

THE NOBLE VULTURE

LESLEY JACKSON



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Mother goddesses unite

The goddess Hathor receives an offering from Ramesses III (out of frame) in the tomb of his son Amenherkhepshef (QV 55) in the Valley of the Queens.

As a mother goddess, Hathor shares the iconography of fellow divine mothers, Nekhbet and Wadjet, and wears the distinctive vulture headdress and uraeus.

On Hathor's brow, Wadjet, the cobra-goddess of Lower Egypt, is poised and ready to strike at the pharaoh's enemies. This is combined with the headdress of her counterpart, Nekhbet, the vulture goddess of Upper Egypt. Together, the "Two Ladies" protect a united Egypt and represent the king's sovereignty over the country.

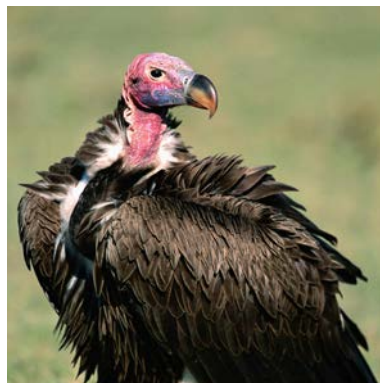
How did the vulture—a bird we view with contempt—become one of Egypt’s prime symbols of protection and an emblem of Nekhbet, the tutelary goddess of Upper Egypt?

The Egyptians viewed the natural world as a channel to the sacred and spiritual worlds, so the natural history of the vulture is the place to start in understanding its symbolism.



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The Egyptian vulture
(*Neophron percnopterus*)



The Lappet-faced vulture
(*Torgos tracheliotus*)



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The African white-backed vulture.
(*Gyps africanus*)

NATURAL HISTORY

The main species known to the Egyptians were the Egyptian Vulture (Neophron percnopterus), the Lappet-faced Vulture (Torgos tracheliotus) and the African White-backed or Griffon Vulture (Gyps Africanus). Some of the depictions of vultures are very realistic, enabling the species to be identified while others show a more generic form.

The Lappet-faced is one of the largest of the vultures with a wing span of 2.5 to 3 metres, and it stands over 1 metre in height. It is very strong and can easily rip open the toughest of hides. A lack of feathers on the head and neck help keep it relatively clean at the feeding site. Lappet-faced vultures nest on flat-topped trees and usually lay one egg. The location of the nest means that the chick is constantly exposed to the sun and has to be shaded by its parents’ wings. The other two species of vulture are smaller and have a bare face but not neck. All vultures display very little sexual dimorphism, one reason perhaps for the view of “the noble vulture of which no male exists” (Papyrus Leiden I 384, 2nd century A.D.).

A long neck and hunched shoulders give the vulture a very recognisable profile. As well as spreading its wings to provide shade for nestlings the vulture has a distinctive wing posture which it adopts when threatened or to show dominance. Its wings are held outstretched with the primary feathers folded and drooping down at the side. On the ground, vultures are awkward

and have limited mobility but they have a distinctive and graceful soaring flight and often circle on thermals for hours. Their wings are very long and broad and the feathers at the wingtips are slightly splayed and curved giving the impression of fingers.

Vultures don’t have the most pleasant of eating habits; they feed off carrion and will eat excrement. We may be squeamish about this but they provide a much-needed sanitation service and, as carrion eaters, they never kill anything. They locate their food by sight and often circle around the carcass for a long period before they descend to eat. Vultures feed communally, showing aggression to reinforce their eating hierarchy, appearing as a noisy all-consuming mob.



PHOTO: © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Detail from the ceremonial Battlefield Palette (Late Predynastic Period, ca. 3150 B.C.), perpetuating in stone the king’s battlefield prowess. Egypt’s fallen enemies are shown strewn about, with the dead bodies being preyed upon by a vulture and other birds.

SYMBOLISM

DEATH

Death is an obvious association for any scavenging creature. Predynastic palettes (left) depict vultures devouring the bodies of fallen enemies. This was surely an unpleasant thing to happen to anyone’s body, but for the Egyptians this had serious implications: a preserved body was considered essential for rebirth.

The Egyptians took this fear and turned it into apotropaic symbols (with the power to avert evil) and protective goddesses. Rebirth is usually linked with death and the vulture is an ideal symbol of transformation. Through the act of consuming



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The Heb-Sed (jubilee festival) was the most important ritual of rejuvenation for the living king. Pictured is a detail from a stela of King Sneferu (4th Dynasty, ca. 2613–2589 B.C.); it now stands outside Cairo's Egyptian Museum (JE 89289). The stela was found in a small chapel by the subsidiary pyramid on the south side of Sneferu's Bent Pyramid at Dahshur.

Here Sneferu wears the white cloak of the Heb-Sed, holding a flail in his right hand and seemingly smiling at his Nebti name, "Neb-Maat" , "Lord of Truth". The Nebti Name comes from the word "neby" , Egyptian for "two ladies," and placed the king under the protection of the goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nekhbet and Wadjet.

the flesh the vulture transmutes it into new life. Death thus becomes the potential for rebirth. This gives vultures a certain ambivalence to their characters. Death may be unavoidable and a pre-requisite for rebirth but it is still unpleasant and something to postpone for as long as humanly possible.

PROTECTION

Two attributes of the vulture hint at protection. Its high circular flight suggests observation—watching for danger and seeing what is to come. A high vantage point allows you to see further; a huge bird now reduced to a speck in the sky could surely take in the whole of Egypt.

More important as a protective symbol were the wings of the vulture, used by the bird to shelter and protect its young and as a form of defensive or aggressive display.

MOTHERHOOD

The ancient Egyptians believed that the world was created by divine words and an echo of this was inherent in all things. Two objects which had a similar sounding name must therefore have a connection at the spiritual level. The Egyptian word for "mother", *mwt* , sounded the same as one of the words for "vulture". The belief that all vultures were female and were considered attentive mothers emphasised this link, so the vulture hieroglyph was used in the word for "mother".

Rather than fitting our modern concept of the archetypal mother: self-sacrificing, gentle yet protective, the mother symbolism of the vulture leans more towards that of the original Mother Goddess of prehistory: the life-giving, death-dealing mother who takes all the deceased into her womb to be reborn.



The Egyptians used four main poses of the vulture in their art:

1. ABOVE

The profile of a flying vulture was usually shown over the head of the king or his royal cartouche. This example comes from the White Chapel of the Middle Kingdom's Senusret I (ca. 1965–1920 B.C.), in the Karnak Open Air Museum.

2. RIGHT

A vulture standing with its wings outstretched emphasises its protective function. Egyptian art seldom depicts forward facing creatures but the vulture is shown this way in its defensive pose with outstretched and drooping wings, the face being shown in profile. This form is often used over temple doors and on pectorals. This example comes from a scarab inscribed with the Throne Name of Amenhotep I (ca. 1525–1504 B.C.): "Djeserkare", "Holy is the Ka of Ra".

3. BELOW

A standing vulture was used on amulets to be placed upon the mummy of the deceased. This group of four amulets (heart, djed pillar, vulture, and cobra) came from the mummy of the Lady Djedmutesankh, most likely a wife or daughter of the 21st-Dynasty's High Priest of Amun, Menkheperre (ca. 1045–992 B.C.). These amulets may have served as a magical charm; from right to left, they read: "Mut (the vulture goddess) says, 'may her heart endure'."

4. NEXT PAGE

A flying vulture depicted from below.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. BEQUEST OF BENJAMIN ALTMAN, 1913. ACC. NO. 14.40.760.





FROM THE TOMBS OF THE KINGS AT THEKES.
London, collected by J. Murray 1850.

A flying vulture depicted from below was often used on temple and tomb ceilings. In its talons the vulture often clutches the shen Ω , a symbol of eternal encircling protection for the king, and sometimes, as above, a ceremonial khu fan. This fan—comprising a single ostrich feather—was used as a symbol of protection.

This image was created by Alessandro Ricci, an Italian artist commissioned by Giovanni Belzoni to draw scenes from the tomb of Seti I (KV 17) after Belzoni had discovered it in 1817. See “On This Day” from page 9 for more on Belzoni’s discovery, and his surprising legacy which continues to assist Egyptologists today.

QUEENSHIP

Vultures became important symbols for queens who aligned themselves with Nekhbet. As Dr. Silke Roth of the University of Mainz in Germany explains, the vulture goddess, along with other female deities, typically “functioned as mothers and consorts in divine families and therefore played an important role in the ideology of kingship. Among the most important insignia were the vulture headdress and the uraeus. Taken over by the queen from the tutelary goddesses and divine mothers Nekhbet and Wadjet, they were at first exclusively worn by the royal mothers of Dynasties 4 and 5 (beginning

around 2600 B.C.). The king’s mother gained particular importance through her son’s accession to the throne, and her specific role in legitimising her son’s rule naturally referred to the divine parentage of the king and was reflected in her attributes, especially the vulture headdress.

“Later on, the vulture headdress became a symbol of motherhood par excellence and was adopted by other prototypical mother goddesses, such as Mut and Isis. From Dynasty 6 onward (ca. 2345 B.C.) the king’s wives—being prospective royal mothers—also began to wear the vulture headdress and the uraeus.”



Hatshepsut transitions from Queen to King

This image shows the Great Royal Wife Hatshepsut wearing the queenly Wadjet / Nekhbet headdress. The relief is from the Neteru-Menu ("Divine Monument")—a limestone chapel commissioned by Hatshepsut, and now reconstructed in the Karnak Open Air Museum.

The monument is fascinating because it is dated to an historic period in Hatshepsut's career: shortly after the death of her husband, King Thutmose II, when the

widowed queen was acting as regent for the rightful king, young Thutmose III.

In a reflection of her gradual assumption of kingly status: Hatshepsut replaced a number of Thutmose III's original cartouches with those of herself and her husband, Thutmose II. She was reinforcing not only her authority, but also her pedigree; forging a link in the pharaonic line from Thutmose II to Hatshepsut.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. ROGERS FUND, 1925. ACC. NO. 25.3.31.



GODDESSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE VULTURE

A number of goddesses have some vulture symbolism but are they really vulture goddesses or are vultures merely one of their symbols? What attributes would a vulture goddess have anyway? The symbolism of the bird informs us; dangerous, protective, maternal and with a strong emphasis on rebirth. In the 21st-Dynasty papyrus of

Gautseshen (above, left), a singer of Montu at Thebes, we see the life-giving sun spreading its rays, flanked left and at right by two images of the goddess Neith in her form of the vulture. In another scene from the same papyrus, twin Nekhbets face a falcon-headed solar orb that looks upon the mummy of Gautseshen.



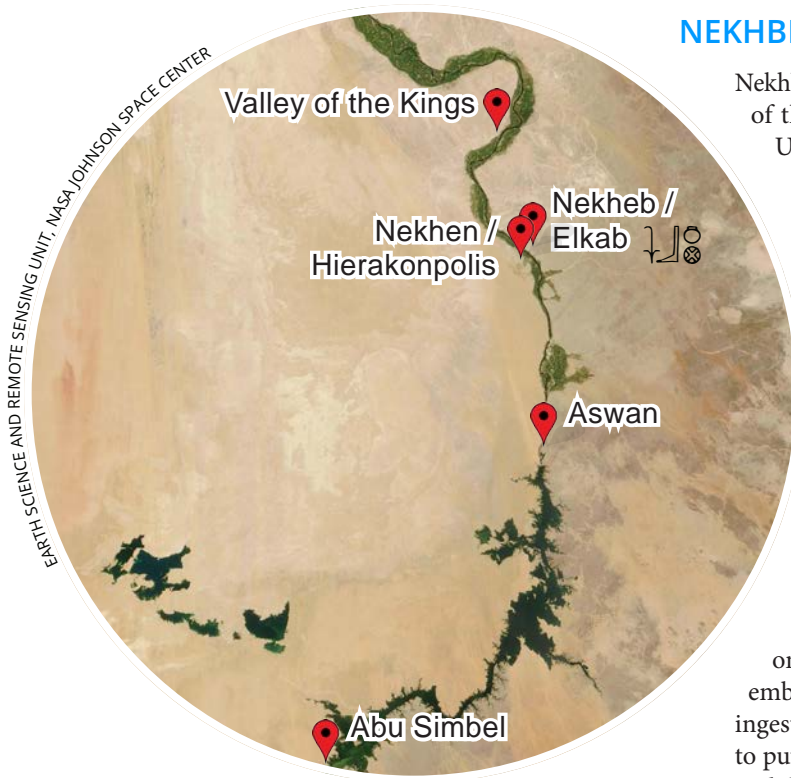
"THE TOMBS OF HARMHABI AND TOUTANKHAMON!"—THEODORE DAVIS (1912)
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EGYPTOLOGY LIBRARY OF PEGGY JOY

Alternative Fact-checking

This portait-headed canopic jar lid from the 18th Dynasty royal tomb of Horemheb (KV 57) helps dispell a largely-accepted "fact". It is popularly believed that Tutankhamun's burial equipment is unique in that some items bear a vulture-and-cobra forehead emblem, rather than the more usual single uraeus (see image on page 18). There are, however, a few earlier and later examples of Nekhbet and Wadjet appearing together

on the pharaonic brow, including the canopic lids of Amenhotep II and Horemheb (above).

This photo was taken shortly after Horemheb's tomb was discovered in 1908. You can see the full image on page 20 in the article reporting on Dr. Nicholas Reeves' search for the original owner of Ramesses II's coffin. It appears that the mighty king's coffin was second-hand and was made with another king in mind.



NEKHBT

Nekhbet's name simply means "She of Nekheb", the capital of the third nome of Upper Egypt (modern Elkab).

Unlike other goddesses associated with the vulture, Nekhbet was normally depicted as a vulture with outstretched wings usually grasping the shen ring in her claws. She can wear the White Crown of Upper Egypt, sometimes with two long feathers. More rarely she can be shown as a vulture-headed woman.

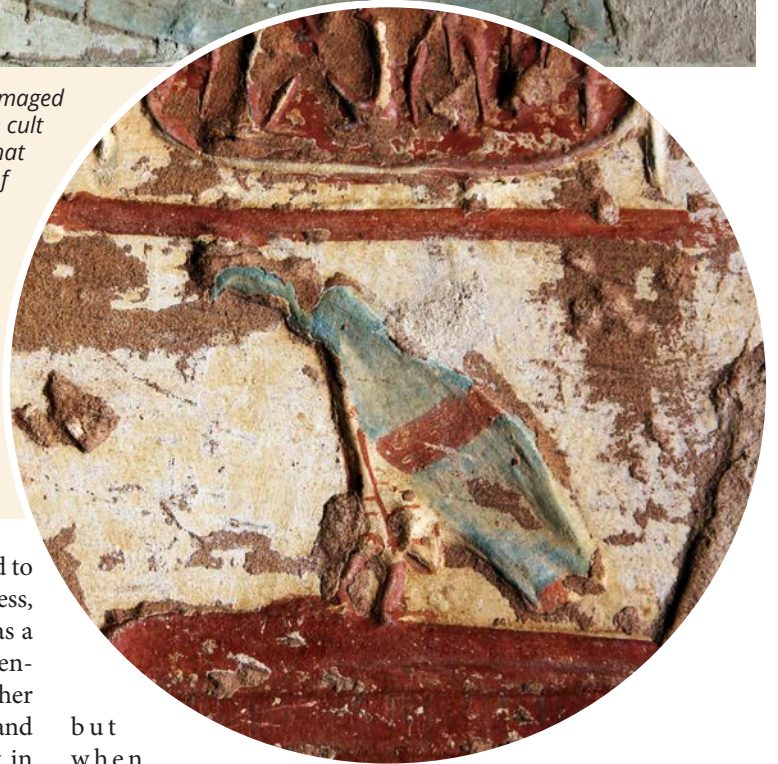
Nekhbet has a strong association with rebirth and funerary imagery, but she does not figure prominently in the funerary texts—possibly because of the lingering fear of the destruction of the body given the nature of the vulture. Coffin Text Spell 957 speaks of "Nekhbet, the entire vulture. Her wings are opened to me. . .

Nekhbet has installed me in the midst of herself [lest] Seth should see me when I reappear." While on one hand, Nekhbet's wings are open in welcoming embrace but the second phrase seems to allude to her ingesting the deceased (albeit with good intentions), or, to put it more agreeably, the deceased becoming as one with her.



The 20th-Dynasty tomb of Setau at Elkab includes a damaged but legible scene of a barque bearing a shrine for the cult statue of Nekhbet. The accompanying text reveals that the statue is being taken by boat from the temple of Elkab to the royal residence of Per-Ramesses, in the Delta, to attend the celebration of the king's Sed Festival, in year 29 of Ramesses III's reign (ca. 1155 B.C.).

Setau was a high priest of Nekhbet under the reigns of eight kings during the bulk of the 20th Dynasty: from Ramesses III through to Ramesses IX (ca. 1175 to 1120 B.C.). With such an incredibly high turnover in pharaohs in less than 50 years, one can imagine Setau making increasingly urgent offerings to Nekhbet, perhaps praying for stability as his country's fortunes declined.



Like many other goddesses, Nekhbet was referred to as the mother of the king. She was largely a state goddess, but at her cult centre of Nekheb she was venerated as a protector of women in childbirth and children. Amenhotep II (18th Dynasty, ca. 1427–1400 B.C.) rebuilt her temple and the foundation deposits of faience eyes and ears and fertility figurines indicate a popular cult in parallel with the official one. In later periods, Nekhbet was considered a protector of the roads which led from Nekheb to the quarries and mines of the eastern Desert, probably suggested by sightings of vultures along these same routes. A 20th-Dynasty tomb painting at Elkab (above) depicts a procession for Nekhbet. A vulture perches on the top of her shrine on the boat and around its wings is a red band. Does this depict a live sacred bird who had its wings bound to stop it flying away?

but when observed riding the thermals in easy spirals, becomes graceful. The Egyptians appeased the spirit of the vulture by taking it as their maternal protector, its large expressive wings becoming a clear statement of its powers. They turned its frightening feeding habits into an illustration of rebirth and their art transformed it into an elegant and powerful symbol.

A BIRD TRANSFORMED

Observing the vulture emphasises its extremes. Up close it is awkward and unattractive with unappealing habits,



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