site of Nāḍ, north of the Jabal Kanīn, some 35 km south-east of Ṣanʿā, has yielded a representation of an eagle from the Ḥimyarite period, of which we have been unable to find an illustration.



FIGURE 20
Eagle and snake. Ṣan'ā' Museum
(COSTA 1978: 67, PL. XVI. B)



FIGURE 21
Aden Museum
(CIAS, II, 2: 545//95.11,
P. II.357-358)

3.3.6 Eagle Fighting with Snakes at Jarf al-Yahūdī

Jarf al-Yahūdī, located approximately 50 km east of Ṣan'ā', at Ḥawlān al-Ṭiyāl, features a famous engraved drawing dated between the first and third centuries AD. To the right of the fortress, there is a dark red depiction that is difficult to interpret. According to As-Salami, this probably represents the fight between five snakes and a bird, probably an eagle; there is little doubt about the mythological interpretation of this scene (As-Salami 2012: 95, fig. 4c) (Fig. 22).

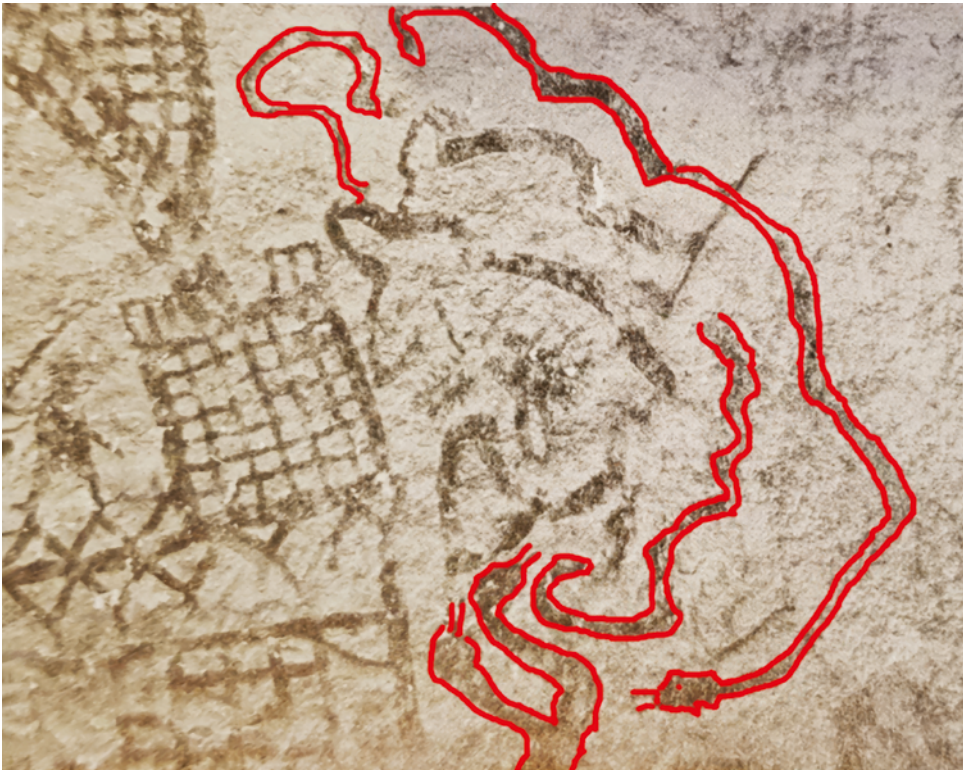


FIGURE 22
Jarf al-Yahūdi. Fight between five
snakes and a bird, probably an
eagle
(AFTER AS-SALAMI 2012: 95,
FIG. 4C)

3.3.7 Eagle and Snake on an Arch in the British Museum

“This central portion of an arch shows an eagle fighting a snake, a monogram, a division line, and the paw of a lion.” The British Museum, London, ANE 1985-2-23, 1 = 141532. H.26, 5 cm, w. 46 cm, TH 15 cm (Simpson 2002: 150, n^o 192).

In Islamic times, the motif of the fight between the eagle and the snake seems to have disappeared, leaving only the snake, an ambivalent being: dangerous to the house’s enemies, yet familiar to those it shelters.

Conclusion

The study of eagles in South Arabia indicates that their depiction dates no earlier than the end of the first millennium BC. In any case, their distribution seems limited, both on coins – possibly excluding those from Ḥaḍramawt – and on facing plates.

Some Greek and Latin authors from the first centuries AD portray the eagle as triumphant, nearly divine, or even deified. This image gradually spread to the Greco-Roman Middle East and later to Nabatea. South Arabian merchants might have adapted some of these depictions to suit their tastes. Although many inscriptions mention the god Nasr “Eagle,” visual representations are relatively rare. Coinage is a prime example of this. Between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD, new motifs undoubtedly emerged under the influence of Parthian and Sasanian cultures.

Finally, the iconography of the fight between the eagle and the snake is quite common in the Middle East. Still, it seems to have had few effects in South Arabia, given the limited number of examples.

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