

EAGLE IMAGERY IN JEWISH RELIEF SCULPTURE OF LATE ANCIENT PALESTINE:
SURVEY AND INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

STEVEN H. WERLIN: Eagle Imagery in Jewish Relief Sculpture of Late Ancient Palestine:
Survey and Interpretation
(Under the direction of Jodi Magness)

The following study examines the image of the eagle in the architectural relief sculpture of Palestinian synagogues as well as on Jewish sarcophagi. The buildings and sarcophagi on which these objects were displayed are dated between the third and sixth century C.E.

Chapter one introduces the topic by presenting some general background to the state of research and by defining relevant terms for the study. Chapter two presents the primary evidence in the form of a rudimentary catalogue. Chapter three examines the so-called “Eagle Incident” described by the ancient historian, Josephus, in *War* 1.648-55 and *Antiq.* 17.151-63.

Chapter four seeks to understand the meaning of the eagle-symbol within the literature familiar to Jews of late ancient Palestine. Chapter five presents the author’s interpretation of the eagle-symbol in both the sculptural remains and literary references. It considers the relationship of the image and meaning to Near Eastern and Byzantine art in light of the religious trends in late ancient Jewish society.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources*

<i>War</i>	Josephus, <i>War of the Jews</i>
<i>Antiq.</i>	Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
M.	Mishnah
T.	Tosefta
Y.	Palestinian Talmud (<i>Yerushalmi</i>)
B.	Babylonian Talmud (<i>Bavli</i>)

* Tractates of the rabbinic sources have been spelled out for the sake of clarity.

Secondary Sources

<i>EI</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
<i>HCSP</i>	<i>Harvard Classical Studies in Philology</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>INJ</i>	<i>Israel Numismatics Journal</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JFA</i>	<i>Journal of Field Archaeology</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRA</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>RA</i>	<i>Revue Archeologique</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i> (Society of Biblical Literature, online at < www.biblicalreview.org >).

NOTE ON PRIMARY TEXTS AND TRANSLITERATIONS

The following conventions have been used concerning the citation of primary texts and transliterations: When the full name of a primary text is cited, it has not been italicized, so as to differentiate it from modern works and transliterated words.

Non-English words have generally been transliterated according to modern pronunciation (as opposed to standard diacritical symbols) and italicized. In a few cases where precision was required, Greek and Hebrew words have been written out in the characters of their respective alphabets. Place names employ standardized spellings or are transliterated according to modern pronunciation.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

The study of ancient Jewish art emerged relatively late in modern scholarship. While art of the Classical and Byzantine worlds has received attention since the Renaissance, the art of ancient Judaism did not inspire academic interest until the twentieth century. Many factors contributed to this disinterest, including the Classical orientation of early art historians, restricted European access to the Near East, and the relatively small corpus of extant material evidence. Long-held assumptions regarding the rabbinic attitudes toward images and their authority over socio-religious institutions allowed ancient Jewish art to be overlooked for many years.¹

Many early scholars assumed that a strict rabbinic interpretation of the second commandment (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8) excluded all figural art from Jewish life, particularly in the synagogue. Discoveries of synagogue art in the twentieth century—including pagan imagery—forced scholars to reevaluate this assumption. By the middle of the last century, some scholars, such as E.R. Goodenough, suggested that the remains represented a form of non-rabbinic Judaism in antiquity. Goodenough's studies were important for the field, bringing to light an impressive corpus of ancient Jewish art, but his interpretation created a dichotomy between Jewish art and rabbinic Judaism, by claiming that Hellenistic Judaism

¹ For a good overview of the history of the field of ancient Jewish art, see Fine 2005: 1-56.

served as a missing-link with early Christianity.² While there were of course non-rabbinic Jews in the ancient world, studies in the past few decades have reevaluated the literary sources to create a much more complex view of rabbinic attitudes toward art. Scholars have generally understood mosaics and frescoes as forms of art that were acceptable in rabbinic Judaism, whereas *sculptural* art remained outside the scriptural regulations. In other words, they saw the rabbinic views as generally tolerant of two-dimensional art, but intolerant of three-dimensional. Nevertheless, research over the past century has consistently collected numerous examples of sculpted art from ancient synagogues, among which the motif of the eagle is prominent.

The present study examines three-dimensional eagle imagery in the late ancient synagogues of Palestine, particularly in the regions of Galilee and the Golan. The study considers the choice of the eagle as an image or symbol within the regional context, evaluating the cultural, stylistic, and religious influences. We will examine the explicit and implicit meanings behind the eagle motif, exploring the ways in which it may have entered Jewish art.

While a few examples of eagles in late ancient synagogues have been known for nearly a century,³ the extent of these three-dimensional representations has only been realized during the past few decades. Excavations of synagogues in Upper Galilee and the Golan since the 1970s have contributed to the growing corpus of eagle sculpture in synagogues. Studies of Jewish art in general have become increasingly nuanced in recent decades, evolving out of the monumental work done by E.R. Goodenough in the 1950s and

² For two influential critiques and appraisals of Goodenough's work, see Urbach 1958 and Smith 1967. See also a more recent discussion, Fine 2005: 36-40.

³ Notably the synagogues surveyed by Kohl and Watzinger in the early twentieth century; see Kohl and Watzinger 1975.

60s. The majority of research has focused on topics such as the frescoes of the Dura synagogue, the Helios and Zodiac motifs in mosaic pavements, and explicitly Jewish symbolism including the menorah, four species, *shofar*, and Torah shrine

Three-dimensional representations and sculpture in synagogues have received considerably less attention than mosaics and frescoes. Although scholars have examined the rabbinic attitudes toward three-dimensional art,⁴ few investigations have considered specific symbol motifs.⁵ This is no doubt due to the relatively small corpus of synagogue sculpture, possibly resulting from aniconic (or anti-idolic⁶) traditions and religious policies.⁷ Indeed, there are very few examples of sculpture carved in the round from synagogues.⁸ Most synagogue sculpture comes in the form of high relief on architectural fragments—especially lintels, column bases, capitals, and pediments. Some of the images carved in stone are similar to those which appear in frescoes and mosaics, such as explicitly Jewish symbols (mentioned above). Interestingly, eagles seem to appear more frequently and more prominently in three-dimensional art than in two-dimensional art.⁹

Representations of eagles, mostly sculpted in raised-relief, have been discovered among the architectural fragments of numerous synagogues dating to the late Roman or Byzantine period in Upper Galilee and the Golan. Although there are examples of eagle

⁴ E.g. Fine 1997, Eliav 1998, Baumgarten 1999.

⁵ Most studies of “symbols” in Judaism are based on literary symbols, particularly focused on symbols in Scripture and in rabbinic literature. See e.g. Neusner 1991. Fine 2005: 140-63 presents a recent interpretation of the artistic symbols of the date-palm and menorah, though cf. Lapin 2006.

⁶ Following Fine 2005.

⁷ Cf. Eliav 1998.

⁸ Interestingly, the few examples of synagogue sculpture carved in the round depict lions.

⁹ The only example of an eagle in mosaic art—to my knowledge—comes from Yafia. See Barag 1993. The only example of an eagle in fresco art—again, to my knowledge—comes from Dura, in the depiction of Solomon’s throne. See Kraeling 1956.

sculpture in Jewish contexts outside of this geographical region—e.g. the Eagle Table in the Sardis synagogue¹⁰ and an eagle carved into the “Seat of Moses” in the “synagogue” on Delos¹¹—the majority of examples come from Galilee and the Golan. As a matter of practicality, we will limit our scope to the ancient Jewish art of Palestine.

In exploring the significance of these eagles in art, we must examine the associated literary evidence. Any texts that would have been familiar to the patrons, artists, and Jews of the period in general might convey insight regarding the meaning of the eagle in Jewish thought. For this reason, we will examine the occurrences of the eagle in not only the appropriate rabbinic literature, but also any references in the Hebrew Bible, Pseudepigrapha, and Hekhalot literature. This is not meant to imply that all Jews of this period were familiar with all of these works, but rather that most Jews would be familiar with the meaning of the symbol as conveyed in these works. Surely, it was not necessary for one to have knowledge of a *specific text* in order to be familiar with the symbol within a cultural context.¹² The goal here is to understand the language of the symbols through which we may interpret the meaning of the eagle.

The dating of much of the archaeological and literary evidence discussed below can be problematic. Regarding the former, it is often impossible to verify a precise date for unprovenienced objects, a problem that often leads scholars to establish dates based on architectural and/or art historical typologies.¹³ Even objects found within stratified contexts,

¹⁰ Hanfmann 1983.

¹¹ See reconstruction in Levine 2000: 325. It seems, however, that there is not enough of this *cathedra* remaining to reconstruct an eagle.

¹² This is, in fact, the definition of what makes something a symbol. See below, “Method and Approach.”

¹³ For an example of the problems surrounding dates based on architectural typology, see Loffreda 1981.

however, can have questionable dates. This can be due to any of a number of factors, including: reliance on incomplete ceramic typologies, an over-reliance on numismatic evidence,¹⁴ inadequate excavation techniques, misidentification of stratigraphy and loci, and the state-of-preservation of and access to datable material. Unfortunately, preconceived notions about sites and cultures play too often a role in the misdating of evidence.¹⁵ In our use of both the literary and archaeological evidence, we have endeavored to remain cautious and conservative when assigning dates.

Our discussion begins by presenting the primary evidence that instigated this study. Although the scope of the project does not allow for lengthy, in-depth analyses of the archaeological evidence—such as would be required for a proper “catalogue”—we have endeavored to present as much information as was available via publications, as well as on-site and museum analyses.

In chapter three, we consider an early and famous account surrounding eagle sculpture from the Jewish historian, Josephus. The so-called “Eagle Incident,” reported in *War* 1.648-55 and *Antiquities* 17.151-54, took place several centuries prior to the synagogue and funerary images we will have examined in chapter two; and it is highly unlikely that the Jews of the late Roman and Byzantine period had any specific knowledge of the event from Josephus’ writings. Nevertheless, it will provide a useful background to exploring how Jews conceptualized the eagle-symbol, as well as three-dimensional imagery, in an earlier period.

Chapter four discusses the Jewish texts with which Jews of late antiquity *were* familiar. As discussed above, these will help us understand what meaning Jews of late

¹⁴ Any object that carries a date will give only a *terminus post quem* for its locus. Coins can be a problem since, unlike pottery, they can stay in circulation for centuries. See e.g. Bijovsky 2000.

¹⁵ See below, chapter two, “Group 3.” Various scholars have assumed these objects come from Jewish communities, however in several cases these conclusions are untenable.

antiquity may be attributed to the eagle. The final chapter presents our interpretations. By synthesizing the evidence conclusions reached in the previous chapters with early Christian art in particular, we will suggest some possible meanings for the eagle-symbol in Jewish art.

Method and Approach

In any discussion on meanings within art, it is first necessary to define our terms. We have so far used the word “symbol” several times without a clear definition. E.R. Goodenough, the first to produce an in-depth evaluation of Jewish symbols in antiquity, defined the term as “an object or a pattern which, whatever the reason may be, operates upon men, and causes effect in them, beyond mere recognition of what is literally presented in the given form.”¹⁶ The “effectual” aspect of his definition does not, in my opinion, seem necessary. Whether or not someone recognizes a non-literal meaning in an image or object has nothing to do with how moved they are by it. Goodenough, it seems, is adhering to the notion that the art is a function of religion, and religion is a matter of personal experience.¹⁷ While I agree that the artwork in this case should be understood within the context of its religious setting—i.e. the synagogue or tomb—it is not necessary to require an effectual aspect to the definition of religion.

Following Goodenough, in his work on symbols in rabbinic literature, J. Neusner defined a “symbol” as anything which “can stand for something beyond itself, without limit to how the thing is represented.”¹⁸ However appropriate Neusner’s definition for his work in Rabbinics—particularly when discussing concepts conveyed in narrative scenes—it is too

¹⁶ Goodenough 1988: 40.

¹⁷ This is perhaps a Christianity-oriented view.

¹⁸ Neusner 1991: 2.

general and vague for the present study. In terms of cultural anthropology, C. Geertz has defined a symbol as “any physical, social, or cultural act or object that serves as a vehicle for conception.”¹⁹ His definition may also be a bit broad for our purposes.²⁰

To allow the term to be both applicable and helpful within the present discussion, we must elaborate on the definition: A “symbol,” as used here, is any object that serves as a vehicle for explicit meaning, standing for a concept beyond what it superficially depicts, and that is widely understood within a particular cultural system.²¹ Symbols can also carry implicit meanings,²² which are not recognized, or only partially recognized, by those *within* the cultural context.²³ As historians and archaeologists, we are outside of the culture system in question; however because we are unable to observe those within the culture—except via literature and artifacts—we are limited as to what we can glean of the *implicit* meaning. Therefore, our goal should be instead to understand the symbol’s *explicit* meaning, i.e. how it was understood by Jews within the cultural context, including the artists, patrons, and internal observers of the art. Because it would be impossible to psychoanalyze an ancient cultural system in order to realize the meaning of something which they themselves were

¹⁹ Geertz 1973: 208.

²⁰ See Firth 1973: 54-91 for the complexities surrounding the term “symbol.”

²¹ It is not our intent to dwell on this matter and develop a theory of symbols, but rather to have a useful definition to apply here. For this reason, our definition may be a bit un-nuanced. Moreover, our current definition may be criticized as teetering too close to the definitions put forth by structural anthropology; see Leach 1976: 38-40.

²² In Geertz’s definition above, he is more focused on the implicit meanings as tools for understanding the culture from an outsider’s viewpoint.

²³ Halle 1998: 51.

unaware,²⁴ we will restrict our investigation to explicit symbolic interpretations, focusing on how the ancient culture employed the image.

As Geertz's definition demonstrates, cultural anthropology tends to include within the definition of "symbol" any object or action. Of course, we are not concerned here with "actions," nor will it be helpful (or possible) to consider any underlying meaning behind those "objects" representing eagles. As D. Halle points out, *anything* can have meaning—and surely does to a certain degree—but it is those objects with "special" meaning which concern us.²⁵ In terms of art, Halle argues, there are artifacts that do not necessarily have meaning beyond their use as decoration.²⁶ It is this point with which we must contest. In researching these eagle-images in particular, some scholars have suggested that they were employed for strictly decorative purposes, and thus deprived of all symbolic value.²⁷ There are two problems with this. First, it is an anachronistic concept. As H. Belting put it, we are dealing with an "era of image," not an "era of art."²⁸ The notion that art existed for the sake of art is not applicable to the world of images before the Renaissance. Second, it is illogical to suppose that *some* images—such as eagles, lions, and human motifs—prominently

²⁴ Ibid. also defines a middle category of meaning—that of which the culture is *partially* aware and can be realized by the researcher. In theory, if those insiders of a culture are *partially* aware of a meaning, their literature or material culture may betray that information to the researcher. Again, however, this involves mass-psychoanalysis.

²⁵ Ibid. 52.

²⁶ Ibid. 57-58. The artifact, as Halle points out, can in fact change from merely a decorative artifact to a symbol depending on the time, place, and audience.

²⁷ Avigad 1976; Avi-Yonah 1981: 65; Hachlili 1988: 333-34; 1995: 184.

²⁸ Belting 1994: 9, 14-16. In his own words: "We are so deeply influenced by the 'era of art' that we find it hard to imagine the 'era of images.' Art history therefore simply declared everything to be art in order to bring everything within its domain, thereby effacing the very difference that might have thrown light on our subject"; *ibid.* 9. He means here that our best chance of deciphering the meaning of the image is to understand it within its own symbolic context.

displayed in buildings employed for sacred and communal activities, are devoid of symbolic value, while others—including culturally specific images, such as the menorah, shofar, and Torah shrine—convey deeply theological messages.²⁹ Explanations of synagogue or funerary art as “mere decoration” will not be considered sufficient as reasonable interpretations.

This is not to say however that the eagle-symbol was indigenous to the cultural system of Palestinian Judaism. Indeed, it was not an uncommon image in Near Eastern, Hellenistic, and Roman art, as well. Certainly, the meaning attributed to the symbols in those contexts affected the meaning in Jewish contexts. Thus, it will be helpful to examine the eagle-symbol in the images of the surrounding cultures, i.e. the greater context of late ancient Judaism. That said, it is our contention that Judaism, while borrowing the image from other cultural systems, developed a specific meaning applicable particularly to the Jews of late ancient Palestine. Deciphering this meaning is the goal of the present study.

²⁹ For examples of such arguments, see Hachlili 1988: 234-346; Fine 1997: 121-22. Cf. Goodenough 1988: 56-59, who, writing in the 1950s, had already made a good case for *not* writing off some images as purely decorative in favor of other that have intrinsic meaning.

CHAPTER TWO:

CORPUS OF EAGLES IN JEWISH RELIEF ART

This chapter presents in detail the known examples of eagle relief sculpture in Jewish contexts of ancient Palestine. The reliefs originate from sites throughout the region, though the majority come from the synagogues of Upper Galilee and the Golan. Most of these pieces were originally incorporated into architecture, though some were found in funerary contexts. All the objects are three-dimensional carvings, however none was carved fully in the round as free-standing statues.¹ While a few are engaged—that is, embedded only partly into the stone—most are depicted in high- or bas-relief, the latter being more prominent. Each entry below addresses the following criteria: provenience (site name and region of the country), dimensions (in meters), medium (all are either limestone or basalt), architectural context,² state-of-preservation, date, physical description, and stylization. The detailed descriptions pay particular attention to the pose and artistic style.

Although the descriptions below may seem somewhat exhaustive, the goal of this chapter is *not* to present a complete catalogue of eagle images in ancient Jewish art. To compile such a catalogue would require considerably more time as well as access to

¹ There is very little ancient Jewish art in the form of free-standing sculpture. A few examples of lion statuary are known from late ancient synagogue, particularly at Umm el-Qanatir and the well-known Sardis synagogue (the latter of which is geographically outside the purview of this study). Also, there are very few remains of Jewish art in the form of frescoes, the obvious exception being the third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos. Although scholarship has been particularly prolific concerning the colorful mosaic pavements of ancient synagogues, only one, to my knowledge, depicts an eagle—the synagogue at Yafia.

numerous collections, which is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, the corpus will simply establish a framework for analysis and discussion of the symbol. Nevertheless, I have endeavored to provide as much relevant information as was available to me via publications, and from museum and on-site analyses.

The compiling of a catalogue such as this presents a number of problems and limitations. First is the obvious problem of available information. Most of the eagle sculpture known is not published in excavation reports. Some examples are mentioned incidentally in brief preliminary reports and broad overviews.³ Some are known only from large-scale survey projects (which may or may not be published fully).⁴ However, even the objects known from excavation reports are not always described in the most detail. These problems are largely a matter of individual objectives. That is to say, excavators concerned with publishing field reports may leave out artistic details to focus on the stratigraphic significance; art historians may emphasize the stylistic origins and influences, neglecting matters of archaeological dating and precise provenience; and scholars of ancient religion may ignore issues of artistic style and precise dating to focus on the symbolic meaning of the image at hand. A proper catalogue would of course evaluate each piece individually and first-hand, ideally including the provenience and stratigraphically-determined date. Unfortunately, the present state of research and scope of this project does not allow for an ideal compendium of the finds.

² It should be noted that the immediate context within the architecture is not always certain or clear, and in several instances educated guesses were based on available comparanda. I have included this category for the sake of thoroughness but have been cautious in definitive assignments for the sake of precision.

³ E.g. Ilan 1987 and 1991.

⁴ E.g. Epstein and Gutman 1972, as well as the work done by Z. Ilan and Z. Ma'oz in the 1980s and 90s in the Golan.

The corpus below is presented in three separate groups. The first group consists of objects for which the provenience (though not necessarily date) is known, as is the religio-ethnic identity⁵ (i.e. Jewish or Christian) of the patron(s). The second group consists of objects, mostly survey finds, where the provenience is known (or reasonably presumed), but where the identity of the patron is in question.⁶ The third and final group consists of eagles whose provenience is unknown. Within these groups, the objects will be categorized roughly by geographic location. These divisions allow for a more cautious approach, particularly regarding the issue of dating. The dating of objects is an especially daunting problem for those pieces found in unstratified contexts and in survey; however, even the dates for some objects found in excavated sites should be called into question.⁷ Unfortunately, in the majority of cases there is not enough information to argue for a definitive date, resulting in the general dating of 3rd-6th century C.E. While I have endeavored to adopt a conservative and cautious approach regarding the dating of materials, a reasonably accurate date has been assigned whenever possible.

Regarding the identification of the eagles themselves, they must be differentiated from other “birds.” In the majority of cases, this is fairly easy to do by pose and details. Eagles in ancient Jewish art are typically depicted with the body facing frontally, the head turned and the wings spread. Other birds, often identified in secondary literature as doves,

⁵ I use the term “religio-ethnic” instead of “ethno-religious” in order to emphasize that, in the case of ancient Judaism especially, the religion was an aspect of the ethnicity, i.e. the group’s identification as a “people” rather than vice-versa.

⁶ There is nothing distinctly Jewish about the symbol of the eagle. Some have, in fact, described it as a “pagan” image (e.g. Goodenough 1953-1965: VIII, 121-42), though it should better be understood as inherently neutral outside of its context. In the case of the eagle, the context gives the symbol meaning. In other words, the symbol by itself can be transmitted to several different religious or ethnic contexts, but only then does it adopt a meaning specific to that religion or culture. (For example, an eagle in front of stars and stripes has a completely different meaning than an eagle standing atop a swastika.)

⁷ The lack of publication and/or proper excavation techniques often makes this difficult.

are shown with the body in full profile and with the wings folded alongside the body. The wings of eagles are also typically depicted with a differentiation between the upper and lower feathers. The feathers of the body and upper portion of the legs are also typically depicted as circles or semicircles, described below as “scales.”

Scholars will sometimes identify these birds as “vultures” (Heb. *‘ayit*) as opposed to “eagles” (Heb. *nesher*). The confusion seems to be a result of a popular tendency to identify both as “birds-of-prey” in general, as well as an ambiguity in modern Hebrew vernacular. Since there is no obvious reason—in terms of artistic form—to differentiate between “eagle” and “vulture,” we will refer to them all here as “eagles.” Under the heading of “eagle,” though, there is a subdivision which seems to be specific to the art of the Golan. The animal referred to in Hebrew as *hivya’i* (חַיִּי) —the Aramaic word for “snake”⁸—is often translated into English as “short-toed eagle” or “snake-eater.”⁹ The images of eagles biting a snake are therefore typically identified as these “short-toed eagles.” Although there may have been representations of different species of eagles in Jewish art, it is not reasonable to make such taxonomic distinctions in artwork, especially since most of the representations were influenced by other art, *not*, as it seems, by nature. That said, we will treat the “short-toed eagle” in Jewish art as a regional variant of the eagle image.

The terms used in describing the parts of the eagles below follow the diagram in fig. i. For the sake of clarity, I have also employed the terms “proper right” and “proper left” when the perspective is that of the eagle. The terms “right” and “left,” on the other hand, are from

⁸ See Sokoloff 1990: 197, spelled חַיִּי, cf. Jastrow 1996: 452, spelled חַיִּי. The derivation of the modern spelling and pronunciation is unclear.

⁹ Ma’oz 1981: 110. This bird-of-prey, *Circaetus gallicus*, lives throughout the Mediterranean region and is common in the eastern Levant. The short-toed eagle is sometimes commonly referred to (in English) as a “harrier-eagle” or a type of “Old world hawk.” See Birdlife International 2006.

the perspective of the viewer. (For example, the “proper right wing of the eagle” refers to the right-hand side as viewed by the eagle itself. If we say, “the eagle’s head is turned to the right,” this means to the right side of the image.)

Concerning the form of the eagles represented, they are almost all depicted facing frontward with wings open, in the so-called “heraldic” position. There are four basic wing styles for the eagles in this corpus (refer to fig. ii). In the first form (fig. ii.1a), referred to here as “open-draped, flat,” the wings extend outward from the shoulders, turn downward at either a curved or sharp angle—the “bend” of the wing—and then turn back toward the body, creating a horizontal line running perpendicular to the body. The wings here have an unnatural and schematic appearance, almost as if the bird is wearing a cape. The second form (fig. ii.1b), referred to here as “open-draped, with point,” is essentially the same as the previous, however the wings come to a point at the tips and then return to the body with a slight curve upwards, rather than a horizontal line. The third form (fig. ii.2), referred to here as “open-pointed,” is similar in that the wings extend off the shoulders and turn at some angle (usually obtuse) downward. The difference is that the wings in this form come to a point at the extreme tip and then return to the body at a diagonal. This creates an upside-down V-shape between the underside of the wing and the side of the body. The open-pointed form is frequent among the short-toed eagles. The third form (fig. ii.3), referred to here as “outstretched,” depicts the wings spread to their limit. This is less common among the eagles in Jewish art. There can of course be fine lines between these forms, and often the object does not fit into any one of these neatly, but has attributes of more than one. The criteria

used to differentiate the forms typically include the angle of the wing's bend, the locations of the wing's curves, and the shape of the wing's underside.¹⁰

CORPUS

Titles in quotations are those given in published references. Figure numbers refer to the figures following the bibliography below. The dimensions typically are that of the entire fragment with which the eagle is associated. The approximated dimensions are based on photographs and/or sketches.

Group 1: *Objects whose provenience and religio-ethnic identity is known.*

No. 1 "Lintel with Eagle, Fish, and Inscription"

Fig. 1

Dabura, northern Golan

.60 (h.) × 1.07 (l.) × .30 (d.) m¹¹

(Reconstructed length: 2.07 m)

Basalt

Lintel, either over a doorway or window, probably synagogue

Refs.: Naveh 1978: no. 11; Urman 1981: 155; Ma'oz: 1995 167, 415, Pl. 130:1;
Hachlili 1995: no. 27.

Although the lintel is not intact on the right side, the portion remaining is well-preserved. The eagle is carved in high relief, with the body protruding about 8.5 cm and the wings protruding about 4 cm from the face of the block. Fig. 1b shows a reconstructed drawing of the lintel based on an assumed symmetry. The head is poised to the proper right and the wings are stretched out to their maximum. The head is ovular, laid horizontally, with a round eye almost in the exact center. The beak is narrow, long, and rather straight; it grips a miniature wreath, the diameter of which is no larger than the head. Diagonal lines extend

¹⁰ Ma'oz 1995: 253-57 distinguishes only two categories. The first is closer to the classical style, with outstretched wings which create an upside-down V-shape on the top edge. In the second style, the wings are bent over and attached directly to the body, similar to the open-draped styles described here.

¹¹ For measurement abbreviations: h. = height, w. = width, d. = depth.

across the neck, indicating a twist. The sides of the body are curved inward, creating an egg-like shape. The body is covered with five or six rows of semicircular, overlapping scales. The proper right, preserved wing extends out horizontally in an outstretched style. Following from the shoulder, it extends upward and out, turning a forty-five degree angle at about the same height as the top of the head. It then extends downward and out, to about the mid-point of the legs. This side curves inward slightly. The feathers are stylized by three upside-down V-shaped bands which extend from the body to the extremities. A shorter fourth band is visible at the bottom, however it does not extend from the body. Slightly curved lines run perpendicular across the bands to depict the upper feathers. They peter out near the end, perhaps to indicate the lower feathers. (There is no other clear differentiation of the upper and lower feathers.) The upper legs are covered with arched lines. The talons are stubby and blockish with little definition of the claws.

The overall appearance of the eagle is schematic, though slender and even somewhat elegant. Although it seems to be well-executed, there is very little attempt at realism, and the feet are awkwardly carved. Two fish appear next to the eagle's wing: a vertically-carved fish extending from the end of the wing, and a horizontally-carved fish underneath the wing.

There is an Aramaic inscription over the wing which reads "makes the gate."¹²

This object was found in survey. Ma'oz places it within his "Dikkeh-'Ein Nashut group" and dates it to the late 5th century.

No. 2 "Lintel with Wreath, Rosette, and Pair of Short-toed Eagles"

Fig. 2

¹² Naveh 1978: no. 11.

Dabura, northern Golan
Measurements unknown
Basalt
Lintel, over a doorway
Refs.: Ma'oz 1995: 168, 258, Pl. 130:4; Hachlili 1995: no. 33.

The lintel depicts two eagles, wings spread, biting snakes, and flanking a wreath and rosette, all carved in bas-relief. The lintel seems to be fairly intact though it may be rather worn, and with no traces of obvious defacement. The details of the eagles are simple. The heads, both turned outward and away from the wreath, have hooked crowns and pointed beaks, lacking any preserved details. Extending from each beak is a long, thin, wavy strip, presumably representing a snake. The snakes run down along the sides of the panel. The bodies of both eagles are bulbous, lacking any preserved stylized texture. The open-pointed wings, which extend outward and down from the shoulders, are curved at the bend, come to a point at the extremities, and form a straight diagonal line back to the body. They are detailed only with vertical lines extending upward from the bottom edge of the wings. These vertical lines appear to reach only about half-way up the wing. This may be meant to differentiate between the upper and lower feathers. The legs of each eagle extend vertically from the bottom. The legs of the left eagle are somewhat worn. On the right eagle, the upper portion of the leg is segmented, though no details are visible to signify the texture. The talons are boxy and crude.

The wreath in the center also has little in terms of details. It is essentially a raised, circular band, segmented by seven or eight strips. It appears otherwise smooth. On the inside of the wreath is a rosette, with four petals and a small circle in the center. It fills up the center of the wreath.

The overall appearance of the eagles and surrounding images is schematic, unrealistic, and formulaic. The images have been depicted in the simplest forms possible.

As with no. 1, the object was found in survey, though most likely belongs to the late 5th century based on other remains from the site.

No. 3 “Lintel of the Bet Midrash of Eliezer ha-Qappar”

Fig. 3

Dabura, northern Golan

.425 (h) × 1.7 (l.) × .285+ (d.) m

Basalt

Lintel, over a doorway of *bet midrash*

Refs.: Naveh 1978: no. 6; Urman 1981: 156; Ma‘oz 1995: 167, 258, 415, Pl. 129: 3;

Hachlili 1995: no. 32.

The inscription in the center of this architectural fragment has made it one of the better known examples of a Jewish eagle relief. The fairly well-preserved lintel depicts in bas-relief two eagles, wings spread, and heads turned toward the center. In the beak of each bird is the tail of a snake. The snakes curve down and toward the center of the panel where they twist into a Hercules knot, and then form the two halves of a stylized wreath. The heads of the snakes meet in the center of the carved panel.

The two eagles, similarly carved, are schematic in both form and detail. The heads of both take the form of hooked knobs with a single incision for the beaks. The left eagle has a circle in the center to depict the eye. The right eagle does not preserve this detail. The neck of the left eagle is stylized with a single horizontal band of three or four vertical lines. The slightly longer neck of the proper left eagle has two such bands. The bodies of both eagles are ovular, so that with the necks, they appear as upside-down light bulbs. The feathers on the bodies are depicted as simple, criss-crossing diagonal lines. The wings of both eagles are spread in the open-pointed style; however, curiously they are both upside-down. Unlike the other eagle reliefs, the bend of the wing is at the bottom, near the hip. The usual upside-down V-shape formed at the underside of the wings is near the shoulder on these two eagles. The tips of the wings—usually low, near the legs—are here adjacent to the necks. The upper feathers of both sets of wings are stylized by a tight net-pattern. The lower feathers are

stylized by parallel incisions. The legs of both eagles extend vertically down, though the legs of the right eagle are curved slightly outward at the bottom. The feathers on the legs are stylized by diagonally criss-crossing lines—another tight net-pattern. There is no differentiation between the upper and lower legs. The talons themselves are stubby and crude, detailed only with short, vertical incisions to depict the claws.

The snakes extend toward the center, form a Hercules knot, and then curve up to form a wreath. The details of the snakes above the knot are depicted by (from lower portion to upper) a long segment, a short segment, a long segment, a narrow band, another long segment, and another narrow band. The heads are pointed and detailed only with two circular indentations on each to depict the eyes.

The Hebrew inscription is located in the center of the panel. To the right of the wreath reads “Eliezer,” and to the left reads “ha-Qappar.” On the inside of the wreath reads “This is [the] *bet midrash* of the rabbi.”

While a 3rd century rabbi by the name “Eleazar ha-Qappar” is known from rabbinic sources,¹³ this inscription is often identified with his son “Rabbi Eleazar bar Qappara.”¹⁴ Either way, there is no reason to assign this lintel necessarily to the 3rd century.¹⁵ As it was found in secondary use,¹⁶ it more likely dates to the 5th century, along with the other architectural fragments from Dabura.

¹³ See Mishnah Avot 4:21-22, Sifre Numbers 42, *inter alia*.

¹⁴ Naveh 1978, no. 6; Urman 1981: 156; Cohen 1981: 14. Cf. Urman 1985, for the argument that they were not father-and-son but rather the same person. For rabbinic references to bar Qappara, see Midrash Tehilim 1:2, B. Shabbat 75a, and Y. Mo’ed Qatan 81c, *inter alia*. For general information, see Jastrow and Ginzberg 1901-1906: 503-05, and Danby 1933: 455, n. 7.

¹⁵ Cf. Urman 1981: 156, who assumes that Eleazar ha-Qappar or bar Qappara actually established this *bet midrash*.

¹⁶ According to Ma’oz 1995: 167, it was incorporated into a mosque and covered with plaster.

The overall impression of the images of this lintel is schematic and crude. There is no sense of realism. The flat panel from which the relief protrudes emphasizes each of the images as schematic and recognizable symbols. The formation of the wreath by the snakes is an interesting variant on a common motif (see below).

No. 4 Eagle Lintel

Fig. 4

Dabura, northern Golan

.38 (h.) × .92 (l.) × .30 (d.) m

Basalt

Lintel, either over a doorway or window

Refs.: Ma'oz 1981: 109 (photograph only); Hachlili 1995: no. 29.

The head of the eagle in this bas-relief is turned to the left, the wings are spread in the open-pointed style, and the legs are stretched widely apart. The eagle's head is a curved knob extending off of a short neck. It is detailed only by a large incised circle in the middle to delineate the eye. A large, curved beak extends to the left, bisected by a curved incision. The body is hardly distinguishable from the large wings. It is covered with an incised scale pattern made up of small individual and overlapping, irregular rectangles. The wings extend off the shoulders out and slightly up, then curve down to the tips which are adjacent to the talons. The upper feathers are stylized by three segmented bands which follow the curvature of the wing. The lower feathers are not segmented. The legs are spread widely. The upper legs are covered in the same scale pattern as the wings. The lower legs are narrower and have no details. The talons, opened widely, are depicted as two long, narrow protrusions, perpendicular to the legs.

This eagle stands in the typical heraldic pose. Its details are schematic and unrealistic. The large eye, squat body, and stretched legs highlight the exaggerated proportions. As with the other fragments from Dabura, this object is mostly likely late 5th century, though it is not from a stratified context.

No. 5 Eagle Relief Fragment

Fig. 5

‘Ein Nashut, northern Golan

.32 (h.) × .50 (l.) × .13 (d.) m

Basalt

Architectural fragment, either within archway (over door or window), or possibly on pediment

Refs.: Ma‘oz 1995: 96, 257, Pl 69:4.

The three fragments which remain of this bas-relief are broken on all sides. The only portions of the eagle itself that remain are part of the lower stomach, part of the proper right upper leg, sections of the upper and lower proper right wing, and a small portion of the lower proper left wing. The relief originally depicted a frontally-facing eagle with open-draped, flat-bottom wings.

The remains of the body indicate that the overall shape was originally rectangular. It is stylized with rows of small, circular, overlapping scales. The proper right wing shows remains of both the upper and lower feathers. The upper feathers are stylized by columns of small, U-shaped bands. About seven are still visible. The lower feathers consist of vertical continuations of the columns, but without the U-shaped bands. The inside of the wing runs along the body, indicating that the form of the wings was originally open-draped and flat. The proper left wing only shows remains of the three long lower feathers. The bottom of the wing, curving slightly downward, is preserved here, showing that the entire wing only extended as low as the eagle's waist. The top of the proper right leg extends down vertically, the edge is in line with the side of the body. The feathers of the upper leg are visible as two rows of oval-shaped, overlapping scales, larger than those of the body.

Despite its meager remains, we can effectively reconstruct the original form of this eagle. The eagles depicted on the orthostat from nearby ‘Ein Samsam (no. 40 below) provide a close parallel. The rectangular body with legs together and open-draped wings is distinctive. Ma‘oz suggests that this eagle originally adorned the pediment of the synagogue

(as in his reconstruction¹⁷), or possibly was placed in the panel of a relieving arch over a doorway. Both of these suggestions are plausible.

Concerning the date, there are two major construction phases for the site of the synagogue at 'Ein Nashut: 4th to second quarter of the 5th century, and mid-5th to the late 6th or early 7th century (with a renovation in the 6th century).¹⁸ If this eagle does belong to part of the main, southern façade of the building, then it must come from the second phase and dates to no earlier than the mid-5th century.

No. 6 “Eagle Lintel”

Fig. 6

el-Ahmadiyeh, northern Golan (N of Qatzrin)

.50 (h.) × 2.20 (l.) m, reconstructed length

Basalt

Lintel

Refs.: Schumacher 1888: 70-72; Ma'oz 1995: 174-75, Pl. 135:3.

The two fragments from this lintel, discovered and initially drawn by Schumacher, preserved only the center and right side of the block. A reconstructed drawing, based on an assumed symmetry, was later offered by Ma'oz¹⁹ (see fig. 6). The images on the lintel depict an eagle in the center, facing frontally, wings outstretched, and head turned to the left. It stands atop an oval object, laid horizontally, with a small circle in the center. A garland extends in either direction from the oval object. The garland stretches up and over a dove or pigeon, and hooks over the proper right horn of a bull. A grape bunch and fish fill the space between the eagle and the bull's head.

The head of the eagle is small, positioned atop a long, tapering neck. The crown is curved and sleek. The small hooked beak extends to the left, behind which is a circular

¹⁷ Ma'oz 1995: 101, Pl 76.

¹⁸ Ibid. 73-82.

¹⁹ 1995: Pl. 135:3.

indentation to mark the eye. Neither the head nor the neck appears to have any stylized details. The neck curves gently into the upper part of the ovular body. The body is short and covered with six or seven rows of small, half-oval, overlapping scales. The wings extend from the shoulders and side of the body. They are outstretched to their maximum, reaching a wingspan that measures more than twice the height of the eagle. The bends of the wings create large, obtuse angles. The top edges of the wings extend to the tips, then turn an acute angle down and inward. The lines formed by the edges of the eagle's outer wings are parallel to the top edges of the wings before the bend; this gives each wing a rhomboidal shape. The upper feathers are stylized just as the body, with small, half-oval, overlapping scales. The lower feathers, comprising about two-thirds of the total wing, are stylized with nine long, deep, parallel incisions. The legs of the eagle extend down vertically from the body. They are each formed by small triangles, at the end of which are four small claws to represent the talons. The upper legs appear to be covered in tiny, round scales. Three long, parallel incisions in the form of wide upside-down U-shapes extend out from behind the eagle's legs. These may be meant to represent the bird's tail.

The bull's head to the right of the eagle is of a rather simple design. An irregular and wavy, the frontally-facing head is in the shape of an upside-down trapezoid. Horns project diagonally, upward and out, from the upper corners. Below the horns are triangular ears extending outward horizontally. The eyes are represented only by two convex curves facing each other.

The bird below the garland and to the left of the bull's head is in profile. Its body faces away from the eagle, but the head turns back toward it. The head is rounded on top, with a small indent in the center to mark the eye. The beak is large and triangular. The legs

are visible below as small, thin incisions. Although it has the appearance of a duck, it is probably better-identified as a dove.

The grape bunch to the right of the bull's head appears to be attached to a thin branch extending from behind the bull's proper right ear. Above the eagle's wing is a small fish with almost no stylization or detail.

Despite the menagerie formed by the images on this lintel, the eagle stands out as the most prominent, located in the center and displaying its impressive wingspan. The exaggerated wingspan calls attention to the eagle's primary attribute (i.e. flight). While the frozen pose of the eagle with outstretched wings may be a bit stiff, the form of the wings still seems somewhat naturalistic (regardless of the exaggerated proportions). The outstretched wings and the shape and size of the head, as well as the garland, are paralleled by an eagle on a lintel at Baalbek.²⁰ The stylization, however, appears rather schematic and over-simplified. In addition, the bull and garland image finds a close parallel at Palmyra.²¹

Other architectural fragments were found along with this lintel in survey, however the location of the presumed synagogue has not been discovered. It is therefore nearly impossible to date this object at present. Nevertheless, Ma'oz suggests the other architectural fragments at the site are part of the same tradition as his "Dikkeh-'Ein Nahshut Group" in the Golan, giving it a probable date of late 5th century.²²

No. 7 "Relief with eagle"
Qutz'biyeh (reused), central Golan (SE of Qatzrin)
.31 (h.) × .47 (l.) × .41 (d.)
Basalt
Architectural fragment, possibly part of a lintel or façade panel

Fig. 7

²⁰ Jidejian 1975: fig. 268, originally drawn by Robert Wood, *The Ruins of Baalbek* (1757).

²¹ Drijvers 1976: Pl. XLIX:2.

²² Ma'oz 1995: 177.

Refs.: Hachlili 1995: no. 26.

Although slightly battered, the incised details of this high relief are fairly well-preserved. The head and the ends of the legs do not survive. The body, which protrudes as a bulbous mass from the stone, is egg-shaped (wider at the bottom). It is covered with rows of wide, overlapping, semicircular scales. The wings are spread in open-pointed style, though they fall behind similarly to the open-draped. The wings extend up and outward from the shoulders, but then hook and drop almost vertically downward. Adjacent to the feet, they taper and form a diagonal line to reconnect with the body, just above the waist. The upper feathers of the wings are covered in scales, similarly-sized and -shaped as those on the body, however they are incised, not carved deeply. The lower feathers are stylized with vertical lines extending toward the tip, detailing the feathers. The space between the inner part of the wing and the body is incised with deep diagonal lines, presumably to depict the tail. The legs are in high relief and bulbous (like the body). They are carved with some texture, but have been fairly battered.

The carving and design of the image are detailed, though certainly not very naturalistic. While the body parts seem proportional, they are stiff and even somewhat cartoonish. The positioning of the wings is awkward and unnatural.

While the object was found in secondary use, it seems to have originated at Qutz'biyeh, where a large public building was found. The building, which includes an architectural fragment bearing a menorah, was probably a synagogue.²³ Since the structure has not been systematically excavated and reported, no date can be suggested for this object.

No. 8 Short-toed (?) Eagle on Architectural Fragment
Quz'biyeh, central Golan (SE of Qatzrin)

Fig. 8

²³ Ilan 1991: 108.

Approximately .20 (h.) × .35 (l.)
Basalt
Architectural fragment, probably lintel
Refs.: Ilan 1991: 108 (fig. 2.).

This relief has been cut along the top, so that no portions above the eagle's shoulders remain. The body and legs are very battered, but appear to have been originally carved in high relief. The eagle is positioned frontally, with wings spread. The figure is comparatively small. The body is rounder than most others, but the details and stylization are no longer visible.

The wings are in the open-pointed style. It seems that they originally extended off the shoulders, however that section is not preserved. The extant portions of the wings show the edges extending downward and slightly out. The wings come to a point at the most extreme end, and then cut diagonally back to the body. This creates an upside-down V-shape between the wing and the body. The upper third of the remaining portion is stylized with three or four rows of almost square, incised scales. Lower on the wings are carved long parallel lines to depict the feathers at the ends of the wings. The legs extend vertically and parallel down from the body. They appear to taper slightly, but are badly worn.

Between the proper right wing and the side of the eagle's body, there is a long, ribbon-like object. It creates an S-curve, extending from the broken left edge of the fragment to the broken upper edge, near where the head would have been. Ilan suggests that this is a snake,²⁴ which would have been gripped by the eagle in its beak. The squat stature and stretched wings agree with this interpretation of the bird as a "short-toed" eagle. Comparanda suggest that the relief was originally paired with another bird in mirror-image (see above, nos. 2 and 3, and further below).

²⁴ Ilan 1991: 108.

As with no. 7, the date of this fragment is unknown. It too is probably associated, along with other nearby architectural fragments to the large public building, probably a synagogue.

No. 9 “Eagle Sculpture”

Fig. 9

Jaraba, western Golan

.47 (h.) × .50+ (w.) × .38 (d.) m

Basalt

Lintel or archway (?)

Refs.: Ma‘oz 1995: 60-61, Pl. 37:3; Hachlili 1995: no. 27.

The eagle is carved in high relief, almost as an engaged statue. The head and most of the wings and legs are not preserved. The body is curved on the sides, bulging somewhat in the mid-section. It is covered with rows of large overlapping scales, not quite semicircular, but more like rectangles with curved corners. Interestingly, the remains of the wings do not appear symmetrical. The proper right wing is folded flat alongside the body. It is covered with the same scales. The proper left wing seems to have been open. The remaining portion is detailed with short, curved feathers on the upper wing and long vertical plumes on the lower wing. Only the tops of the legs remain. They are stylized with two or three upside-down V-shaped bands, running across each leg.

According to Ma‘oz,²⁵ this sculpture is one of the more detailed and impressive of the Golan. Although the preserved details and textured features are somewhat schematic, the pose may have appeared naturalistic. Ma‘oz places the architectural fragments from this site in his “Dikkeh-‘Ein Nashut” group, dating it to the late 5th century.²⁶

No. 10 “Conch Window with Eagle”

Fig. 10

ed-Dikkeh, western Golan

.72 (h.) × .62 (l.) × .39 (d.) m

²⁵ Ma‘oz 1995: 61.

²⁶ Ibid. 63.

Basalt

Lintel from a window, probably in the main façade of the synagogue

Refs.: Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 527; Ma'oz 1995: 23, Pl. 8:4.

This badly worn eagle relief is placed to the right of a high, pointed cornice on a lintel over a Syrian gable window. The lintel has an arch filled by a conch design. Above this there is a narrow frieze with oval and geometric shapes, and then above this is the wider cornice which creates a narrow pediment over the arch. To the right is a small eagle in bas-relief, facing frontally, with wings in an open-draped position.

Although the eagle stands erect, its vertical axis follows the diagonal line of the cornice. The body, legs and wings bend slightly inward toward the pinnacle of the pediment. The head is not preserved. The body appears rectangular, but is badly worn. The wings extend from the shoulders upward and out, curving dramatically down to the legs. There is no space between the wings and the body. Although the wings appear pointed at the bottom, their attachment to the body makes the form appear more like the open-draped style. The feathers on the wings are stylized with rows of large, overlapping, triangular scales. There is no differentiation between the upper and lower feathers. The long, thin legs extend vertically down from the body, leaving little space between them. Their width remains fairly constant, although the bottoms at the talons are not preserved. The upper legs are stylized with three or four deeply-incised, V-shaped bands, similar to the legs of no. 9 (above).

The overall impression of the eagle is unnatural, crude, and schematic. The awkward positioning projects a concern on behalf of the designer to include the symbol by haphazardly squeezing it into place, rather than any concern for classical realism. The style is somewhat similar to the similarly-placed eagle found at 'Adriyeh (no. 39, below). It is probable that

another eagle flanked the other side of the lintel in the adjacent position, much like the window lintel at er-Rafid, though that lintel substitutes crudely carved lions for the eagles.²⁷

Ma'oz dates the synagogue at ed-Dikkeh, including this window lintel, to the second half of the 5th century.

No. 11 “Broken Eagle-Wing”
ed-Dikkeh, western Golan
Measurements unknown
Basalt
Unknown location in synagogue
Refs.: Ma'oz 1995: 33, Pl. 11:3.

Fig. 11

This object was photographed during survey in 1968, but has since been lost or stolen. From the photograph, it appears to be a fragment of a wing, probably from an eagle carved in high relief. Despite its very fragmentary preservation, the details are still quite visible. The feathers are depicted as parallel bands, marked by deep incisions. The bands on the left side of the photograph run diagonally from upper-left to lower-right. Those on the right side of the picture appear to run horizontally. It is impossible to say whether or not this was part of a relief or an engaged eagle. Ma'oz suggests that it is similar to the wing of the engaged eagle on the pediment at Chorazin (cf. no. 20, below).²⁸ As with the other objects from ed-Dikkeh, this likely belongs to the second half of the 5th century.

No. 12 “Broken Capital (?) with Eagle Relief”
ed-Dikkeh, western Golan
Measurements unknown
Basalt
Architectural fragment, possibly on the corner of a capital
Refs.: Ma'oz 1995: 33, Pl. 13:1.

Fig. 12

²⁷ Ma'oz 1995: Pl. 20:1.

²⁸ Ma'oz 1995: 33. No such wing, however, is known from the most recent publication by the excavators at Chorazin. See Yeivin 2000.

As with no. 11, this object has been lost since it was photographed during survey. In the picture available, it appears to be a badly weathered section of a column capital. The high relief eagle appears frontally with wings spread on the corner of the capital. The head is barely visible, reduced to a smoothed-out blob. The body bulges out from the capital in a bulbous fashion. The wings, spread in the open-draped style with a point, extend horizontally from the shoulders. They bend at an obtuse angle and extend downward and out, in an open-pointed form. The body and upper feathers appear to be covered in scales, however they are quite worn. The lower feathers seem to be stylized with bands running the length of the wing. The legs and talons are no longer visible.

Eagles on capital corners are attested elsewhere in the Byzantine period. Among the most famous is the so-called “Column of Marcian” from the fifth century Church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki.²⁹ Here, the column depicts four high relief eagles at the four corners of the capital. Their heads are no longer preserved, suggesting that they projected outward from the stone, possibly carved in the round. Parallels exist in Istanbul, dating to as late as the ninth century.³⁰

Ma’oz suggests that this object was originally part of a Corinthian capital which adorned the synagogue at ed-Dikkeh.³¹ If so, it would date to the second half of the 5th century.

No. 13 “Eagle carved on double column capital”

Fig. 13

Umm el-Qanatir, southern Golan

.455 (h.) × 1.03 (l.) × .36 (d.) m

Basalt

Column capital from some sort of aedicula, possibly a Torah shrine, in synagogue

²⁹ Dalton 1925: 197, Pl. XXXIII.

³⁰ Ibid. 197.

³¹ Ma’oz 1995: 33.

Refs.: Ma'oz 1995: 124-26, Pl. 89:1; Hachlili 1995: no. 31.

The well-preserved, high relief eagle, surrounded by various geometric designs, originally adorned the column capital of an aedicula, possibly the Torah shrine of the synagogue in which it was found. The capital is a rectangular block with carvings on two of the long sides and one of the short. The short side curves down and inward. The eagle is carved on one of the long sides of the block. This long side of the capital would have faced outward from the Torah shrine, according to Ma'oz's reconstruction.³² (Much of the long inner side would have been obscured by the ark.) While the form of the eagle is typical—frontal view, wings spread, head turned—some of the details, and in particular, the overall shape, are unique compared to the other eagles examined here.

The head of the bird is turned to the proper left. It is small—slightly disproportional to the body and wings—hooked, and rounded on the crown. Although the details are battered, there appears to have been a small eye carved in the center. The narrow, pointed beak extends to the right and slightly downward. The beak is gripping something, possibly a bunch of grapes,³³ though it is difficult to be sure. On the neck are four or five diagonal incisions, marking the twist of the head.

The body is large and egg-shaped, bulging in the center. It is covered with at least six curved rows of semicircular scales. The wings are in the open-draped style with pointed tips. They extend off the shoulders, out and slightly upward. They then make a sharp ninety degree turn, following straight down and parallel to the sides of the eagle's body. The outer edges of the wings are slightly bowed inward. At the tips, they curve up and inward back to the body. The point at which they reconnected to the body is no longer preserved. The upper

³² Ibid. 126-27, Pl. 92.

³³ Ibid. 125.

feathers, comprising the upper two-thirds of each wing, are represented by rows and columns of scales, identical to those on the body. The lower feathers are detailed with four or five long feathers, extending down vertically and bowed inward slightly. The legs of the eagle are not preserved.

The eagle is surrounded on the capital by geometric designs. Running behind and to either side of the eagle is a band of large almond shapes, roughly about the size of the eagle's head. These shapes also appear on the short (front) side of the capital. To the left of the eagle are three designs, one on top of the other. The topmost is a wheel design with ten spokes. The middle design is rectangular bar with three indentations. The lower image is a rosette with eight petals. According to Ma'oz's reconstruction, the frieze running above the capital was decorated with braided motifs, almond shapes, and grape bunches and vines.

The overall impression of the eagle is geometric and unnatural. The sharp corners of the wings and ovular body present a neat and well-executed image, but no attempt was made at classical realism. The stylization—including the scales, feathers, and neck-twist—is schematic, as is the general pose; however, the exaggerated form of the wings and body, in particular, make this eagle unusual in its regional context. The closest parallel is on the orthostat relief from 'Ein Nashut (no. 40 below). The synagogue from which this capital at Umm el-Qanatir originated has been dated to no earlier than the 5th century.³⁴

No. 14 “Eagle Relief”

Fig. 14

Umm el-Qanatir, southern Golan

.45 (h.) × .70 (l.) m

Basalt

Architectural fragment, building type and location unknown

Refs.: Schumacher 1888: fig. 134; Kohl and Watzinger 1975: fig. 258; Goodenough III: fig. 531; Ma'oz 1995: 120, Pl. 84:1, 2.

³⁴ Ibid. 127-29.

Little is known about this fragmented relief since, after being photographed in 1932 by E.L. Sukenik's survey expedition, it was stolen from the site. Ma'oz believes it to be the same object sketched by Schumacher in his survey.³⁵

The high relief fragment is somewhat battered, though still visible are the body, legs, proper left wing, and part of the proper right wing. The head is not preserved. The eagle faces forward with its legs together and wings spread. The body is oval shaped. Traces of scales are still barely visible. The wings are open-draped with a flat edge at the bottom (obscured by the tail). They extend out from the shoulders, curving down. They fall vertical to the body, reaching the level of the talons and creating a slight S-curve. At the extreme end of the lower feathers, the wing turns at a sharp angle and then re-connects behind the tail. The upper feathers of each wing are stylized with scales, now battered. The lower feathers are stylized with long, deep, parallel incisions. The legs, too battered to see the details, are wide and stocky, running vertically, side-by-side. The talons are barely still visible. The tail protrudes from behind the body, about waist-high. It is fan-shaped, stylized with deep diagonal lines.

The overall impression of the eagle is schematic and stiff. The state of preservation makes it difficult to assess the quality of the stylization. The form and pose—especially the broad, straight legs and tail over the wings—are similar to no. 7 (above).

It is unclear where on the building this fragmented relief would have been. The date, as with the synagogue with which it is associated, is likely 5th century.

No. 15 Pair of Eagles on Arch Lintel

Fig. 15

³⁵ Ibid. 120. The form and preservation are the same, but the details are quite different. Nevertheless, this lack of precision in Schumacher's records is actually consistent with his other sketches, leading me to agree with Ma'oz assumption. Ma'oz however refers to another eagle, Pl. 89:2, in his description of this relief. The lintel, in secondary use in the photograph of Pl. 89:2, is clearly not the same as that in Pl. 84:2, so he must have been mistaken.

Kh. Tubah, eastern Upper Galilee
Measurements unknown
Material unknown
Lintel over archway, probably in synagogue
Refs.: Ilan 1991: 32.

The lintel is broken down the middle. At the bottom of the fragment is an archway, above which is a decorated pediment with images running in a frieze along the interior. On the pediment, there are two eagles flanking the pinnacle. The wings of the eagles are open-pointed. The head of each eagle has been battered, apparently deliberately. While the remaining portions of the eagles are visible, the details and stylization are not entirely clear.

The bodies of each eagle are round. The wings extend off the shoulders horizontally in either direction. They then turn downward and out with an obtuse angle at the bend. When they reach the tips of the wings, they turn inward, connecting with the bodies just above the waists. The thin legs of the right eagle extend down vertically and parallel. They barely show any signs of textural detail for the talons or claws. The legs of the left eagle are thin and are spread apart slightly. The talons on this eagle are very simply depicted as wider portions at the end of the legs.

On the pediment below the eagles, there are multiple images depicted. A vessel, turned on its side, is carved on either end. From these vessels sprout grape vines which twist through the frieze to the pinnacle of the pediment. Among the vines are some grape bunches, as well as the faint outline of a four-legged animal (on the right side).

Ilan suggests that this lintel adorned the Torah shrine. It is just as likely, to my mind, that it was part of a Syrian gable window in a building's the main façade. However, it was not found in excavation, so we can only speculate. The pottery found during survey dates to the 4th-5th centuries, so it is likely that the lintel also dates to that period or soon thereafter.

Merot, northern Upper Galilee
About .80 (h.) × 2.03 (l.) × .66 (d.) m
Limestone
Lintel over doorway of room next to synagogue, possibly a *bet midrash*
Refs.: Ilan and Damati 1987: 75-77; Ilan 1993: 1030.

The lintel bearing the two eagles in bas-relief was found face down and broken through the middle. The eagles, particularly their heads, are badly battered, however the plain wreath and Hercules knot which they flank are well-preserved. This suggests that the eagles were intentionally defaced.³⁶ Nevertheless, the outline of the eagles is still fairly visible. They appear to be mirror images. Each eagle stands frontally, with its wings spread in the open-draped style with pointed tips. The heads are too badly damaged to determine which direction they were turned. The crown of the head on each eagle is rounded. The bodies are ovular. No stylized texture was carved to detail the scales or body feathers. The wings extend outward and up from behind the shoulders. They appear to rise high, to about the mid-level of the head, then curve dramatically and drape down in an S-curve. The wings come to a point at the end, just below the level of the body. There is no stylization to differentiate the upper feathers from the lower. While it is clear that there were legs below the body, they are too badly damaged to delineate.

The wreath is marked by a narrow, high-relief ring, at the bottom of which is a large Hercules knot. The area in the center of the wreath was not fully carved out, leaving a raised circular patch. The ends of the Hercules knot curve out and have three-pointed leaves attached. The wreath and knot both appear to be smooth.

The lack of texture on the eagles may be a matter of preservation, though it appears likely that the surfaces were left smooth purposefully. The similarities in form and design to the lintel from Yafia (no. 24 below) suggest affinities in stylization as well. The curvilinear

³⁶ See Ilan 1987: 76, who suggests that this was done during the eighth century iconoclastic policies of Yazid II.

features of the eagles—particularly the crown of the head, the circular body, and the S-shaped, open-draped wings with pointed tips—are paralleled in the example from Yafia. The thin wreath is also quite similar.

An inscription, quoting Deut. 28:6, runs along the bottom of the relief. It reads: “Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” Remains of a mosaic pavement in this room preserve another inscription, which reads: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together”—a quotation from Is. 65:25. Below this inscription, there are the remains of a lamb’s head on the right and a wolf’s ears on the left. It seems that the surveyors identified the room as a *bet midrash* partially based on these inscriptions (although presumably also because of its incorporation into the synagogue complex and its size).

The initial phase of the synagogue at Merot was dated on the basis of survey finds to the late 4th or early 5th century. The room identified as a *bet midrash*, including the lintel, were part of a later phase which partitioned the adjacent courtyard into several rooms. The surveyors dated this phase to the 7th century. Until a systematic excavation is carried out, though, the exact dating of the synagogue complex’s phases will remain unknown.

No. 17 Eagle and Garland Lintel

Fig. 17

Gush Halav, Upper Galilee

About .48 (h. of lintel with cornice) × 1.50 (l. of underside panel of lintel) × .28 (w. of underside panel of lintel) m

Limestone

Underside of lintel, over main doorway of synagogue

Refs.: Kohl and Watzinger 1975: fig. 210; Goodenough III: fig. 522; Meyers et al. 1990: 84, Fig. 25, Photo 40.

This eagle, carved mostly in high relief on the underside of the lintel of the Gush Halav synagogue, is one of the better known eagles of synagogue art. Its intricate form and

design, placement on the lintel, and singularity in its immediate context make it an interesting subject, independent of its role in the corpus of Jewish eagle images. The eagle here is located on the underside of the lintel of the main doorway to the synagogue in the southern façade. It faces frontally, wings spread, head turned to the left. A garland drapes behind and to the sides of the eagle. This is the only carved image found in the excavation of the synagogue at Gush Halav.

The eagle is fairly well-preserved, though the lintel is broken along the edge of the bird's proper left wing, just clipping the lower feathers. The disproportionate head is as large as the body. No neck is visible, so that the wide bottom of the head melds into the body. The crown of the head is rounded. The beak, extending horizontally to the left, is almost as large as the remainder of the head. It is broad and hooks downward, coming to a point at the end. The lower third of the beak is slightly recessed to indicate the lower jaw of a closed beak. The underside of the beak curves smoothly into the chin. A large raised circle represents the eye of the eagle in the center of the head. A wide incision was carved from the back of the beak (where it meets the face), down to the edge of the body. This delineates the face into an anterior and posterior section. The feathers of the face are stylized with long, deep striations, running parallel to each other and in line with the curvature of the beak and crown.

The squat head sits atop an equally squat, rounded body. The stylization of the body consists of rows of large circular overlapping scales; in the middle of each is a concentric incision. This same stylization is seen in only one other object from this corpus: on the fragment from an eagle's wing at Qatz'yun (no. 29, below).

The wings are open, though not extended to their limit. They drape somewhat and are not pointed at the tips, however the obtuse angle at the bend places the style somewhere

between open-draped and open-pointed. The wings curve upward and out from the shoulders, reaching a height adjacent to the tip of the beak. The proper left wing attaches to the shoulder slightly higher than the proper right. The bend of the wing dramatically curves the outer edge downward toward the tip (not preserved on the proper left wing). The lower feathers flare outward slightly.³⁷ The upper feathers, comprising about half the wing, are stylized with the same scale pattern as on the body. The lower feathers are represented by three wide bands, extending diagonally. Those on the proper right wing are partially obscured by the tail feathers.

The legs extend from the bottom of the body, though the proper left leg attaches slightly to the side of body, as well. They are spread apart, however not to their full limit. The upper legs, comprising about half the total, are wide and appear as mushroom caps, billowing outward at the bottom, and folding over the lower leg. Although the stone is weathered here, three or four striations are still visible, following the length of the leg. The lower leg is much thinner, though it does not taper. The talons are still apparent only on the proper left leg. Three triangular claws extend in opposing directions—down and out—from the bottom of the leg.

The tail of the eagle peaks out from behind the body and the proper right leg. It is triangular in shape and extends down to a point just above the talons (unlike the lower feathers of the wings, which extend below this point). The lower edge of the tail is

³⁷ The drawing in Meyers et al. 1990: Fig. 25 does not represent accurately the form of the wing. The sketch does not show the lower wings at all. It includes the tail on the proper right side of the eagle, however represents erroneously the lower feathers on the proper left wing as part of the tail, too. The angle at the bend of the wing is also drawn much more obtusely than the relief is carved. As a result, the wings in the sketch appear outstretched, when they are really closer to either open-draped or open-pointed. The error is understandable considering the weathering of the limestone, but the photograph on the subsequent page in the publication (Photo 40) indicates the correct form of the eagle's wings and tail. See also the photograph in Kohl and Watzinger 1975: fig. 210, reprinted in Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 522, taken when the lintel was better preserved.

horizontal. It is stylized by three deep incisions creating the appearance of long plumes, much like the lower feathers of the wings.

The garland originates behind the eagle's head and flows to either side. It curves downward then back up, creating volutes at the ends. The garland is thick and comprised of tightly conglomerated pieces, large and irregular in shape.

The overall impression of the eagle is unnatural and heavily stylized, though elegant and less schematic, representing a more classical style. The body parts are quite disproportionate, but do not give it an awkward appearance. The oversized beak and dramatic bend in the wings accentuate its distinctive characteristics as a bird-of-prey and a "master of flight." While the pose of the eagle is quite common among the other examples from Jewish sites, the style of the sculpture is atypical and unparalleled in this corpus.

The excavators have placed the southern façade of the synagogue in Period I of the building history, dated 250-306 C.E.³⁸ It is highly unlikely that the lintel could have been inserted after the initial construction of the southern façade. Although the excavators highlight the numerous earthquakes that shook the synagogue, there does not seem to be any indication that the entire façade was ever reconstructed. This would then date the eagle lintel to the second half of the 3rd century, making it among the earliest—if not *the* earliest—of the eagle reliefs in this corpus. Magness, however, has proposed a late 5th century date, arguing that the supposed renovations made to the substructure after the earthquakes (in 306 and/or 363 C.E.) are part of the original construction, pushing the date to no earlier than the second half of the 5th century.³⁹ Since there are no exact stylistic parallels for the eagle at Gush Halav, art historical evidence does not help either case. Moreover, because the motif of the

³⁸ Meyers et al. 1990: 39-40, 99.

³⁹ Magness 2001: 12.

eagle in Jewish art seems to have been used over the broad period of the 3rd-6th century, the Gush Halav eagle does not aid in the dating of the synagogue either.

No. 18 “Eagle Doorway”

Fig. 18

Kh. Shema‘, Upper Galilee, west of Safed

Measurements unknown

Limestone

Doorjamb on western entrance to synagogue

Refs.: Meyers et al. 1976: 47-48, 74, fig. 3.7.

This eagle is carved into the doorjamb of the western doorway of the synagogue. It is a simple etching rather than high relief, with little detail and no texture depicted. It is identified as an eagle (as opposed to another type of bird) only by its form and position.

The figure faces frontally, wings spread and head turned to the right. The rounded crown of the head proceeds seamlessly into the large triangular beak. The long neck tapers slightly into the head. The body is in the shape of an upside-down trapezoid, giving the eagle very broad shoulders. The wings have little definition. They are attached to the shoulders, but touch nowhere else on the body. They extend upward, curving dramatically and then fall to the sides, the outer edges bowing slightly outward. There is no bend in the wings. The tips are pointed. The feet are represented by two long, thin lines extending downward from the body, spread apart. At the ends of the legs, the talons are depicted only with one or two haphazard marks. The excavators describe the motif as “eagle-in-wreath,” however, I see no reason to assume that the circular background in which the eagle is set is meant to be a wreath, especially since nowhere else do we find such a motif. There is no detail to the circle to indicate that it is anything more than a border.

The eagle is very geometric in design. Aside from form and motif, there is little to connect the image stylistically to the other eagles in this corpus. Concerning the date, the eagle could have been carved at any point in the building’s history up to the modern period.

(The doorpost was found by the excavators still standing in its original position.) The excavators suggest that the design was part of the Synagogue I phase (late 3rd century) because it was at this time that the doorway served as the main entrance to the building; whereas in the Synagogue II phase (4th century), they hypothesize that the northern doorway became the primary entrance.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, there is no way to be certain of the date of this carving.

No. 19 Eagle and Figure Relief on Frieze

Fig. 19

Chorazin, eastern Galilee, north of Capernaum

About .38 (h.) × .37 (w.) m

Basalt

Interior frieze of synagogue

Refs.: Goodenough III: fig. 494; Yeivin 2000: 45, 116, 131 (no. 16), Fig. 107, Pl. 14:1.

This image is depicted on a frieze running along the interior of the synagogue.

Although the head of the eagle is no longer preserved, the wings are still visible, as are the legs. The eagle's wings are folded down, partially surrounding a human figure. On either side of the image are circular designs with twisted, radiating lines. To the left of eagle is the well-known image of the mask surrounded by a radiating-twist design, often identified as Medusa,⁴¹ though more likely, to my mind, the head of Helios.⁴² The eagle, carved in high relief, protrudes farther from the frieze than the surrounding images.⁴³

Although the shape of the eagle's body is obscured by the human figure in the middle, the stylization is barely visible near the top. It is composed of a few rows of small circular scales. The wings fall off the shoulders, parallel alongside the body. The proper

⁴⁰ Meyers et al. 1976: 74, though cf. Magness 1997.

⁴¹ Yeivin 2000: 114, following Goodenough 1953: 195; 1958 224-229.

⁴² I thank Dr. Jodi Magness for this suggestion, though she credits the idea to Dr. Hanan Eshel, via personal communication.

⁴³ This is more apparent in the photograph by Kohl and Watzinger (1975: fig. 99), republished in Goodenough III, than in the more recent publication by Yeivin.

right wing comes to a point at the end, reaching down to the top of the leg. It is stylized by three or four rows of long, thin scales. The proper left wing, mostly obscured by the head of the human figure, hangs down equally as low. It is stylized by long narrow feathers, running the length of the wing. The legs of the eagle extend down from behind the human figure. They are long, wide, and do not taper. No texture is detailed on the legs. The talons consist of three large claws and a fourth smaller claw.

The human figure is disproportionate, with a head much too large for the body. The face is not preserved. The body is covered with some sort of garment hanging from the proper left shoulder, and stylized by diagonal incisions. The proper left arm cradles a long stick of some sort. The proper right arm is not preserved, and the legs appear to be obscured by the proper right wing of the eagle.

The overall impression of the eagle is schematic in its stylization. The disproportionate figures, awkward pose, and unnatural effect suggest a formulaic mythological scene.⁴⁴ The image has been identified plausibly as Zeus and Ganymede (see below).⁴⁵ Although the synagogue at Chorazin was originally dated on stylistic grounds to the 3rd century, further exaction and survey work has suggested a date of the second half of the 4th century, at the earliest.⁴⁶ More recent studies have suggested a date of 5th century or later.⁴⁷

No. 20 Engaged Eagle on Pediment Crest
Chorazin, eastern Galilee, north of Capernaum

Fig. 20

⁴⁴ Similar reasoning has been employed in the interpretation of the orthostat from 'Ein Samam (no. 40), often identified as Daniel in the Lion's Den.

⁴⁵ Yeivin 2000: 116.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 30*.

⁴⁷ See Ma'oz 1981: 113 and Magness (forthcoming). I thank Dr. Magness for access to her unpublished work.

About .50 (h.) × .30 (w.) × .20 (d.) m
Basalt
Crest of pediment in main façade of synagogue
Refs.: Yeivin 2000: 37, Figs. 77, 81, Pl. 6:1.

This once-prominent eagle crowning the pediment of the synagogue's façade is now only represented by its body, part of its tail feathers, and the points on the stone where the wings and talons connected. The sculpture is engaged, its body protruding more than halfway from the stone. The body has been damaged, though the detail on the majority is still preserved. It is egg-shaped, tapering slightly at the bottom. It is covered in ten rows of square scales. Although the wings are not preserved, they were apparently spread open, perhaps outstretched, as evidenced by the point of attachment still visible on the stone to either side of the eagle. The tail, which extends out from behind the lower body, is not preserved in full either. The remaining portion fans out to either side and downward. It is detailed with five bands to represent the long protruding tail feathers. While the feet are not preserved, the points at which they attached to both the body and the stone indicate that they were rather long compared to the body.

The surviving portions of the eagle do not leave much room for interpretation in terms of style. Nevertheless, the prominent location on the pediment of the synagogue façade is evidence of its central importance in the building's decoration.⁴⁸

As with the relief from Chorazin above, this object probably dates to no earlier than the 5th century.

No. 21 "Eagle over center portal of main façade"
Capernaum, eastern Galilee (NW of Sea)
Measurements unknown
Limestone
Lintel, over main doorway of synagogue

Fig. 21

⁴⁸ In several of his reconstructions of Golan synagogues, Ma'oz placed an eagle in the pediment, presumably influenced somewhat by this object at Chorazin.

Refs.: Kohl and Watzinger 1975: figs. 17, 18; Sukenik 1934: 9-10, Pl. IIa; Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 459.

The eagle which once adorned the lintel over the central doorway of the Capernaum synagogue has since been deliberately defaced. Although the general outline of the eagle is still visible, the details of the texture and features have been completely destroyed. The eagle stands frontally with its head turned to the left and wings spread in the open-draped style and pointed tips. The head, body and legs appear to be well-proportioned. Each wing extends upward and out from the shoulders, arches dramatically, and then drapes down forming a slight S-curve. The lower feathers of the proper left wing still preserve the hooked shape of the tip. There is a small space between the body and the underside of the wing. The short, thin legs extend down from the body, spreading outward.

Although the state of preservation does not allow us to comment on the stylization, the surviving portions of the eagle's form and shape suggest an elegant but not naturalistic eagle.

While no other images are apparent on the lintel, the sections to either side of the eagle are also defaced. This suggests that there were possibly other images flanking the eagle itself. The frieze above the lintel is decorated with six small winged figures with garlands and roses between them. The small, thin figures are in human form, though they are all defaced. The wings, however, were left untouched. On either side of the frieze, there are tall palm trees which extend down the sides of the lintel.

Although the site was originally dated by Kohl and Watzinger to the 3rd century, based on art historical typologies,⁴⁹ many scholars now accept a late 5th or 6th century date

⁴⁹ Kohl and Watzinger 1975: 4-40, 184-203; followed and defended by Avi-Yonah 1973, Foerster 1971, Tsafirir 1995.

for the synagogue at Capernaum.⁵⁰ The revised dating places the art from Capernaum in the same tradition as the synagogues in the Golan.

No. 22 “Eagles Frieze”

Fig. 22

Capernaum, eastern Galilee (NW of sea)

Measurements unknown

Limestone

Frieze on interior of synagogue

Refs.: Kohl and Watzinger 1975: figs. 65, 66; Sukenik 1934: 17, Pl. Vb; Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 475; Hachlili 333, 334 (fig. 21).

The eagles here are depicted in profile on the upper half of a frieze. They are positioned with their backs to each other and their heads turned face-to-face. Between the eagles is a garland, which the eagles grip in their beaks. To the right of the eagles is a creature with the upper body, head, and front legs of a horse, and the lower body of a serpent-like or fish-like animal—a “sea horse” in the literal sense. A braided design runs below the images. On the bottom half of the frieze is carved a row of dentils, followed by a band of ovals and other geometric designs.

The eagles are, for the most part, mirror images of each other. The heads are stretched horizontally. The long, hooked beaks extend from the head toward the center of the motif. A large eye is marked by a deep indentation behind the beak. The crown of the head is rounded and smooth. The face is stylized with horizontal striations to indicate the feathers. The broad neck follows seamlessly into the body which twists around in the opposite direction. The body of each eagle is mostly obscured by the wing. Only one wing is visible for each bird—the proper left wing on the left eagle, and the proper right wing on the right eagle. The wings are folded flat against the body. The feathers appear as long, wide blades, as opposed to the typical scale pattern. They stretch down the eagle’s side, pointing toward

⁵⁰ For dating following the 1968-72 excavations, see Corbo et al. 1972-1975: I, II; and Loffreda 1972, 1981. See also Magness 2001: 18-26.

the other eagle. The tips of the most posterior feathers of each eagle almost touch in the center of the image. The legs of the eagles extend horizontally from the body. On each eagle, one leg is angled upward, and the other lies flat along the bottom of the panel. The legs are thin and without any apparent texture. The long, hooked talons at the ends of the legs are also very thin.

Although the form of the eagles is markedly different from the other examples in Jewish art, they are identified as such by their pronounced beaks—indicating they are birds-of-prey of some sort—and the large stylized feathers on their wings. The overall impression of the eagles is elegant and delicate, though the details, proportions, and pose are not naturalistic. Because the image is crammed into the frieze, it does not appear very prominent on this architectural fragment. Unlike the eagle which adorned the lintel (no. 21), this example seems to be just another part of the decorative detail, no more or less crucial to the synagogue's symbolic repertoire than the “sea-horse” to the right or even the dentils below. The form of the eagles in this image is unique in our general corpus of Jewish art. Its singularity and distinctiveness in design is characteristic of the Capernaum synagogue's art altogether, which tends to utilize common images in late ancient Jewish art but present them in an ornately detailed and classical manner. As with no. 21, it likely dates to the late 5th or 6th century.

No. 23 “Eagles and Wreath Keystone”

Fig. 23

Capernaum, eastern Galilee (NW of Sea)

Measurements unknown

Limestone

Keystone

Refs.: Kohl and Watzinger 1975: fig. 25; Sukenik 1934: 10, Pl. IIIa; Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 465; Hachlili 1988: 333.

On the upper portion of this keystone is carved in high relief a detailed wreath and conch shell, tied with a Hercules knot at the bottom. Below the wreath are two, now defaced,

images which appear to be birds in profile. The deliberate destruction only preserved the outer form of these figures. They face each other, wings folded, tails extending outward, and beaks apparently gripping the ends of the Hercules knot. The talons of each bird are close to, if not touching, those of the other. The bodies appear to fall backward, creating a V-shape between the two figures. The breast of each bird thrusts outward in profile, creating an S-curve down the front of each body.

These birds have been identified as eagles by Goodenough, Sukenik, and Hachlili. Considering the state of preservation, there is nothing about these birds themselves, to my mind, which would necessarily indicate that they are eagles. That said, it is true that the motifs with which they appear here—wreath, Hercules knot, and conch—are very frequently associated with eagles in other, better preserved examples (see below). The fact that the birds here seem to be gripping the ends of the Hercules knot is a convincing detail, as this motif is seen in several other images.

Although such a variation on the form of a common motif would not be atypical for the synagogue at Capernaum (see no. 22), there are parallels in fourth century Christian sarcophagi from Rome that would indicate that these should be understood as doves instead of eagles. In the sarcophagi motifs, a wreath encircles the monogram of Christ—the *chi-rho* symbol—and sits atop a large cross. Two small birds, in profile, with wings folded, stand on of the horizontal beam of the cross, yet below the wreath. This motif has been interpreted by Kitzinger as a metaphor for Christ's Passion,⁵¹ and by Grabar, who believed the motif originated in Rome, as the Resurrection.⁵²

⁵¹ Kitzinger 1977: fig. 44.

⁵² Grabar 1968: 124-25, figs. 297, 298.

Despite the art historical parallels linking the image to fourth century Rome, the keystone should be dated along with the rest of the building to the late 5th or 6th century.

No. 24 Eagles Flanking Wreath Lintel

Fig. 24

Yafia, western Lower Galilee, southwest of Nazareth

About .50 (h.) × 1.50 (l.) m

Limestone

Lintel, probably over main doorway of synagogue

Refs.: Vincent 1921: 436-37; Goodenough 1953-65: III, fig. 569; Barag 1993: 660.

The face of the lintel is preserved almost in whole, except for the upper right corner. The details of the bas-relief images are worn. Two eagles are depicted, posed frontally, wings spread, heads turned toward the center of the panel. The two eagles appear to be mirror images, though the proper left wing of the right eagle is not fully preserved.

The head of each sits atop a slender neck. The neck of the right eagle is somewhat longer. The head hooks around into a narrow, pointed beak, which is positioned down and inward, at about a forty-five degree angle. At the end of the beak is a small disc with a concentric circle in the middle. Vincent interpreted this object as a “small wreath.”⁵³ The almond-shaped eye is in the center of the head. There is otherwise little apparent detail on the bald, sleek head.

The body of the left eagle is round, slightly ovular. The body of the right eagle is shaped more like an upside-down light bulb, due in part to its lengthier neck. No textural stylization has been preserved on either body. They appear rather smooth. The beak rests in front of the wings, making the wings appear more distant and attached to the eagle’s back. They are open-draped and pointed at the tips. The wings extend upward off the back of the shoulders. The bend of the wings is almost at the height of the scalp. The bend curves

⁵³ See Vincent 1921: 437, who cites several of Kohl and Watzinger’s images of the wreath design from Capernaum, and the eagle motif from Gush Halav, Umm el-Qanatir, and ed-Dikkeh. In fact, these wreaths and eagles are not similar to Yafia in any aspects other than the framed panels and choice of motif.

dramatically, falling downward vertically. The outer edge of the proper right wing of the left eagle is straight. However the outer edges of the proper left wing of the left eagle and the proper right wing of the right eagle create an S-curve. (The proper left wing of the right eagle is not preserved.) The wings come to a point at the tip, then curve diagonally to the waist, following the line of the legs. There is no apparent stylization preserved to represent the feathers. However there is some sort of demarcation extending horizontally across each wing, about two-thirds down, perhaps to differentiate the upper feathers from the lower feathers. The legs of the eagles are wide and heavy. They are spread apart, extending from the body down and outward. The thickness of each leg remains constant all the way to the bottom. No talons or differentiation between the upper and lower leg are visible. There is no obvious stylization.

The eagles flank a large wreath in the center of the lintel. The wreath is formed by a ring interrupted by a knot at the bottom. It is not the typical Hercules knot seen elsewhere, but rather more like a bow. The details on the wreath itself are very faint, though there appear to be many small incisions to mark the texture of the branches and leaves.

The entire lintel is bordered by a double-helix pattern, enclosing a thin double-line. The left eagle is separated from the wreath and the right eagle by this border, as well. While the images on the lintel were no doubt observed together, the demarcating border puts the right eagle in distinct panel. The crowns of the eagles, as well as the top of the wreath, overlap the double-line portion of the border.

The overall appearance is elegant and curvilinear, though unnatural and a bit cramped. The eagles fill up all the space in their immediate vicinity, leaving no negative space between the body parts. The unnatural forms of the wings and legs, and the lack of

stylized detail suggest a very schematic overall form, probably mimicking more elaborate examples of the eagles-flanking-wreath motif.

Vincent dates this lintel to the 3rd century, presumably based on comparanda from Kohl and Watzinger's survey.⁵⁴ With the redating of synagogues in the Galilee and Golan, there is no reason to suppose now that this lintel dates to such an early period. It more likely belongs to somewhere in the 4th-6th century. However this date cannot be verified since the object is now out of stratigraphic context.

No. 25 Three eagles on the "eagle" sarcophagus

Fig. 25

Bet She'arim, western Lower Galilee

Approximately .25 (h.) × .23 (w.) m

Approximately .28 (h.) × .25 (w.) m

Approximately .31 (h.) × .28 (w.) m

Limestone

Lid and short side of sarcophagus no.56, Catacomb 20, Room X

Refs.: Avigad 1976: 142, Pls. XLI:1; XLII: 1.

Three eagles appear in bas-relief on the "eagle" sarcophagus from the Bet She'arim necropolis. Two are on the top of the lid; one is on the short end of the coffin. Each of these eagles has the same form and stylization. They are positioned frontally, wings spread in open-pointed style, with the head turned to the right side. A garland, segmented into six bunches, encircles each eagle below it and to its sides. The reliefs are well-preserved, except for the head of the left eagle on the lid.

The head of each eagle is slightly hooked. The crown is rounded and smooth, and the pointed beak curves out and downward. A circular incision marks the proper right eye in the center of the head. Curved incised lines represent the short feathers along the back of the head and neck. The body has no delineated shape. It is covered in haphazardly-placed semicircular scales. The wings extend horizontally from the shoulders and then turn down

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and slightly outward at a sharp angle. The wings come to a point at the tip, then return up to the body at a diagonal, creating an upside-down V-shape between the underside of the wing the body. The upper feathers are stylized with the same scales as the body. The lower feathers are depicted as deep incisions running the length of the wing to the tip. The legs appear as long triangles, extending down from the body and curving to the right. No texture is detailed. At the ends of the legs, four long, thin claws curve into each other.

The other panels of the sarcophagus depict two lions with their paws on a bull's head, and individual bulls' heads on the other short end of the sarcophagus and the on the lid.

The overall impression of these disproportionate eagles is simple and schematic. They seem to bear the same sort of form and stylization seen among the synagogues, particularly in the scales and the wings. The curved legs and long talons however are atypical. The initial use of catacomb 20, in which this sarcophagus was found at Bet She'arim, was originally dated on the basis of architectural and art historical typologies to the end of the 2nd century.⁵⁵ This date however was based on the assumption that the entire necropolis went out of use after the destruction of the city during the Gallus revolt of the mid-4th century.⁵⁶ More recent work has determined that the city continued to prosper into the 6th century.⁵⁷ Glass and ceramic finds from the catacomb 20 suggest that it continued in use until then.⁵⁸

No. 26 Eagle in aedicula on the “shell” sarcophagus
Bet She'arim, western Lower Galilee
About .31 (h.) × .24 (w.) m

Fig. 26

⁵⁵ Avigad 1976: 115, 262-64.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁵⁷ Vitto 1991: 138.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 139-40, citing the glass and ceramic analyses by Barag and Magness, respectively.

Limestone

Long side of sarcophagus 117, Catacomb 20, Room XXI

Refs.: Avigad 1976: 143-45, Pls. XLIII:1, XLIII A:2.

The bas-relief eagle is found on the left half of a horizontal panel decorating one of the long sides a sarcophagus. It is enclosed in a small aedicula, consisting of two miniature columns capped by an arched conch design. The eagle itself is positioned frontally, wing spread, and head turned to the right. It fills the interior of the aedicula, with its head, wings and talons all touching the sides.

The head of the eagle is a simple circle with no neck. The long, straight beak extends horizontally to the right. Neither the head nor beak has any apparent stylization to indicate texture. The body is round and also undecorated. The wings extend from either shoulder, curving downward at the bend of the wing. They are open-draped, flat on the bottom, though not clinging to the body. The tips of the wings are obscured by the side of the aedicula. The detail on each wing consists of three deep incisions running the length of the wing and following its curve. No differentiation is made between the upper and lower feathers. Two long, thin legs extend vertically from the body, retaining the same width the whole way down. The talons are represented only by small bulges at the ends of the legs. No other details were incised or carved on the legs.

On the opposite side of the panel is a similarly carved aedicula, but instead of an eagle there is a small lion in profile. The carving is flat, rather shapeless, and without detail, appearing only to be some sort of quadruped with a long tail. The image is identified as a lion only by its common parallels.⁵⁹ To the left of the lion aedicula is a stylized wreath with a rosette pattern in the middle. To the right of the eagle aedicula, a faint outline of a similar wreath is apparent, below which is a fully carved Hercules knot. Apparently the artist began

⁵⁹ E.g. at er-Rafid, see Ma'oz 1995: Pl. 20:1.

to carve a wreath here but did not finish it. Above this long, horizontal panel are two lions in profile flanking a frontally poised bull's head. The artwork of the sarcophagus, in particular the animals, seem to have been carved rather crudely, perhaps even hastily. Avigad suggests that the artist was creating an original composition of motifs known from contemporary Jewish art, rather than copying a specific pattern from another sarcophagus.⁶⁰ This may account for the asymmetry of the panel with the aediculae, the unusual stylization of the eagle's wings, and the overall simplicity of the motifs themselves. Regarding the aediculae, Avigad also proposes that the artist meant them to be arks of the Law. While the Jewish patrons here may have interpreted the aedicula in such a way, the same motif is seen in non-Jewish lead sarcophagi, where they certainly did not represent a Torah shrine.⁶¹

An inscription was painted on the side in red paint but has since disappeared. It read: "This is the sarcophagus of [rabbi] Gamaliel, the son of Rabbi Eliezer [who died] at the age of seventeen [seventy?] years. May the memory of the just be blessed."⁶² Along with the inscription from the lintel at Dabura (no. 3 above), this is the only known "rabbi" explicitly associated with the image of an eagle.

As with the above sarcophagus from catacomb 20 (no. 25 above), this object may date to as late as the 6th century or soon after.

No. 27 Eagle on short side of the "gable" sarcophagus

Fig. 27

Bet She'arim, western Lower Galilee

.49 (h.) × .34 (w.) m

Limestone

Short side of sarcophagus no. 103, Catacomb 20, Room XXI

Refs.: Avigad 1976: 145, Pl. XLIV:4.

⁶⁰ Avigad 1976: 144.

⁶¹ See Rahmani 1999: nos. 58, 75.

⁶² Avigad 1976: 250-51, inscription no. 26; Fig. 125.

The eagle is carved in low, flat relief along the short side of the “gable” sarcophagus from Bet She‘arim. It stands frontally posed, wings spread, and head turned to the left. The eagle is framed from within an enclosed rectangle, with a short trapezoidal base.

The surface of the stone is quite rough, allowing only deeply-cut stylization to be visible on the image. No such stylization can be viewed on the head, neck, body or legs. The head of the eagle is small, appearing as an isosceles triangle laid horizontally, with the point—representing the beak—to the left. There is a deep eye cut into its center. The head sits on top of a tall, thin neck. The body is circular, though flattened at the bottom where the legs attach. The wings extend from the shoulders, curving up and outward immediately. They then slope down at a forty-five degree angle. There is no bend along the outer edge of the wing. The tips of the wings are obscured by the sides of the box in which the eagle stands. The underside of the wing runs parallel to the outer edge, reattaching to the body at a diagonal and forming an upside-down V-shape between the underside of the wing and the body. The form of the wing is similar to the open-pointed style, though without a bend on the outer edge. The wings are stylized with five or six incised lines, running parallel to each other and the edges of the wings. There is no differentiation between the upper and lower feathers. The long, thin legs of the eagle extend vertically from the body, spreading apart very slightly. At the bottom of each leg is a triangular bulge representing the talons.

As with the eagle on the “shell” sarcophagus (no. 26), the eagle here fills the interior of the rectangle. Although its head does not reach the top of the rectangle, the wings and talons touch the sides. Also similar to the eagle image on the “shell” sarcophagus is the overall design and style of the eagle. The shape of the body, stylization of the wings, form of the legs, and general stance of the eagle are all stylistically identical. The head and neck are much thinner, however the triangular form of the former is similar. These similarities, along

with the corresponding conch and Syrian gable design—found on the long face of the “gable” sarcophagus—led Avigad to suggest that these two sarcophagi were designed in the same workshop.⁶³

Also, as with the “shell” sarcophagus, there is an inscription in red paint on the side.⁶⁴ It reads as follows: “This is the sarcophagus [of ...] the daughter of Rabbi Joshua ... May the memory of the just be blessed.” Avigad suggests that the father of the deceased is the same “Rabbi Joshua” mentioned in two other inscriptions (nos. 23 and 24, on sarcophagi nos. 115 and 116). The inscription does not associate the eagle image with a rabbi directly, as so with the inscription on the “shell” sarcophagus (no. 26) and the *bet midrash* inscription from Dabura (no. 3). Nevertheless, it is significant to point out the tolerance among the members of a rabbi’s family for such explicit imagery.

As with the above sarcophagi from catacomb 20 (nos. 25 and 26), this object may date to the 6th century, though it is uncertain.

Group 2: Objects whose provenience is known but religio-ethnic identity is unclear.

No. 28 “Eagle Relief”

Fig. 28

Dabura, northern Golan

Measurements unknown

Basalt (?)

Architectural fragment: probably lintel or façade panel

Refs.: Ilan 1991: 79 (fig. 2).

This high relief eagle is mostly intact except for the head. It stands in an atypical pose compared to the other eagles in this corpus. The eagle faces to the right in a three-quarters view. The proper right wing appears to be open, though draped backward. The proper left wing is folded and mostly out of view, obscured by the bird’s body. The proper

⁶³ Avigad 1976: 145.

⁶⁴ Avigad 1976: 249-50, inscription no. 25.

right leg strides backward, though it is brought to the forefront of the relief; the proper left leg stands straight and is set back in the relief. The tail extends off the body, alongside the proper right leg and below the proper right wing.

The curvilinear body protrudes in a bulbous manner from the stone. It is irregular in shape. The stomach and breast appear to thrust in the direction of the bird's movement (to the right of the panel). The body is covered in irregular rows of half-oval, overlapping scales.

The proper right wing extends from the shoulder horizontally. The bend of the wing is at an obtuse angle. The remainder of the wing (after the bend) stretches down and to the left, almost to the level of the talons. Although the textural details of the upper feathers are unclear from the image available, those of the lower feathers—about half of the wing—are in the form of long parallel striations. The proper left wing is folded over so that only the bend is visible; the lower parts are hidden by the body of the eagle. The visible portion of the proper left wing curves evenly around, disappearing near the bottom of the body. It is stylized by irregular circles, rather haphazardly placed, though about the size of the scales on the body.

The proper left leg stands straight down from the eagle's body. It appears to be triangular; however its details are obscured in the available image. The proper right leg is in the forefront of the relief. It strides backward in relation to the eagle's body. The upper leg is like a long, wide, upside-down triangle, extending from the body. The lower leg is badly worn and difficult to discern. The upper part of the leg, about two-thirds of the total length, is stylized with deep, parallel incisions running diagonally. The tail, extending downward and out from behind the proper right leg, is long and broad. It, too, is stylized with deep,

parallel incisions, though somewhat further apart than on the leg. The bottom of the tail is flat, so as to give the entirety of the tail a rectangular shape.

The overall impression of the eagle's form is more lifelike than the typical front-facing eagles with wings spread, placing it closer to the classical tradition. Its pose and asymmetry give it a much more three-dimensional appearance than is typical for other eagle reliefs in Jewish art. The stylization of the feathers and scales, though, are schematic and typical of other eagle reliefs in the vicinity. This point helps identify the figure as an eagle.

The object was discovered as a surface find in Nahal Jilbon, a ravine near Dabura. Ilan maintains that it should be associated with the architectural fragments of the presumed synagogue and *bet midrash* (nos. 1–4 above).⁶⁵ Ma'oz, interestingly, makes no mention of this find, perhaps because it is not definitively connected with the other objects related to the synagogue. The problems relating to the discovery of this relief make it impossible to verify a date.

No. 29 "Fragment of an Eagle Relief"

Fig. 29

Qatz'yun, eastern Upper Galilee, north of Merot

Measurements unknown

Material unknown

Architectural fragment (?)

Refs.: Ilan 1991: 58, 59 (fig. 2).

Very little is known about this sculpted fragment of an eagle's wing found in survey at Qatz'yun. It is carved in high relief, though only a small portion of the proper left wing remains. The fragment is curved along the top edge then flattens. The border is stylized with long, shallow, overlapping segments. The surface of the wing is stylized with half-oval, overlapping scales. Each scale has a smaller, concentric half-oval in the center, similar to the scales on the eagle lintel at Gush Halav (no. 17). The textural details are more intricate than

⁶⁵ Ilan 1991: 78-79.

most of the other eagle reliefs in the region. The wing is identified as that of an eagle based primarily on the parallel at Gush Halav.

Although an inscription mentioning “the Jews” and dating to the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211 C.E.) was found at the site, there is no specifically Jewish building with which we can associate this object. Little can therefore be determined concerning the object’s date.

No. 30 “Eagle Relief”

Fig. 30

Ma‘ar, northeastern Lower Galilee
About 1.00 (h.) × .90 (l.) m
Limestone (?)
Architectural fragment
Refs.: Ilan 1991: 163 (fig. 1).

This relief presents one of the more unusual eagles in this corpus. The head is not preserved and the extant portions are badly worn. The fragment is broken on all sides. The bas-relief eagle stands very tall, and in three-quarters view, turned slightly to the proper right. The wings are spread open.

Although the head is missing, part of the neck is visible. It is thin and runs smoothly into the body. The eagle’s body is long and thin, more almond-shaped than egg-shaped. The body is stylized with criss-crossing incisions to create a grid pattern (seven rows by four columns). The body proceeds seamlessly into a short, pointed tail. The wings, spread in a manner similar to the open-pointed style, are disproportionately short. They extend up and outward from the shoulders; the bend curves down and around dramatically. The bottoms are much narrower and extend to only waist high, though admittedly the bottoms are badly worn. The wings form a vertical S-curve and are oddly shaped, appearing more like large human ears. They are stylized with incised scales, roughly the same size as those formed by

the grid on the body. The legs extend down vertically from the body. The proper left leg is in full view, while the proper right leg is partially obscured. The upper leg tapers and is stylized with the same crude scale pattern, while the lower leg is narrow consistently to the bottom. The talons are not preserved.

Ilan reports that alongside the relief was a fragment of a wreath.⁶⁶ He suggests that it was originally connected to the eagle relief, but without further information little more can be said.

The overall impression of this eagle relief is unnatural and awkward with exaggerated proportions. The highly geometric design is quite unlike the examples from nearby sites (particularly Kh. V'radim and Capernaum). Nevertheless, the three-quarters pose is closer to the lintel from Kh. V'radim (no. 31 below) than any other site.

Because it is a surface find, there is no way to verify the date. Although Ilan maintains that Ma'ar is the site of a synagogue, no specifically Jewish art nor unquestionably Jewish architectural fragments have been uncovered.

No. 31 Eagle Lintel
Kh. V'radim, eastern Lower Galilee
Measurements unknown
Limestone
Lintel
Refs.: Ilan 1991: 128, 129 (fig. 1).

Fig. 31

Two buildings have been surveyed at Kh. V'radim. One is of limestone, the other basalt. Both have been identified as synagogues by Ilan, though no distinctly Jewish artwork or architectural details have been cited.

⁶⁶ Ilan 1991: 163.

The eagle lintel has been associated with the limestone building. It was discovered by Braslavi,⁶⁷ who then sketched it. However, the current whereabouts of the fragment itself are unknown.

At first glance, the bird appears to be standing frontally. However, the positioning of the legs and tail indicate that it is actually in three-quarters view, turning to the proper left. The head also faces in this direction. The wide neck supports a broad, curved head. Following the curvature of the head, the beak hooks downward, then back up to follow the upper part of the neck. The deep, almond-shaped eye is positioned to the right of the center of the head. According to the sketch, a pupil was incised in the corner of the eye. The head is stylized with long, thin incisions, some of which extend off the top of the head down over the back of the neck, and some of which extend from below the eye. They appear to be depicting the long, matted feathers of the eagle's head.

The body is ovular. It is covered by four or five rows of half-oval scales (positioned longwise). At the widest point, there are six scales across. The wings are spread widely in an outstretched style in either direction. The tip of the proper left wing is no longer extant; only about two-thirds of the proper right wing remains. The points at which the wings extend from the back shoulders are obscured by the head. They curve outward and up slightly, then slope down into the extremities. The upper third of the wings are covered with haphazard, rounded scales, about the same size as those on the body, but more random in shape and placement. The lower feathers are stylized by long, widely-spaced incisions.

The tail of the eagle is visible on the proper right side of the body, below the wing. It extends out from behind the body at about the mid-section to the top of the proper right leg. It is stylized by three deep grooves, running parallel out to the end of the tail. The legs extend

⁶⁷ Ibid. 128.

down vertically from the body. The proper left leg appears to be connected to the body much higher than the proper right. This is meant to indicate that the bird is turning to its left. The upper legs are covered in feathers and taper toward the bottom; the thin lower legs are bare, comprising only about a quarter of each leg. At the ends are the talons, the three claws of which are spread widely.

The overall impression of the eagle is naturalistic, at least, more so than the other objects here. In general, the body parts are quite well-proportioned. The neck and head are more realistic than other examples in that they are wider and larger. The curved wings are a little odd, but the division of the legs, the spread of the claws, and the inclusion of the tail all suggest that the artist was endeavoring to depict a life-like animal in the classical tradition.

As an undocumented surface find from an unexcavated site, there is no way to verify the date of the relief.

No. 32 “Short-toed eagle relief”

Fig. 32

Ad'mot (Kh. Ayd'mah), eastern Lower Galilee

Measurements unknown

Basalt

Architectural fragment, possibly lintel

Refs.: Ilan 1991: 124 (fig. 1).

This fragment of a bas-relief depicts a short-toed eagle, head turned to left, wings outstretched, with a snake gripped in its beak. The form and shape are both well preserved, but any incised details that once existed have worn away.

The head, which sits atop a long neck, is hooked. The pointed beak extends off to the left. The body, which appears to protrude from the stone slightly further than the other parts, is like a rectangle with curved corners. The wings stretch out dramatically to either side. The wingspan appears almost double the height of the eagle. The wings extend upward and

out from the shoulders. The top edges of the wings curve up, then down and out, then back up again, producing an S-curve on the upper edge of both wings. The extreme tips of the wings come to a point, then curve back down and in, toward the waist of the eagle. There are some incised striations visible on the outer third of each wing, presumably representing the long, lower feathers. The legs extend down vertically from the body. They are spread slightly. The legs are short and rather wide, with no apparent differentiation between the upper and lower leg. The talons have three stubby claws extending down from the leg.

The overall impression of the relief is texture-less and formulaic, almost like a stamp. Although the broad S-curve on the upper edge of the wings is not typical of the short-toed eagle seen elsewhere, the pose and form are quite similar. The fragment, which is broken on all sides, probably would have been the right part of a lintel, and there was likely an adjacent short-toed eagle originally on the left.

The basalt medium is noteworthy, considering the location. Construction material and associated sculpture in Galilee (both Upper and Lower) tends to be limestone. Basalt is the standard material in the Golan. The date of the fragment cannot be verified, though the comparanda suggest that it probably belongs in the 4th-6th century.

No. 33 “Lintel with a relief of eagles flanking a vessel” Fig. 33
Bethlehem of the Galilee, western Lower Galilee (SW of Sepphoris)
.95 (h.) × .40 (l.) m
Limestone (?)
Lintel
Refs.: Dalman 1923: 32-35; Ilan 1991: 197 (fig. 1).

The details of this bas-relief are difficult to describe since the only available photograph does not capture the definition well. Nevertheless, it is clear that the lintel has been badly worn and is broken on three sides. The relief shows two eagles, each facing frontally, wings spread, heads turned toward each other, and flanking a tall vessel. The head,

body and legs are better preserved on the right eagle. Its neck is long and the head appears hooked. The body does not have any real definition, but runs into the wings and legs seamlessly. The legs are stocky and close together. On the left eagle, the proper left wing is still visible. It is spread in the open-pointed style, extending outward from the shoulder, and then turning downward at an obtuse angle. After reaching the tip of the wing, it turns up toward the eagle's waist, creating an upside-down V-shape between the wing and body.

The vessel between the eagles has two parts, upper and lower. The upper part is a trapezoid, with the narrow end pointed down. The lower part is a round, slightly ovular, shape, with a three incisions crossing in the center of the oval to create a simple star design.

The overall form is similar to the flanking eagles on lintels seen elsewhere. The apparent form of the eagles, with curved heads, stocky legs, and open-pointed wings, is similar the short-toed variety (see below), but because the details are so obscure, I hesitate to classify it necessarily as such. In either case, the vessel in the center is an interesting and singular variation on the eagles-flanking-wreath motif.

The obvious similarities notwithstanding, there is nothing at this site which is verifiably Jewish. One of the buildings was originally identified as a synagogue based strictly on the north-south orientation.⁶⁸ This object was an undocumented surface-find, now out of context. At the very least, we can say that it is highly unlikely that the object is any earlier than the 3rd or 4th century.

No. 34 Eagle Graffito

Fig. 34

Bet She'arim, western Lower Galilee

.25 (h.) × about .15 (w.) m

Limestone

Wall of archway in Catacomb 12, Room I

Refs.: Avigad 1976: 22, Fig. 6.

⁶⁸ Ilan 1995:197, following Dalman 1923, who differentiates this building from the nearby "church" which is oriented east-west.

This eagle image was drawn with faint incisions on the wall of a hallway leading to the burial chambers of Catacomb 12 of the Bet She'arim necropolis. It is positioned frontally, wings spread, head turned to the left. The image is the only figural design portrayed on any of the walls of the catacombs in the necropolis.⁶⁹

The eagle appears as if it were stretched vertically. The head is small, sitting atop a long thin, slightly crooked neck. The crown of its head is rounded and smooth. The beak, extending to the left, is hooked. A large oval incised into the center of the head represents the eye. There are four or five stray incisions on the head and neck, but no clear schematic stylization otherwise is apparent on the head.

The body is long and egg-shaped, slightly narrower at the top. Sporadic, haphazard incisions run in every direction; though none of the typical schematic stylization is portrayed. The wings are spread in the open-draped style with pointed tips. They extend off the shoulders, outward and slightly upward. The bend of the wing curves dramatically downward. The tips flare out, giving the outer edge of the wings an S-curve. The wings are somewhat asymmetrical in both form and stylization. In form, the proper left wing creates a more pronounced S-curve, and the tip is less-well defined. The proper right wing is longer with a more definite shape at the end. Both wings are stylized with short incised lines. Those on the proper left wing are random and messy; those on the proper right wing are confined to the lower feathers and run almost parallel to each other down the length of the wing. The upper feathers of the proper right wing are stylized with semicircular scales. The tail of the eagle extends down from the body, flaring to the sides, where the legs of the eagle typically are positioned. A fan of nine or ten long incisions extends from the bottom-most

⁶⁹ Avigad 1976: 79.

portion of the body. On either side, long triangular, blades point down and outward. These may be meant to represent part of the tail feathers, or perhaps the eagle's legs.

The graffito appears as simple, unskilled artwork. The form and style of this drawing find no parallels anywhere else at Bet She'arim. It does not seem to be part of the catacomb's design. The graffito was more probably drawn by a visitor. The standard pose would have been familiar to any inhabitant of the region at almost any point in time. The crudity of the stylization does not date the image, nor does it place it among any specific religio-ethnic group. The date is therefore impossible to determine, except to say that it was cut some time after the initial use of the catacomb at the end of the 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century.

Group 3: *Objects whose provenience and religio-ethnic identity are both unknown.*

No. 35 "Lintel with Eagle Relief"

Fig. 35

Hafar (originally from Dabura?), northern Golan

.38 (height) × .92 (length) × .20 (depth) meters

Basalt

Lintel, either over a doorway or window

Refs.: Epstein and Gutman 1972: 263; Ma'oz 1995:166, 254, 415, Pl. 129:2; Hachlili 1995: no. 30; Gregg and Urman 1996: 203.

The well-preserved lintel depicts a bas-relief eagle standing in a frontal pose with its wings spread and the head turned to the proper right. The head is rounded, with a large, circular indentation representing the eye, and a large hooked beak. The neck is narrow, with bands indicating a twist. The body is squat, covered with semicircular scales which extend over the upper feathers. The lower feathers consist of vertical lines. The wings are outstretched. They have a slightly-obtuse, rounded bend; the lower feathers are longer on the outer edges, creating a somewhat triangular wing. The legs are covered with scales down to the talons. The claws are spread wide horizontally.

The overall appearance of the eagle is wide and squat. Its details are relatively simple, though still somewhat realistic. The form is stiff and formulaic. The image is isolated from any other surrounding symbols.

Although the object was found in Hafar during survey,⁷⁰ Ma'oz suggests the likely provenience of Dabura. Concerning the date, Ma'oz places the art and architectural fragments of Dabura in his "Dikkeh-'Ein Nashut Group," dating it to the late 5th century C.E.⁷¹

No. 36 "Eagles on a lintel"

Fig. 36

Found at Kafr Harib (reused), southern Syria
.40 (h.) × 1.03 (l.) × .27 (d.) m
Basalt (?)
Lintel
Refs.: Hachlili 1995: no. 34.

The lintel carved in bas-relief, though badly worn, appears to depict two eagles, wings spread, flanking a circular disc. It is difficult to say whether the details have been worn away, or if they were never carved. The heads are barely preserved; it is unclear whether they are turned toward or away from the disc in the center. The bodies are not distinguished from the wings. The wings are spread in an open-pointed style. They curve downward and out from the shoulders. The lower extremities of the wings come to a point, then reconnect with the body of the eagles about waist-high, creating an upside-down V-shape. The legs extend down vertically from the body, tapering near the talons, which are not preserved.

The circular object between the eagles protrudes out several centimeters from the lintel. There are no apparent details or incisions preserved on the surface. It is surely meant

⁷⁰ Epstein and Gutman 1972: 263.

⁷¹ Ma'oz 1995: 172.

to represent a wreath, since the form and positions of the images on the lintel are similar to the short-toed eagles flanking a wreath (see below). Although the object is badly worn, it does not appear that any sense of realism was intended. Any details on the original carving would have been worn away; however the crude form of the birds and the schematic positioning of the three images suggest that they were not carved originally.

No. 37 “Eagle in high relief”

Fig. 37

Find-spot unknown, object now in Hecht Museum (no. H-1627)

.47 (h.) × .37 (l.) × .30 (d.) m

Basalt

Possibly on pediment

Refs.: Hachlili 1995: no. 25.

This engaged eagle sculpture protrudes almost completely from the stone. The head and wings do not survive, however the body and legs are quite well-preserved. The long, oval-shaped body is covered with rows of large, overlapping, semicircular scales, about six or seven across. The bottom of the body tapers somewhat, covering the groin area. The legs attach on either side. The wings, connected at the shoulders do not survive in full either. However, the upper feathers of the proper right wing preserve the same scales as on the body. The wings were apparently not spread widely, but rather were folded along the side (though not closed completely). This is apparent in the lower portion of the wing, visible on the proper left side, stylized by long strips of feathers rather than scales. The legs, which extend down vertically, are covered for the most part with diagonal bands which cease at the talons. The claws each have three pointed toes, spread widely to clutch a large ball in each.

The remaining portions of the eagle are well-proportioned. The overall impression of the eagle is naturalistic and detailed.

According to Hachlili, a similar eagle was found at the site of El-al, in the Golan, however no photograph or sketch of any such eagle could be located. She concludes that the

object comes from a Jewish site in the Golan based on this single parallel.⁷² The wings folded down would be an exceptional pose for the eagles in Jewish art, as would the spheres which the eagle clutches in its talons. The semicircular scales are a common stylization, both in Jewish art and in non-Jewish art (see below). Based on the information available, there is no evidence to assert that the object came from a Jewish community. If it did, the sculpture would be the most impressively executed and realistic object known to date, fitting neatly in the classical tradition.

No. 38 Eagle in Low Relief

Fig. 38

Find-spot unknown, object now in Golan Archaeological Museum, Qatzrin

Measurements unknown

Basalt

Lintel (?)

Refs.: None could be found.

The poorly preserved architectural fragment bears an eagle carved in bas-relief. The proper left wing is not preserved, nor is the lower legs. The details of the image are no longer visible either. Its head is turned to the left, and the remaining wing (proper right) is spread in an open-pointed style. The head is in the shape of a curved knob, and the beak extends out and down, tapering to a point. The outline of the body is unclear, though it appears short and stocky. The preserved wing extends out and slightly upward off the shoulder. The outer portion curves all around, reaching the tapered tip which points inward toward the legs. The inner portion of the wing also curves—an atypical characteristic—reconnecting midway down the body. The remaining portions of the legs appear short, wide, and badly battered. They extend vertically down, side-by-side.

The form of the eagle—the spread wings, knob-like head, and short stature—is similar to the short-toed eagles (see below). However, the incurved wing is peculiar. The

⁷² Hachlili 1995: no. 25. For El-al, see Ilan 1987: 111.

date and original context of the eagle are impossible to determine, however the similarity in general form and pose is similar to several of the eagles in this corpus.

No. 39 Eagle Fragment from Syrian Gable Window

Fig. 39

Found in 'Adriyeh, northern Golan, possibly from synagogue at 'Ein Nashut

.70 (h.) × .48 (l.) × .37 (d.) m

Basalt

Lintel fragment from a window with a Syrian gable

Refs.: Ma'oz 1995: 98, Pl. 67:1.

This high relief eagle originally would have adorned the lintel of a window with an arch and pointed pediment, i.e. a Syrian gable. The large stone above the arch had a high pointed cornice, in the corner of which was this small eagle image. Lintels found at ed-Dikkeh and Khirbet Tubah bear eagles in similar positions (nos. 10 and 15). The eagle itself is persevered in all its parts, though the details and stylization have been badly worn. The eagle's pose is common—frontally faced, wings open, head to the side. However, the proportions and form are somewhat unusual compared to the other objects discussed.

The round, slightly hooked head sits atop a short wide neck. The beak over the proper left shoulder is just barely visible. The body is oval, protruding slightly in a bulbous manner from the stone. Although it is worn, faint remnants of irregularly circular scales are still visible. The wings extend off horizontally from either shoulder, perpendicular to the body. The bends of the wings are rounded. The outer edges turn a ninety degree angle and fall vertically to the tips of the lower feathers, ending at a point adjacent to the top of the legs. The inner edges of the wings turn upward vertically and then inward horizontally at almost a ninety-degree angle. This is somewhat unusual and unnaturalistic. Although the wings are open, they do not follow the typical pattern of those that are open-draped or open-pointed; they are, however, more open than the typical open-draped style. The upper feathers

of the proper left wing are stylized with three rows of long, amorphous scales. The feathers of the proper right wing are no longer preserved. The lower feathers continue in the same width as the scales on the upper feathers, but are not segmented into scales. The long, thick legs of the eagle extend straight down together from the body. They taper very slightly at the bottom, but there is no clear distinction between the upper and lower leg. At the bottom, the remains of talons protrude from the stone; however no details remain. About half-way down the proper right leg, three diagonal incisions extend downward and out from behind the eagle. These presumably were meant to be the tail.

The overall impression of the image is disproportional and awkward. No realistic form or naturalistic pose are represented. The carving is somewhat crude. Because this lintel fragment was discovered along with other pieces of the same lintel, Ma'oz was able to reconstruct its place in its original building quite easily. The question is: what *was* the original building? The find-spot's proximity to the synagogue at 'Ein Nashut led Ma'oz to suppose that it once adorned the façade of that building. If so, then the fragment would belong to Level II there, giving it a date of no earlier than the mid-5th and no later than the late 6th century.

No. 40 Orthostat with Eagles, Lions, and “Master-of-beasts” Fig. 40

Found in 'Ein Samsam, possibly from synagogue at 'Ein Nashut
.40 (h.) × 2.14 (l.) × .37 (d.) m

Basalt

Free-standing architectural fragment (?), possibly the base of an aedicula

Refs.: Ma'oz 1981: 111-12; 1995: 102-03, Pls. 75, 76; Hachlili 1988: 173, 322-23, Fig.IX.24b, Pl. 88; 1995: no. 37, Gregg and Urman 1996: 103-04.

This orthostat is one of the more well-known, if not the *most* well-known, of the objects in this corpus. Although it is damaged on the right side, it was found mostly intact and is well-preserved. On the left side is carved a fully three-dimensional lion's head, complete with mane and front paws. The head protrudes from the end of the orthostat. The

sculpted panel of the block runs the length of the long face, along what would be the lion's proper left side. The panel depicts in the center a "master-of-beasts" motif, consisting of a human figure with arms raised, flanked on the left by a lion in profile and on the right by a lioness (identified by the cub which clings to its underside). The lions are flanked on either side by frontally-facing eagles, wings in the open-draped style, and heads turned in profile toward the center of the panel. All figures on the panel are carved in bas-relief, giving the details, stylizations, and body parts a flat, two-dimensional appearance.

The eagles are, for the most part, mirror images of each other. The head is long and oval-shaped, positioned horizontally and tapering slightly at the beak. The head sits atop and perpendicular to a neck of the same thickness. The bend of the head on top of the neck creates a ninety-degree angle. A small divot in the center above the neck marks the eye. The back of the head is stylized with small bands radiating from behind the eye. The neck is stylized with three horizontal bands, slightly curved downward. The left eagle grips in its beak a tight group of nine or ten small circles, presumably depicting a grape bunch.

The bodies of the eagles are rectangular in shape, positioned longwise, though the body of the right eagle is slightly curved at the bottom. The body of the left eagle is covered with rows of small, half-oval scales. The body of the right eagle is covered with rows of small, curved, overlapping bands. The wings are spread in the open-draped style. They extend horizontally from the shoulders. The bend of the wing forms a sharp ninety-degree angle. The wings fall to about the mid-point of the legs. The wings are divided evenly between the upper and lower feathers. The upper feathers are stylized by columns of semicircular scales. The lower feathers are stylized by long, unsegmented columns, following the same width as the scale columns on the upper feathers. They are curved slightly at the tips. The thick legs extend straight down from the body. They are not spread

apart but they are not touching, either. The proper left leg of the right eagle is not preserved. The legs are rather long, approximately the same length of the body. The upper leg, comprising about half the total, is stylized with curved, un-segmented bands, very similar to the neck. The lower leg, which tapers very slightly, has no stylization. The talons appear stocky with four stubby claws extending downward from each.

The overall appearance of these eagles is square, flat, and schematic. There is no hint of realistic features or natural forms. The pose, shape, and stylization are all similar to the eagle relief fragment found at 'Ein Nashut (no. 5 above). It is also similar to the eagle on the capital from Umm el-Qanatir (no. 13 above), except for the overall shape of the body.

Concerning the provenience, Ma'oz has suggested plausibly that the orthostat served as the base of an aedicula for the Torah shrine in synagogue at 'Ein Nashut.⁷³ The similarity of the eagles with the fragment found there (no. 5 above) supports this. However, as Gregg and Urman point out, this does not preclude the possibility that the orthostat originated at one of the other nearby sites, nor does it necessarily identify the object as "Jewish."⁷⁴ If it does come from 'Ein Nashut, then it certainly dates to between the mid-5th and late 6th century. The object's similarities with the eagle fragment at 'Ein Nashut and the capital at Umm el-Qanatir also suggest a 5th century date.

No. 41 Snake-biting Eagles Flanking Lion-Wreath on Lintel Fig. 41
 Found in Safed, probably from one of the synagogues at Kh. Tubah⁷⁵
 .55 (h.) × 2.10 (l.)
 Basalt
 Lintel
 Refs.: Avigad 1944: 18-19, Fig. 1, Pl. 2:1,2; Ilan 1991: 31.

⁷³ Ma'oz 1995: 102-03.

⁷⁴ Gregg and Urman 1996: 103-04; and see below.

⁷⁵ Ilan 1991: 31.

The lintel depicts two eagles in high-relief, facing frontward, wings spread, heads toward each other, each gripping a snake in its beak. The birds flank a wreath, in the center of which is the face of a lion. The lintel was found broken in several places.⁷⁶

The eagles are generally mirror images of each other. The curved, slightly hooked heads sit atop short necks. The narrow, pointed beaks extend horizontally from the head toward the center of the panel. There is little apparent stylization on the heads and beaks, though these areas have been badly worn. The back of the head of the left eagle has four or five parallel lines, possibly to represent the short, slick feathers of the head. Small, faint indentations mark a single eye on each eagle, just above the beaks.

The body of each eagle is egg-shaped, positioned longwise, with the narrow end at the bottom. The bodies are covered with six or more rows of semicircular, overlapping scales. The large, open-pointed wings extend out and slightly upward from the shoulders in either direction. The bend of the wing is curved. The sides fall vertically, bowing slightly inward to create a subtle S-curve. The tips of the wings extend as low as the talons. The undersides of the wings form a diagonal line, stretching back to the mid-section of the body. The wings are stylized by three or four parallel bands which follow the overall shape. They appear to be segmented by curved incisions forming long scales. There does not seem to be any differentiation between the upper and lower feathers.

The legs are attached higher up on the body than is typical, almost mid-way. The upper legs are in the shape of upside-down, rounded-off triangles. They appear to be stylized with curved haphazard incisions. The lower legs and talons are not preserved, though

⁷⁶ In the photograph of fig. 41, one can see how it was reconstructed incorrectly. Avigad 1944: 18 determined that a layer of cement was laid over the break along the left side of the wreath, leading to the confusion. His sketch (fig. 41) clarifies the original form of the lintel.

Avigad suggested they were carved in the round, based on the protruding distance of the eagles' bodies from the lintel.⁷⁷

Each eagle grips in its beak the end of a snake. The snakes, segmented only on the upper halves, extend from the beaks toward the center of the lintel, turning downward into an S-curve. They create a Hercules knot just below the wreath in the center of the lintel. The wreath is stylized by eight segments. The four segments on either side overlap from the bottom to the top. At the top there is a small flower. In the center of the wreath is the face of a lion, positioned frontally. The two eyes are almond-shaped. The snout extends down from between the eyes. The slit of the mouth extends vertically from the nose, over the septum, and then outward to either side of the face. The chin is curved and narrow. The mane is depicted as strands radiating up and outward from the forehead. The lion has an anthropomorphic appearance.

The vertical doorjambs and the horizontal cornice are both stylized with the same “net” or “scale” pattern. This motif is very characteristic of late Roman-Byzantine period synagogues in Upper Galilee and the Golan (e.g. Nabratein, Gush Halav, Bar'am, 'Ein Nashut). The border around the doorjamb is a simple geometric band of circles and curved lines.

The overall impression of the eagles in this motif is schematic, stiff, and unnatural. The stylization of the wings is atypical. The hooked heads and snakes suggest that these are meant to be short-toed eagles. However, the shape of the body, disproportionately large wings, and triangular legs are distinct from other examples described as short-toed. It seems that the artist was copying the form of the short-toed eagles-flanking-wreath motif but employing the details and textural style of more classizing examples.

⁷⁷ Avigad 1944: 18.

Because the object has been completely removed from context, it is impossible to verify its date. The motif is common to the 4th-6th century, however the stylization of the wings and the form do not have close enough parallels to help date the object.

Discussion

Having presented the primary evidence in a reasonably comprehensive manner, we will now discuss the major trends and characteristics of these eagles, as well as their immediate relation in form and style to Classical, Near Eastern, and Byzantine art. The following comments are meant only to identify the significant aspects and motifs, not to present interpretation (see below, chapter five).

Material

The natural bedrock used for architecture and sculpture on the east side of the Great Rift Valley in the northern region is basalt, the beds of which extend over the Golan and the area known as the Bashan (including the Batanaea, Trachonitis, and the Hauran). On the west side of the valley, in the region of Upper and Lower Galilee, the natural building material is limestone. Basalt is a harder stone, which makes it more difficult to sculpt intricate detail. Twenty-five of the eagle reliefs are carved in basalt; fourteen are in limestone.⁷⁸ The artistic quality—though admittedly subjective—does not appear to be any better or worse in either medium. Both include artwork showing high and low levels of skill. Basalt objects have been found in both the Golan and Galilee, though the stone could only have been quarried in the former. There is no obvious reason for the occurrence of basalt sculpture and architecture in Galilee, though I suspect that it was due to various factors, including available resources, financial means, and personal preference. None of the objects found on the east side of the valley was of limestone. In cases where the associated

architecture is known, the reliefs all seem to conform to the same material as the building, suggesting that they were naturally seen as part of the structure as a whole and not as distinct works of art.⁷⁹

Stylization and Details

The depictions of the eagle in Jewish sculpture of late ancient Palestine reflect an overly-simplistic, unnatural, and intensely stylized portrayal of the bird. The artistic style is in contrast to the Classical, realistic forms known from Roman art⁸⁰ and regional sites, such as Palmyra (see below). The unrealistic design of the Jewish eagle-images results in several schematic characteristics in the artistic details. For one, the half-oval or semi-circular scale pattern meant to depict the feathers of the eagle's body and upper feathers appears in almost all of the examples. The depiction of the talons as crude, boxy and/or stubby shapes is common in several of the reliefs. The lines of the "neck-twist" appears in a number of the images,⁸¹ as do the knobby, hooked heads, and upside-down V-shaped bands across the legs.

While these and other characteristics occur frequently among the eagles of the catalogue above, there is no complete uniformity. In fact, considering the limited region in which these reliefs were found, there is a surprising variety. This indicates, to my mind, that there were no pattern books or organized and interrelated workshops producing these reliefs. Unlike the geometric architectural details seen in the synagogues of the Golan and Galilee,

⁷⁸ For two objects, this information was not available to me.

⁷⁹ The notion that these were artistic objects in their own right—as opposed to part of the architecture or greater design—does not seem to have been part of ancient thinking. See Belting 1994: 3-6; and Eliav 1998 with literature cited there.

⁸⁰ E.g. the well-known portrayal of Claudius with the attributes of Jupiter, including the eagle in the Vatican Museum; see Zanker 2004: 11. While the Classical Roman eagle is often depicted with wings spread open, there is good reason to believe that eagle statues kept by the Roman camps depicted the eagle with wings folded; see Downey 1977: 137-39.

⁸¹ See also Ma'oz 1995: 253-59.

the eagle depictions do not conform to a set stylistic design.⁸² There are a few instances where details are close enough in style and/or technique to hypothesize a connection between artists,⁸³ however these are an exception rather than the rule.

Because of the nonconformity among the eagle-images in Jewish art, it is difficult to discern any stylistic similarity with non-Jewish examples in the region. The eagle sculpture in Nabatean art displays somewhat more uniformity within their own style, to the point that specific schools at Petra and Medain Saleh can be identified.⁸⁴ While these eagles as well as those from Kh. et-Tannur⁸⁵ are in the typical heraldic pose with wings spread, the shapes of the head and beak, the curvature of the wings, the thickness of the legs, and the style of the scales bear no stylistic relation to the eagles of Palestine in the later periods.

The examples from Baalbek,⁸⁶ dating to the first and second centuries C.E.,⁸⁷ like those from our corpus, are dissimilar from each other. There are few stylistic similarities between those eagles and the ones in Jewish art. A relief fragment found by the German excavation at Baalbek in 1898-1905 bears some resemblance in the form of the scales to the examples in our corpus, but otherwise exhibit no stylistic affinity.⁸⁸

Avi-Yonah⁸⁹ and Hachlili⁹⁰ highlighted the Jewish eagle-image's similarity to Near Eastern art by pointing out the "round body" and the heraldic pose. Fewer than half of the

⁸² For pattern books of geometric designs in architecture, see Hachlili 1988: 393.

⁸³ E.g. nos. 5 and 40, and nos. 17 and 29.

⁸⁴ McKenzie 1990: 16; Pls. 2-7.

⁸⁵ See Glueck 1965: 479-83; and Zayadine 2003: fig. 41.

⁸⁶ Jidejian 1975: figs. 50, 54, 268.

⁸⁷ Ward-Perkins 1981: 314-25.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, a low-relief eagle panel from the Great Court at Baalbek is similar in detail to the eagles on the lintels from Kedesh; see Jidjian 1975: fig. 54; on Kedesh, see below.

⁸⁹ Avi-Yonah 1981: 65.

eagles described above have round bodies; most exhibit ovular, rectangular, or irregularly shaped stomachs. While the heraldic pose may have been more common in Near Eastern art than in Roman art—where realism favored more naturalistic poses—this feature is so widespread and general that it does not help to pinpoint any direct influences upon our eagles.

Ma'oz, who examined the eagles from the Golan, divided the reliefs into two stylistic types.⁹¹ The first is characterized by a more Classical style eagle, with wings outstretched, and represented by the reliefs from Dabura, el-Ahmadiyeh, Gush Halav, and Kh. V'radim (nos. 4, 6, 17, 31 above). These images, in addition to the eagles from the temple at Kedesh, are within the Palmyrene tradition which, according to Ma'oz, continued to dominate the sculptural styles in Phoenicia into the later periods.⁹² The second group is characterized by the eagle's "clinging" wings alongside the body, twisted neck, and curved stomach shape. Ma'oz identifies several eagles with this group, including those from Dabura, 'Ein Nashut, Jaraba, and Umm el-Qanatir (nos. 2, 3, 5, 9, 13, and 40). He sees this style as entering the Golan via the Hauran in the Byzantine period.⁹³ While there are unifying features among these eagles, no one exhibits all the characteristics Ma'oz ascribes to them. His criteria of classification, though helpful in categorizing the reliefs, may over-generalize the specific stylistic details of the individual pieces for the sake of explaining their origin.

In Avi-Yonah's discussion of "Oriental stylization" of animals in Jewish art, he maintained that the general Near Eastern tendency was toward *over*-stylization at the expense

⁹⁰ Hachlili 1995: 185-86.

⁹¹ Ma'oz 1995: 253-57.

⁹² Ibid. 255-56.

⁹³ Ibid. 260.

of realism.⁹⁴ The artistic trend was typically aimed at an “excessive insistence on the emotional value of the representation.”⁹⁵ While I agree that the eagles in Jewish art display a predilection toward unrealistic stylization—perhaps to the point of over-stylization, in light of the general lack of realism—it is unclear as to the reason. Avi-Yonah’s argument seems to suggest that there was a *conscious* emphasis placed on the artwork’s unrealistic and schematic style—possibly vis-à-vis the Classical art known in Roman Palestine—as, he supposes, there was in Near Eastern art in general. It is as likely, though, to my mind, that the art was simply representative of its Near Eastern context, mixed with—as Ma’oz points out—Classical elements popularized by the Roman impact on Near Eastern religious art. As such, it should not be assumed that there was any conscious decision or ideological motive behind the predilection toward schematic representation over realism.

Placement

Of the forty-one eagle reliefs listed above, fourteen were originally found on lintels; three were part of a Syrian gable window in a building façade; one (possibly two) was part of a pediment panel; two were on column capitals; two were parts of interior friezes; one was on a keystone (of unknown original position); one was on a doorjamb; one (possibly two) was part of a Torah shrine; and three were on sarcophagi. The prominent position of the majority of these finds—on lintels, pediments, and building facades—highlights the centrality of the eagle as a symbol in Jewish public architecture. In several cases, the lintels are known to have been placed over the central doorway (nos. 1, 3, 16, 17, 21).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Avi-Yonah 1981: 53.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Although the fragmented state of many of the objects does not allow for certainty, it is highly likely that several others served as lintels for main doorways (nos. 2, 4, 6, 8, 24, 33, 35, 36, 41).

The prominent arrangements parallel other eagle-symbols in the region. Among the most well-known is the Eagle Lintel from the sanctuary of Ba'al Shamin at Palmyra.⁹⁷ Here, the deity is represented by the imposing eagle, standing tall with wings stretched to almost triple the height. The central eagle is flanked by two additional eagles on either side, with wings folded, heads turned inward. Below the wings of the central eagle are the busts of 'Aglibol, the moon, and Malakbel, the sun, each with their own smaller eagle.⁹⁸ Similar eagle-lintels are found at Roman period sites in the Near East, such as Suweida in the Hauran,⁹⁹ as well as at Dura-Europos¹⁰⁰ and at Hatra.¹⁰¹ Most relevant is the nearby temple at Kedesh in Upper Galilee, dedicated to Ba'al Shamin¹⁰² and Apollo¹⁰³ or some local solar-deity. The temple there was constructed in the second or third century and the building went out of use sometime in the fourth century, possibly as a result of earthquake damage.¹⁰⁴ J. Dentzer-Feydy has shown that it was common practice in Syria to place divine figures on the lintel of public buildings.¹⁰⁵ This practice continued in Syrian churches throughout the Byzantine period, where the cross or the monogram of Christ would be placed on the center of lintels.¹⁰⁶ Whether or not Jews considered the eagles in their art to be *divine figures* (see

⁹⁷ Colledge 1976: fig. 12.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 33.

⁹⁹ Dentzer-Feydy 1992.

¹⁰⁰ Colledge 1977: 85.

¹⁰¹ Ingholt 1954: 5-6.

¹⁰² Fischer et al. 1984: 166-68.

¹⁰³ Magness 1990: 177-81

¹⁰⁴ Fischer et al. 1984: 168-69.

¹⁰⁵ Dentzer-Feydy 1992.

¹⁰⁶ Peña 1996: 169-73.

below, chapter five), their placement is certainly within the regional practice of carving eagles—considered attributes or symbols of the divine elsewhere in the Near East (see below, chapters three and five)—on lintels of public buildings.

In addition to lintels, eagles are often found in other fairly prominent locations in non-Jewish buildings in antiquity. As mentioned above (no. 12), the eagle was a popular motif on column capitals in fifth-century Byzantine architecture, as well as in the Coptic architecture of Ahnas, in sixth-century Egypt.¹⁰⁷ Coptic architecture also placed the eagle in apsidal niches in the interior of the buildings.¹⁰⁸ These examples parallel the prominence of the symbol throughout both the regional and contemporary contexts of the eagle images described above.

The placement of three of the eagle-symbols on sarcophagi raises the question of the symbol's meaning within funerary contexts, as well as whether such examples should be considered separately. Eagles in Jewish funerary contexts may also be attested on two tombstones from fifth-century Zoar, located southeast of the Dead Sea.¹⁰⁹ These have not been included in our catalogue because the quality of their design makes it unclear whether or not they are indeed eagles. These tombstone “birds,” illustrated with the same red paint as their associated inscriptions, are depicted in profile, facing to the left. They are below and on either side of a seven-branched menorah. The bent legs and profiled stance are more closely paralleled by the bird images found in the synagogue mosaics—e.g. at ‘Ein Gedi and Beth Alpha¹¹⁰—and less frequently in relief art—e.g. at Qutz’biyeh¹¹¹; *these* depictions are

¹⁰⁷ Duthuit 1931: 49, Pl. XLIIIa.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 46, Pl. XXXVIIb.

¹⁰⁹ Naveh 1995: no. 10; 2000: no. 24. I thank Yael Wilfand for bringing these inscriptions to my attention. She has informed me that the Christian tombstones from Zoar also utilize similar bird-imagery.

¹¹⁰ For ‘Ein Gedi, see Barag et al. 1981: 119. For Beth Alpha, see Sukenik 1975.

certainly not eagles, but better identified as doves,¹¹² or perhaps peacocks.¹¹³ However, the positioning of the Zoar tombstone-birds, flanking the central menorah, is somewhat similar to the placement of several of the eagles in our corpus. Nevertheless, their crude design makes their identification as eagles impossible to verify, thus denying them inclusion in the present study.¹¹⁴

Eagles are well-attested in funerary contexts in the Roman world. As mentioned above (no. 26), the eagle-image is found on Roman lead sarcophagi, though their meaning here is far from certain. Rahmani suggests that the eagles on lead sarcophagi within aediculae depict the *aquila* which, he says, was the symbol of the *legio* X Fretensis, stationed in Jerusalem and Caesarea during the third century, when these sarcophagi were deposited.¹¹⁵ While this may be so, it does not explain why there would be symbols—similar in placement and form, though portrayed quite differently stylistically—on contemporary Jewish sarcophagi. The eagles on the lead sarcophagi may be a reference to apotheosis;¹¹⁶ however the static bird with wings open, but not outstretched, would be unusual for such a reference, as the eagle which bears the soul in apotheosis is typically in flight.¹¹⁷ In the end, it seems that the meaning of the eagle on the Bet She‘arim sarcophagi should best be considered as a common symbol in Palestinian Jewish culture, with no distinctly funerary meaning.

¹¹¹ Ilan 1991: 108.

¹¹² Possibly related to Temple-imagery.

¹¹³ Peacocks are associated with Christian idea of resurrection and immortality, as described by Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 12.4, and as appears in Syrian churches; see Peña 1996: 175.

¹¹⁴ An example also comes from the Jewish catacombs in Rome; see Goodenough 1953: III, no. 729. Here, however, it is obvious that the birds are *not* eagles.

¹¹⁵ Rahmani 1999: 69.

¹¹⁶ See Zanker 2004, though this was more commonly associated with members of the imperial family.

¹¹⁷ See for example, *ibid.* 60, 63.

Arrangement of Symbols

The eagles in the above catalogue generally appear as either a single eagle with wings spread, or as a pair, flanking an object or architectural feature. Twenty reliefs depict single eagles, while fourteen depict pairs.¹¹⁸ Seven of the pairs flank wreaths, one flanks a vessel, and one flanks a “master-of-beasts” motif. Both the single eagle and flanking-pair are known from Classical and Near Eastern art.¹¹⁹

The closest examples, geographically, of single eagles have already been mentioned above—those from Palmyra, Baalbek, Petra, Suweida, and Kedesh. In the majority of these cases, as well as elsewhere throughout the Near East, the eagle was representative of the godhead—Ba‘al Shamin-Zeus-Jupiter—or a solar deity—sometimes the same as the godhead (see below, chapter three).¹²⁰

The flanking-pair of eagles has fewer parallels in Near Eastern art. The first example—important for its symbolic similarity, though distinct geographically—comes from Hatra. A frieze relief from the palace, dated between the mid-second century to no later than the mid-fourth century C.E.,¹²¹ depicts two eagles, wings folded, posing in a three-quarter turn, and flanking a bust of the solar god, Shamash.¹²² The details of the eagles bare little artistic similarity to those in our corpus, and their pose and stance is also unparalleled in Jewish art. What is significant is the fact that they are eagles flanking a central figure and

¹¹⁸ For seven of the objects it is unclear, due to the state-of-preservation, whether it was originally part of a pair or not.

¹¹⁹ Avi-Yonah 1981: 60-65.

¹²⁰ Cook 1914: I, 550-604; Goodenough 1958: VIII, 126-27; Avi-Yonah 1981: 65 (and literature cited there).

¹²¹ Ingholt 1954: 5-6. The lower date is based on coins giving a *terminus post quem* of the mid-second century. The city did not recover from the Sasanian destruction in 239, and was abandoned entirely by the time Ammianus Marcellinus passed by in 364; see *ibid*.

¹²² Sarre 1923: Pl. 62 identifies the image as Helios; cf. Ingholt 1954: 24.

that they hold wreaths in the mouths (see above, no. 1). The mini-wreaths are a reference to triumph; the fact that they are in the eagles' beaks indicates they are presenting the symbol of triumphant victory, thereby identifying the function of the birds with that of the divine figure of the winged Victory.¹²³ Both Victory and the eagle are depicted in Classical,¹²⁴ Parthian,¹²⁵ and imperial Byzantine¹²⁶ art as bestowing the wreath of triumph, usually, though not exclusively, upon a ruler.

Another noteworthy parallel for the arrangement of symbols, mentioned already above, comes from Baalbek, where we find two eagles on either side of and below a bust of Helios.¹²⁷ The relief does not depict the eagles holding a wreath up to Helios in triumph; however the inner wing of each bird rises up to the bottom of the bust, as if they are supporting the effigy. Their faces look down and away from the rays of the deity. It seems, to my mind, that the eagles should here be understood as subordinate to Helios, though still an important part of the motif (see further below, chapter five).

The placement of two winged-figures flanking a central object or symbol is an important motif in early Byzantine art, particularly in the depiction of angels bearing the image of Christ. We shall return to this motif and its relation to the eagles above in chapter five.

Short-toed eagles

¹²³ Cf. Zanker 1988: 93.

¹²⁴ The most well-known is the *corona civica*—see Zanker 1988:93-94—and for Victory, see *ibid.* 96, *inter alia*.

¹²⁵ Colledge 1977: Figs. 38n and 38o, *inter alia*.

¹²⁶ Goodenough 1967: 24, 37; Kitzinger 1977: Pl. 86, *inter alia*.

¹²⁷ Jidejian 1975: Fig. 50.

Among the forty-one eagles described above, five (nos. 2, 3, 8, 32, 41) have been identified as short-toed eagles. The primary characteristic that identifies this type of eagle is the snake which it grips in its beak.¹²⁸ Of these five examples, three are depicted as a pair flanking a wreath (nos. 2, 3, 41), while the other two are fragmentary, and are likely to have been depicted similarly in their original, complete state.

Although the snake is the major unifying image, there are several notable stylistic features common among these five short-toed eagles. Four of the five display open-pointed wings (nos. 2, 3, 8, 41). Four out of five have hooked heads with smooth, rounded crowns (nos. 2, 3, 32, 41).¹²⁹ Four out of five have stubby, blockish talons (nos. 2, 3, 8, 32).¹³⁰ Generally, these are not well-carved images, but display simplicity in details and a schematic form. In addition, they are all carved from basalt.

Concerning location, two are from Dabura in the northern Golan (nos. 2 and 3); no. 8 is from Qutz'biyeh, in the central Golan; no 32 is from Ad'mot in Lower Galilee; and no. 41 was found in Safed but probably originates from the synagogue at Kh. Tubah in eastern Upper Galilee. Although no. 32, from Ad'mot, is geographically disparate, all five short-toed eagles seem to be generally located in a limited range.

Three of these five objects (nos. 2, 3, 41) were certainly used as lintels over a doorway. While two (nos. 8, 32) are too fragmented to determine the original location in their respective structures, the remaining portions suggest that they too served as lintels.

¹²⁸ According to Ma'oz 1981: 110, the short-toed eagle is a regionally peculiar specimen that feeds on snakes. The diet of local fauna, however, is irrelevant for our purposes in light of the obvious consistency among the examples of this motif in Jewish art.

¹²⁹ The head of no. 8 is not preserved.

¹³⁰ The talons of no. 41 are not preserved.

One can only speculate on the associated structures for four of these five lintels. Certainly, the design suggests public buildings, as do the presumed economic means necessary for displaying such artwork. For no. 3, though, an inscription indicates explicitly that it originally stood over the doorway of a *bet midrash*.

Despite the stylistic similarities, there is nothing to suggest these reliefs were made by the same artist or workshop. The variations in details—such as the curvature of upper wings and outward facing beaks of no. 2, the upside-down wings and net-pattern texture of no. 3, and the S-curved, outstretched wings of no. 32—preclude the possibility that any sort of “pattern-book” was employed here.¹³¹ It is more likely, to my mind, that these were simply commonly-understood and easily-recognizable symbols.

Furthermore, several other eagles exhibit stylistic similarities with the short-toed variety. Nos. 1, 10, 15, 39 and 40 all display the same stubby, boxy talons. Nos. 13, 24, 25, 34, 36, and 39 all have similarly hooked heads. The common central motif of the wreath—which probably was originally present for all five of the short-toed eagle reliefs—is also seen in other examples where the absence of snakes does not permit the identification of the eagle as short-toed (nos. 16, 23, 24, 36).

Regarding the form and position of the short-toed eagles, it is noteworthy that the snakes are gripped in the eagle’s beak. The snakes in these reliefs are generally depicted as being held in submission, since at no other point do they come into contact with the eagle, usually falling limp. In the two examples where segments of the snakes are discernable (nos. 3 and 41), the snakes are apparently gripped by their tails, an attribute which further implies that the eagles have the dominant position in an unbalanced relationship. This design is in contrast to other eagle-and-snake motifs from the Classical and Near Eastern world, in which

¹³¹ Cf. Hachlili 1988: 391-95, and literature cited there.

the snake is wrapped around the eagle as the two struggle against one-another. An example from the Nabatean site of Kh. et-Tannur¹³² dating to the first or early second century C.E.¹³³ depicts an eagle with a snake entwined around the bird's body, the heads of the two meeting confrontationally. The sculpture is highly detailed with unrealistic stylization. The eagle stands upon a wreath, laid horizontally. A very similar sculpture was found at Zharet el-Bedd, in the region of the Decapolis. The eagle-and-snake depiction here is out of proportion.¹³⁴ These two examples as well as a later graffito from Dura¹³⁵ portray the eagle and snake in conflict, where neither clearly has the upper-hand. A more graphic version of the motif appears in a sixth-century mosaic from the Great Palace in Istanbul.¹³⁶ Here, the fight is bitter, as blood squirts from the snake where the eagle bites into it.

These examples portray the figures in action. A more static depiction appears in a low-relief panel from Aden, on the southwest tip of the Arabian peninsula.¹³⁷ The eagle's wings are in open-pointed style, its head is to the right, and two snakes encircle it. The heads of the snakes meet on either side of the eagle. The schematic details are different from the eagles in our corpus, as is the form of the head and legs; however the low-relief portrayal is

¹³² Glueck 1965: 479-83, Pl. 140, 141; McKenzie 2003: 175.

¹³³ For issues of chronology, see Patrich 1990: 109-10, and literature cited there.

¹³⁴ Glueck 1965: 480-81.

¹³⁵ Rostovtzeff 1933: 253.

¹³⁶ Rice 1968: fig. 93.

¹³⁷ Bossert 1951: 99, fig. 1290. The stylization and details of the form are not analogous to the eagles in Jewish contexts.

more similar than the engaged Nabatean sculpture. Nevertheless, the snakes are *not* being gripped in submission; they are actively attacking under their own will.¹³⁸

By comparing the motifs that combine the symbol of the eagle with the snake, it becomes clear that our short-toed or snake-biting eagles are not paralleled directly by other motifs. It may be that, as Ma'oz suggested, they were meant to depict local wildlife.¹³⁹

Other Motifs

Several other symbols are commonly depicted along with the eagles in addition to the snakes discussed above. These include vessels, grape bunches, fish, garlands, bulls, lions and, in two cases, human figures. Most of these are common motifs in Near Eastern art, especially the lions and bulls (see further, chapter five).¹⁴⁰ One motif worth calling attention to is the miniature wreath clutched in the beak of the eagle. Although there are only two examples of this in the catalogue above (nos. 1 and 24), it is a particularly interesting feature since there are seven separate examples in which the eagles are flanking a wreath. The motif of eagles and wreaths is common in Roman art, where the eagle is typically understood to be Jupiter, and the wreath is a symbol of victory bestowed upon the monarch.¹⁴¹ This motif, however, was also common in Near Eastern art in general¹⁴² and Syrian funerary art,¹⁴³ it even made its way into Parthian art, as displayed on coins.¹⁴⁴ Although the image of the

¹³⁸ There is a relief of a winged anthropomorphic creature holding limp snakes and flanked by griffins in Nabatean context; Glueck 1965: 483-84, Pl. 167a. Whatever the connection in subject-matter, this image does not bear directly on our short-toed eagles, so far as I can tell.

¹³⁹ Ma'oz 1981: 110.

¹⁴⁰ See Avi-Yonah 1981: 60-65, and literature cited there.

¹⁴¹ Zanker 1988: 93. The image is especially popular in representations of the *corona civica*. See below, chapter three.

¹⁴² E.g. see the frieze panel from third-century Hatra, Ingholt 1954: Pl. VI:3.

¹⁴³ Cumont 1917: 39, 64-69.

¹⁴⁴ Colledge 1977: Pl 38n. See further, chapter four.

eagle with a mini-wreath in its beak is less common in Byzantine art, there are examples of the eagle raising a circular object (wreath?) in its wings.¹⁴⁵ The eagles-flanking-wreath motif is, to my knowledge, unattested in Byzantine art, however, the form with other winged-figures is common (see below, chapter five).

The frequency of the eagle-image in late ancient Jewish art suggests that it was a recognizable and commonly understood symbol among the communities in which the reliefs were employed. Since no attempt to portray the eagle realistically is evidenced, the symbol was probably identified by its notable attributes—the wings, feathers, beak—its form—the “heraldic” pose—and its placement—lintels, pediments, building facades. This sort of image recognition indicates symbolic meaning behind the image, not a literal understanding.¹⁴⁶ Since the lack of standardized representation suggests that no pattern book was employed by the artists, the various craftsmen who designed these birds must have had a physical image in mind in order to represent the symbol. This point underscores the importance of the eagle as an element of the culture’s symbolic language, recognizable to both the craftsman and patrons alike. With the goal of interpreting this icon within Jewish culture of late ancient Palestine, we will now examine the relevant literary references to eagles.

¹⁴⁵ Such representations appear on the tops of staffs as depicted on diptychs; see e.g. Grabar 1968: fig. 270.

¹⁴⁶ Elsner 1995: 191.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EAGLE INCIDENT AND HEROD THE GREAT

Although the eagle sculptures examined in the previous chapter date to no earlier than the third century C.E., and, in most cases, somewhat later, there are several instances of the eagle image relating to Judaism during the previous centuries.¹ We cannot discuss all examples here; however a close examination of one particular event may prove helpful for eagle-symbol in late ancient Judaism.

The event is recorded by Josephus in *War* 1.648-55 and again in *Antiq.* 17.151-63—the so-called “Eagle Incident.” The author placed it in 4 B.C.E., just before Herod’s death. Herod’s life-threatening illness prompted two men in Jerusalem, Judas, son of Sariphaeus,² and Matthias, son of Margalothus,³ to incite the youth to commit sedition for the sake of the Law. The two men are referred to in *War* as “scholars, exact in regards to the ancestral Law” (σοφισταί . . . δοκουντες ἀκριβοῦν τὰ πατρία [*War* 1.648]),⁴ who have the support of the

¹ In addition to those discussed here, see, for example, the supposed eagle on the *cathedra* in the synagogue at Delos (above, chapter one, p. 4, n. 10), as well as a lamp found there depicting the eagle of Zeus (Bruneau 1970: 484-85); see also Goodenough 1957 for inscriptions dedicated to *Theos Hypsistos* and decorated with eagles (although admittedly this identification is far from certain).

² As it is spelled in *Antiq.* 17.148, or possibly Sepphoraheus (with variants), as it appears in *War* 1.648.

³ As it is spelled in *Antiq.* 17.148, or possibly Margalus (with variants), as it is appears in *War* 1.648.

⁴ Thackeray 1927 translates “doctors . . . profound experts in the laws of their country.”

masses and lecture to the youth. These “scholars,” or “doctors,” are probably best identified as Pharisees.⁵ The event, as recounted in *War* 1.649-55, unfolds as follows:⁶

Hearing now that the king was gradually sinking under despondency and disease, the doctors [σοφισταί] threw out hints to their friends that this was the fitting moment to avenge God’s honour and to pull down those structures which had been erected in defiance of their fathers’ laws. It was, in fact, unlawful to place in the temple either images or busts or any representation whatsoever of a living creature; notwithstanding this, the king had erected over the great gate a golden eagle. This it was which these doctors now exhorted their disciples to cut down, telling them that even if the action proved hazardous it was a noble deed to die for the law of one’s country; for the souls of those who came to such an end attained immortality and an eternally abiding sense of felicity; it was only the ignoble, uninitiated in their philosophy, who clung in their ignorance to life and preferred death on a sick-bed to that of a hero.

While they were discoursing in this strain, a rumour spread that the king was dying; the news caused the young men to throw themselves more boldly into the enterprise. At mid-day, accordingly, when numbers of people were perambulating the temple, they let themselves down from the roof by stout cords and began chopping off the golden eagle with hatchets. The king’s captain, to whom the matter was immediately reported, hastened to the scene with a considerable force, arrested about forty of the young men and conducted them to the king. Herod first asked them whether they had dared to cut down the golden eagle; they admitted it. “Who ordered you to do so?” he continued. “The law of our fathers.” “And why so exultant, when you will shortly be put to death?” “Because, after our death, we shall enjoy greater felicity.”

The proceedings provoked the king to such fury that he forgot his disease and had himself carried to a public assembly, where at great length he denounced the men as sacrilegious persons [ἱεροσυλῶν] who, under the pretext of zeal for the law, had some more ambitious aim in view, and demanded that they should be punished for impiety [ἁσέβεις]. The people, apprehensive of wholesale prosecutions, besought him to confine the punishment to the instigators of the deed and to those who had been arrested in the perpetration of it, and to forgo his anger against the rest. The king grudgingly consented; those who had let themselves down from the roof together with the doctors he had burnt alive; the remainder of those arrested he handed over to the executioners.

In light of Herod’s political astuteness and religious sensitivity to his Jewish subjects—relative to the Roman administrators who succeeded him—it is out of character for Herod to have placed an image of “a living creature” within the Temple precinct. Scholars

⁵ Sanders 1992: 385.

⁶ Loeb translation (Thackeray 1927).

have noted this peculiar affront for some time. A.H.M. Jones suggested that this was a meaningful symbol for Herod, since the eagle was also the only figural image that appeared on any of his coins.⁷ Jones interpreted the eagle on the Temple in light of Herod's relationship with Augustus, which at the time was under some duress.⁸ The eagle would therefore be a symbol of Rome and her hegemony over Herod's kingdom.

This hypothesis has been taken up by many others since Jones,⁹ but it is an unlikely explanation for several reasons. First, it assumes that the eagle had only been recently added to the Temple. As Goodenough pointed out,¹⁰ "had put up" (κατεσκευακει) in *War* 1.650 is contrasted with the following sentence "this it was which the doctors *now* exhorted their disciples to cut down"¹¹ (‘ον δη τοτε παρηγουν ’εκκοπτειν ‘οι σοφισται [*War* 1.650]). The use of *τοτε* contrasts the event with those of the earlier period.¹² The passage is correctly translated by Thackeray, he "had erected over" indicating that it had been there for some time prior to the event.

Jones' hypothesis also assumes that the eagle would have pleased Augustus and shown loyalty. One should recall, however, that in Herod's day the eagle was a symbol of

⁷ Jones 1938: 148. On Herod's eagle coin, see below.

⁸ Ibid. assumes so based on the events surrounding the Arab monarch Syllaeus (*Antiq.* 16.287-99), though this suggestion does not take into account fully Augustus and Herod's reconciliation shortly after (*Antiq.* 16.351-55).

⁹ E.g. Richardson 1996: 18, where he argues that Herod's "attachment to Rome caused him to include, in as politically astute a way as possible, a symbol of the Roman authority." It is a valid point that Herod would have been "politically astute" to honor Rome, but from the point of view of the Jerusalem population, there was nothing "politically astute" about it (see further below). For other adherents to the "symbol of Roman authority" hypothesis, see Gutman 1989: 170 and Sanders 1992: 284. Fine 2005: 73-74 agrees that there was a Roman political connection, but, despite such an interpretation, points out that the eagle is an important symbol on Hellenistic coins (on which, see below).

¹⁰ Goodenough VIII: 123, n. 26.

¹¹ Loeb translation (Thackeray 1927), my emphasis.

¹² I thank Dr. Zlatko Pleše for assisting me with the Greek here.

Roman military—not of Rome herself.¹³ Although it was also considered an attribute of Jupiter in the Augustan period, it was not seen as a symbol of the emperor.¹⁴ Augustus’ political images only employed the eagle with the *corona civica*, i.e. as an image of Jupiter bestowing divine favor. However, even this image is more often displayed as the winged-Victory rather than the eagle of Jupiter.¹⁵ If Josephus had described the Temple eagle as clutching or standing on a wreath, one could naturally argue that it was a symbol of Rome, referring specifically to Augustus’ claim to authority (i.e. Jupiter’s consent). The literary evidence as it stands, however, does not allow for such an interpretation.

Moreover, the eagle was also an image employed readily by the Hellenistic kings, particularly the Ptolemies, as well as city-states contemporary with Herod (see below). It is unlikely that such a politically-ambiguous symbol would have had the same homage-paying effect toward Augustus. (One should contrast the eagle, for example, with the temple of Roma and Augustus at Caesarea, which had obvious political meaning.) The eagle image (as

¹³ It is unclear whether those living in the East would have differentiated between “Rome” and the “Roman military.” Perhaps the symbol may have been understood as one of Rome in general, but specifically referring to her military. In either case though, the eagle was introduced as the military standard by Marius in the second century B.C.E. See Toynbee 1973: 241. While this may have been a clearly identifiable image for those provinces under direct Roman rule, one should recall that regular Roman troops were *not* stationed in Judea during Herod’s reign. Herod had his own armies—including a royal bodyguard of four hundred Gauls (*War* 1.397), not an standard-bearing legion—which were on occasion supplemented by Roman legionaries and cohorts, sent *on loan* from Alexandria or Antioch (see e.g. *Antiq.* 452-53). It was not until after Archelaus was removed from rule in 6 C.E. that the Roman military was permanently stationed in Judea—first in the form of cohorts under the command of the prefecture in Caesarea, and then, from 70 onward, in the form of the *legio* X Fretensis under the command of the legate stationed in Jerusalem. Nowhere does Josephus indicate that the Roman military was a permanent fixture on the landscape of Judea in *Herod’s* day. (I suspect, following the advice of Dr. Ed Sanders, that this misconception comes from New Testament scholarship eager to apply the historical context of the Roman soldiers in the Passion narrative to that of the reign of the villainous Herod.) It is therefore questionable, to my mind, whether the eagle would have been a commonly understood symbol of the Roman army in the time of Herod.

¹⁴ Zanker 1988: 92-93. In 27 B.C.E., Augustus had been awarded the *corona civica* by the Senate, and the laurel—a symbol of victory and an award to the protectors of Rome—was sometimes depicted with the eagle of Jupiter (see *ibid.*), indicating divine consent. The eagle, however, was here still a symbol of Jupiter, *not* of emperor, not of the military, and not of Rome.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

we will see below) fits more comfortably into Hellenistic imagery. The proper context of Herod's eagle is better understood as part of the eclipse of the Hellenistic world, rather than steeped in Roman imperial symbolism.

Such an approach was taken by Goodenough in his treatment of the Eagle Incident. By placing the eagle in its Hellenistic context, Goodenough interpreted the image in terms of the Near Eastern sun-god.¹⁶ His theory must have been based somewhat on A.B. Cook's multivolume work on Zeus, in which the author traces the Near Eastern roots of the god-head in relation to the sun.¹⁷ Goodenough qualified his theory, stating "Yahweh had not syncretistically been identified with the pagan sun god, but had absorbed his powers and value."¹⁸ He further supposes that the majority of Jews would have found the eagle quite acceptable. In support of this supposition, he refers to some of the eagles described in the present work (see above, chapter two), noting that Jews "shortly afterwards became fond of putting up eagles on their synagogues."¹⁹ Such a direct connection between the eagle-symbol in the first century B.C.E. and those of the synagogues can no longer be substantiated since the synagogues are now dated significantly later than Goodenough could have realized. Nevertheless, his connection of Herod's eagle with the Near Eastern sun-god is worth noting.

Another interesting idea put forth by Goodenough regards the "doctors" and their students who conspired to cut the eagle down from the Temple. Goodenough, in agreement with Jones²⁰—as well as Herod (*War* 1.654)—believed the motive to be political and *not*

¹⁶ Goodenough VIII: 125.

¹⁷ Cook I: §6.

¹⁸ Goodenough VIII: 130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 125.

²⁰ Jones 1938: 148.

religious. Following Kraeling, Goodenough noted that images, in general, were only considered offensive when used for idolatrous worship.²¹ There are a few problems with assuming a political motive on behalf of the trouble-makers in Eagle Incident. First, it makes Josephus himself responsible for claiming that their motives were to uphold the Law and honor God (*War* 1.649-50; *Antiq.* 17.150-51). It is possible that Josephus simply assigned piety to the culprits' motive. Thus would be keeping with the general theme of piety versus sacrilege throughout his works. However, if we were to assume Josephus' voice is behind the attribution of piety to the motive, we would be denied any ability to use that motive as a means of deciphering the nature of the image's offense.²² Second, the notion that this was a political act presupposes that the eagle held some sort of political symbolism. The usual suspect for the eagle as a political symbol is Rome;²³ but Goodenough did not claim that this was a symbol of Rome, so his explanation for such a motive makes no sense. Third, what political ends could really have been expected? Certainly, the act stirred trouble, but this is hardly an organized revolt, and more like a high-profile protest in the form of vandalism. In

²¹ Goodenough VIII: 124, citing Kraeling in a *Harvard Theological Review* article of 1942. Kraeling, in turn, echoed the point made by Whiston in a note to *Antiq.* 17.149-54 of his 1802 edition of *Josephus: The Complete Works*: "The making of images without an intention to worship them was not unlawful to the Jews." Both Whiston and Kraeling were apparently familiar with this concept from M. Avodah Zarah 3:4. Scholars have become increasingly sensitive to this issue in the past few decades, though harangues aimed at the reluctant are still routinely issued; see a recent re-presentation of this in Fine 2005: 69-70.

²² Josephus of course was not alive during these events, so he is certainly using some source, probably Nicolaus of Damascus (on whom, see Schürer 1973: 28-32). It would be odd, though not impossible, for Nicolaus—supposedly an apologist for Herod—to describe the *sophistai* in this manner, though perhaps he was attempting to juxtapose them with Herod's piety at the end of the episode (which is almost certainly Nicolaus' voice). If we assume that the motives of the *sophistai* were political, and the words are *not* those of Josephus or his source, then the only conclusion is that the culprits are simply ardent liars. Such a conclusion would be contrary to their otherwise ideological character.

²³ We have shown above that the eagle as a Roman political symbol in Judea at this time is unlikely. It is equally unlikely that Herod was referring to the political power of the then-disbanded Ptolemaic kingdom—especially considering his problems with Cleopatra and his attempt to distance himself from his ties with Mark Antony after 30 B.C.E.

Josephus' account, the culprits appear to be aware of their actions' consequences. Given the lack of political change achieved as a result of the incident,²⁴ it seems that their motives were, as Josephus reports, based on religious zeal and not political sedition.

This argument may come under criticism for drawing too sharp a division between religion and politics in first century Judea. Nevertheless, to claim that the event was politically motivated minimizes the religious fervor behind the radical teachers and impetuous youths, both willing to risk certain death for the sake of "piety" (φιλία του 'ευσεβους [*Antiq.* 17.159]). Despite an admittedly good-faith reading, I see no reason to doubt either of the author's claims: The *sophistai*, on the one hand, were offended by the image and felt that taking it down was in keeping with their interpretation of the Law.²⁵ Herod, on the other hand, saw their act of impiety ('ασεβεις [*War.* 1.654]) as sacrilegious ('ιεροσυλουντας [*Antiq.* 17.163]). Therefore, by extension, Herod's act of initially erecting the eagle in the Temple precinct was a form of piety.

Despite Josephus' suggestions that Herod sought to be memorialized and glorified in his reconstruction of the Temple, the ruler himself claims piety as his motive. In the speech given in presentation of the construction plans to the populace, Herod says: "That the enterprise which I now propose to undertake is the most pious ['ευσεβεστατον] and beautiful one of our time I will now make clear" (*Antiq.* 15.384), and that, in erecting this "archetype of piety" (15.386), he will "by this act of piety make full return to God for the gift of this

²⁴ It is true that those who mourned the execution of the *sophistai* and the students would eventually commit open sedition (*War* 2.6-13); however this was a result of Herod's appointment of an inadequate high priest, which was itself a result of the Eagle Incident. Therefore, one cannot argue that the motive was initially to change the office of high priest.

²⁵ Presumably the second commandment, see above, chapter one. For the specific nature of their objection, see below.

kingdom” (15.388).²⁶ If we are to believe that these words were spoken in honesty—and that they, or some like them, were *actually* spoken—in what way would Herod and his subjects have interpreted the eagle as part of that message of piety? In order to answer this question, we will first consider the placement of the eagle in its immediate context, then its context within Herod’s kingdom, and finally its greater context in the Hellenistic world as a whole.

Regarding the exact placement of the eagle, Josephus is somewhat unclear. Thackeray notes that it was probably in the pediment of the Temple building proper,²⁷ however Josephus frequently refers to the Temple Mount as a whole by simply using the term *ναοῦ*. Jones, too, assumes the Temple proper, placing it over the door to the building itself.²⁸ Richardson, who recognizes markedly the complexities of Josephus’ description, takes a more nuanced approach. He suggests that the eagle was placed over the gate of Wilson’s arch, which led from the upper city to the Temple Mount.²⁹ Richardson bases this on a number of points and presumptions. First, he rules out the Huldah Gates (on the south side of the Temple Mount) and the Golden Gate (on the east side) because they had “symbolic significance for the Jews.”³⁰ Perhaps he attributes symbolic significance to the former because it led to the City of David, and the latter because it led to the Mount of Olives. In neither case, however, should we assume that such significance existed or, if it

²⁶ Loeb translation (Marcus and Wikgren 1963). I suspect that the comments before the speech (*Antiq.* 15.380-81) are those of Josephus, but that the speech itself is likely that of Nicolaus, either in the form of the original speech or rewritten in his *History*. If so, then the source—as a royal advisor, historian and speech-writer, as well as personal friend of the king—was near to Herod himself.

²⁷ Thackeray 1927: 308-09; however I should point out that most reconstructions of Herod’s Temple give it a flat roof without a pediment.

²⁸ Jones 1938: 148.

²⁹ Richardson 1996: 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

did, that it would have affected the placement of the eagle.³¹ Richardson goes on to argue that Wilson's arch is the probable location because it was the access-way for the wealthy elite. While it is true that the western hill was home to the wealthy aristocrats in the first century, this should not be taken to mean that these people would have tolerated such figural imagery any more—or any less—than other Jews.³²

Richardson further suggests that Wilson's arch was the route that Herod himself would have taken to the Temple (his palace being on the west side of the city near the modern Jaffa gate).³³ Of course, this assumes Herod visited the Temple on a regular basis. Josephus, in fact, mentions only one visit, and that is when he conquers the Temple in 37 B.C.E.³⁴ (at which time Herod's Temple had not been built!). I am not suggesting that Herod *never* visited his most expensive and elaborate building project,³⁵ but rather, when he did, he probably entered from the northwest corner where the Antonia fortress offered a segregated and elite vantage point, as well as the protection of the tower and garrison.

In the same line of reasoning, Richardson presumes Wilson's arch as a plausible location because it would have been the ceremonial entrance for distinguished visitors, like

³¹ The City of David, or the lower city, was simply the low-income housing district of first-century Jerusalem, lacking, to my knowledge, any specific reverence in Herod's day. The Mount of Olives was the prime location for viewing the city (as in *Antiq.* 7.202; 20.169; and *War* 2.262; 6.157), particularly for military strategy. While it is mentioned as the place for burning the red heifer in M. Middot 1.3, it does not, to my knowledge, assume any specific symbolism until the Christians apply to it messianic hopes.

³² One should recall the conspicuous lack of figural imagery among the art of the mansions on the western hill. See Avigad 1983.

³³ Thus Richardson probably interprets Josephus' description of the gate as leading "to the palace by a passage over the intervening ravine" (*Antiq.* 15.410).

³⁴ *War* 351-56 and *Antiq.* 14.479-86. We can probably postulate that Herod was present at the Temple for several particular events, e.g. when Aristobulus III presided as priest (*Antiq.* 15.50-52). Nevertheless, Josephus does not specifically mention Herod's presence at the Temple.

³⁵ In fact, I agree with Richardson 2004:280-81 that Herod was, in all likelihood, directly involved in the design of his buildings.

Agrippa or Augustus. While this may have been the route they took—and I agree it likely was—the suggestion is based on the assumption that the eagle is representative of Roman hegemony, paying homage to Herod’s overlords of vassalage. Naturally, one would first have to show that the eagle *was* such a symbol in first century B.C.E. Judea in order to use it as evidence for determining the location (see above).

Among his assumptions, Richardson makes a good point regarding a probable *external* location of the eagle statue. Such a location would have had “the greatest impact on the first-time visitor.”³⁶ An external location on one of the gates to the Temple Mount is in contrast to Jones and Thackeray’s suggestion that it was on the Temple proper. Now, having criticized Richardson for *his* assumptions, let us, for a moment, make one of our own. If we are to assume that the eagle was, in fact, geared toward a general audience and the “first-time visitor”—as, I agree, an external location implies—where should we expect it to be placed? Surely some first-time visitors ascended the platform via Wilson’s arch; however, as Richardson points out, this was the access-way of the wealthy, i.e. the few. Placing it in a central location would be more logical. Perhaps then Jones and Thackeray were correct, and the eagle did adorn the Temple façade.³⁷ But this would reach significantly less viewers, as women and non-Jews were forbidden from the sacred court immediately outside the Temple.³⁸ Likewise, Nicanor’s Gate, which led from the women’s court to the sacred court, may not have been easily viewable by non-Jews.³⁹ As Richardson argues, the most likely

³⁶ Richardson 1996: 17.

³⁷ Such would be in keeping with what some synagogues were doing several centuries years later (see above, chapter two).

³⁸ *Antiq.* 15.419.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 418, although there is some confusion as to which gate was Nicanor’s Gate. See Marcus and Wikgren 1983: 459, n. e.

place is one of the external gates. The gate upon which the eagle would have reached the largest number of viewers was *not* Wilson’s arch, but rather the Huldah Gates on the southern side. With its triple-doorway and broad staircase, it was capable of supporting the highest volume of traffic. What made this the “great gate” (την μεγαλην πυλην [*War* 1.655]) was not so much the size or elaborate and expensive detail (as with Nicanor’s gate⁴⁰), but rather its use as the primary thoroughfare. The fact that the Huldah Gates served as the primary entry-way is further supported by the mishnaic evidence in M. Middot 1.3 and 2.2.

Moreover, this agrees with Josephus’ account of how the youths hacked away at the eagle. First, they committed the act while “numbers of people were perambulating the Temple” (*War* 1.651), or perhaps more accurately, the courts and the entry-ways. They then “let themselves down from the roof⁴¹ by means of stout cords.” Josephus’ words—σχοινοις παχειαις καθιμσαντες—are redundant, since καθιμαω alone means “to let down by a rope.”⁴² He emphasizes “stout cords,” or “strong ropes,” perhaps to indicate the necessary tools for the logistical difficulty. Hanging by ropes would have been a particularly dangerous venture on the southern side of the Temple Mount and from the roof of the Royal Stoa. Thus Josephus’ statement in his description of the construction (*Antiq.* 15.412) is all the more revealing:

The height of the portico [i.e. the stoa] standing over it [i.e. the edge of the platform] was so very great that if anyone looked down from its rooftop, combining the two

⁴⁰ *Antiq.* 15.418 refers to Nicanor’s gate as τον μεγαν. This should not be taken as evidence for assuming that it is the same “great gate” as that of the eagle, since it is probably only referred to as “great” compared to the triple gateways (τριστοιχους πυλωνας) described in the previous sentence.

⁴¹ Perhaps the roof of the Royal Stoa (?).

⁴² Liddell and Scott 1889: 391. Cf. *War* 1.655, where it is employed without an indirect object of means.

elevations, he would become dizzy and his vision would be unable to reach the end of so measureless a depth.⁴³

It is therefore most likely, in my opinion, that the golden eagle was placed somewhere over the entrance of the Huldah Gates on the southern side of the Temple Mount, where the most visitors would have had the opportunity to view the image.

Regardless of the exact location, though, the hypothesis that Herod wished to make the eagle a prominent feature in the Temple precinct is related to his intended audience. I suggest that the eagle was primarily geared toward the *non*-Jewish visitors to the Temple. There can be little doubt that non-Jews attended and even participated in worship at the Jerusalem Temple.⁴⁴ The most obvious evidence is in the low-partition which encircled the Temple courts, separating the general plaza from the more sacred space of Israel, i.e. a *temenos* (one of several in the precinct). Josephus describes it as “a stone balustrade with an inscription prohibiting the entrance of a foreigner under threat of the penalty of death” (*Antiq.* 15.417).⁴⁵ The partition is referred to as a *soreg* in mMidd. 2.3. The authenticity of these claims have been substantiated by the discovery of several of the inscriptions themselves.⁴⁶ The spatial division implies that there were non-Jews frequenting the Temple. Since the actual act of sacrifice was, of course, administered by the priests, there would have been no logistical reason for worshippers—foreign or domestic—to proceed beyond the *soreg*. In addition, Josephus mentions numerous occasions where foreign rulers or

⁴³ Loeb translation (Marcus and Wikgren 1963). The total depth he refers to is actually to the bottom of the ravine, but his point regarding the height from the foot of the retaining wall to the roof of the stoa is well-made.

⁴⁴ Schürer 1979: II, 309-13.

⁴⁵ The description is paralleled in *War* 5.194.

⁴⁶ Of the three discovered, the only complete one was found by Clermont-Ganneau in 1872. It is now in Istanbul. Another was published by Bickerman in 1946. See Marcus and Wikgren 1963: 458, n. d, and literature cited there.

dignitaries sacrificed at the Temple.⁴⁷ The most well-known was the daily sacrifice offered and paid for by the Roman emperor—a precedent set by Darius, Ptolemy III, and Antiochus III⁴⁸—the cessation of which was, according to Josephus, the event to spark the revolt in 66 C.E. (*War* 2.409).

Additionally, there is good reason to suspect that it was Herod's intent that non-Jews visit the Temple on a regular basis. First, Herod spent a good deal of time and money catering to his non-Jewish subjects.⁴⁹ Almost all the cities he re-founded and built-up were in the non-Jewish regions of his kingdom; the most impressive and well-known projects included Caesarea-Maritima, Sebaste, and Panias.⁵⁰ In addition, Herod maintained important relations with non-Jewish peoples *outside* of his kingdom by contributing money for various projects.⁵¹ A statue base bearing Herod's name, now lost, was found in the vicinity of Si'a, indicating that the monarch may have had something to do with the building of the Temple of Ba'al Shamin there. In addition, he dedicated all sorts of gymnasia, halls, porticoes, temples, aqueducts, theaters, baths, fountains, and colonnades to foreign cities all along the Levantine coast, in Asia Minor, and throughout Greece and the islands (*War* 1. 422-25; *Antiq.* 16.146-49). He even gave an endowment for the Olympic games (1.426-27; *Antiq.* 16.149) and helped with tax relief in cities of Asia Minor (*War* 1.428).

⁴⁷ For a complete discussion, see Schürer 1979: II, 310.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Richardson 2004: 229.

⁵⁰ For a complete list of all Herod's buildings, see Richardson 1996: 197-202 (however, use caution as there are several errors in citations of Josephus).

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 201-02; and *idem* 2004: 230.

Josephus attributes these lavish gifts to Herod's desire for external security, i.e. foreign military support "against his own subjects" (*Antiq.* 15.327).⁵² However, despite Josephus' claim, there is no evidence that Herod ever used external security against his own people, with the exception of Rome.⁵³ It is unlikely that Herod would have expected military support from any of the cities or islands to whom he donated. As the parallel account of Herod's foreign projects in *War* suggests, he may have even *alienated* foreign rulers—i.e. those responsible for military deployment—by arousing "jealousy or suspicion . . . in conferring upon states greater benefits than they received from their own masters" (*War* 1.428).

In his own psycho-analysis of Herod, Josephus attributes his foreign gifts to personal prestige and the development of an international reputation (*Antiq.* 16.153).⁵⁴ While this may be a more logical motive—based on our knowledge of the ruler, which comes entirely from Josephus—the historian states explicitly that it is his *own* interpretation in assessing the figure nearly a century after his death (*Antiq.* 16.153, 159).⁵⁵ Although vanity and personal hubris are not unlikely, it is equally possible, to my mind, that the monarch sought to

⁵² I assume this is Josephus himself speaking here because he accuses Herod of straying from the nation's customs (*Antiq.* 15.328), an accusation which would be out of character for the traits typically assigned to Nicolaus. Cf. Toher 2003: 432.

⁵³ The one time he needed help from a neighboring kingdom, in 40 B.C.E., he was turned away from the first foreign nation from whom he sought help, Nabatea, and was forced to go to Mark Antony (*War* 1.274-81; *Antiq.* 14.370-78).

⁵⁴ Richardson 1996: 195.

⁵⁵ Given the facts that (1) Josephus is so explicit in stating that this is his personal opinion, and (2) that such an explanation does not appear in the parallel account in *War* 1.422-28, I suspect this is Josephus himself speaking, and *not* Nicolaus. The account in *War* is, on the other hand, a self contained unit (1.401-30) that praises Herod and his building projects consistently; it was probably lifted directly from Nicolaus' works. See further Toher 2003, and literature cited there.

promote the prestige of his kingdom, as well as himself. Good relations with foreign districts in the eastern Mediterranean was, I believe, part of his overall economic policy.

In addition to the projects of infrastructure and economic development undertaken throughout his kingdom,⁵⁶ Herod seems to have promoted similar policies abroad. At Rhodes, for example, Herod made contributions for shipbuilding (*War* 1.424) and at Tyre and Berytus he built stoas and agoras (*War* 1.422).⁵⁷ These projects helped forge economic ties, which were no doubt important in promoting the import and export of goods to and from Judea.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the magnitude of Herod's ostentatious constructions *within* his kingdom were probably meant to impress those who passed through the region—almost like tourist-attractions⁵⁹—as he himself argues in a speech to the populace:

In the most difficult situations I have not been unmindful of the things that might benefit you in your need, nor have I in my building been more intent upon my own invulnerability than upon that of all of you, and I think I have, by the will of God, brought the Jewish nations to such a state of prosperity as it has never known before. Now as for the various buildings which we have erected in our country and in the cities of our land and in those of acquired territories, with which, as the most

⁵⁶ Richardson 1996: 188-89. These projects included the well-known harbor at Caesarea Maritima, warehouses and industrial facilities at Sebaste, Agrippias, Antipatris, and Phaselis, and roads to encourage trade. While all of these must have cost significant amounts of capital to build, the use of all of them likely generated a handsome revenue, and the construction would have lowered unemployment significantly. See Jones 1938: 86, who attributes the tax innovations to Egyptian, i.e. Ptolemaic, influence. Herod also seems to have been involved in the cultivation and export of balsam and date-palm cultivation in the Dead Sea region; see *ibid.*, and Richardson 1996: 188. See also Sanders 1992: 161-65 for important remarks on taxation and the economy under Herod, as well as the literature cited there by Appelbaum; and Rajak 2002: 123.

⁵⁷ Richardson 1996: 189.

⁵⁸ Rajak 2002: 123, and literature cited there.

⁵⁹ Scholars often cite Herod's secluded winter palaces in the Judean desert—particularly Masada, Jericho, and Herodium—as representative of his extraordinary feats of architectural ingenuity. His urban constructions, however, probably would have garnered more attention in the first century. This bias in scholarship is due in part to the state-of-preservation at these sites, in contrast to the impressive building projects at Sebaste, Caesarea Maritima, and, of course, Jerusalem.

beautiful adornment, we have embellished our nation, it seems to me quite needless to speak of them to you” (*Antiq.* 15.383-83).⁶⁰

Herod is here portrayed as an administrator who is fully aware of the economic benefits of his projects to both the national prestige and the domestic economy. The construction of the Jerusalem Temple embodied both these concerns, in addition to the obvious religious message. Herod must have known that the Temple would be a focal point in the country for both the Judean and the foreigner. Its prestige would serve as the voice of the Jewish nation abroad, and its beauty would continue to be a point of pride for centuries to come. Hence the later rabbinic saying: “Whoever has not seen Herod’s Temple has never seen a beautiful thing” [B. Baba Batra 4a].⁶¹

If, therefore, Herod wanted the Temple to speak to non-Jews, in what way was the golden eagle—adorning the Temple precinct in a prominent location—part of his message? How would non-Jews have interpreted this symbol in Herod’s day? Before considering the specific meaning of the eagle to non-Jews, it will be useful to examine another use of the eagle by Herod—on one of his coins.

Of the half-dozen or so images portrayed on the coins of Herod the Great,⁶² the eagle is the only “living creature.”⁶³ The bronze eagle-coin probably would have circulated widely

⁶⁰ Loeb translation (Marcus and Wikgren 1963). It is unclear whether or not the speech goes back to Herod. The overall message—solidarity with the Jerusalem populace—suggests Nicolaus, and therefore probably similar to an original speech given by Herod, if not the speech itself. However, we cannot be certain.

⁶¹ See also B. Sukkah 51b.

⁶² Other images include the tripod and apex, winged caduceus, laurel branch, a shield, fruit, pomegranate (or poppy-head), various pieces of Temple furniture, the diadem, wreath, palm branch, vine, cornucopia, and the anchor. For discussion, see Meshorer 1982: 19-28.

⁶³ Scholarship has noted this eagle-coin of Herod since the mid-nineteenth century. Madden 1864: 112-13 suggested that it was not a coin of Herod the Great, but rather Herod of Chalcis. This was based on an unfounded assumption that a coin with a figural image on it would not have been minted in a Jewish kingdom.

in Herod's kingdom.⁶⁴ It depicts on the reverse an eagle, in a three-quarter turn, with wings folded. The obverse shows a single cornucopia with a Greek inscription ΒΑCΙΑ ΗΡΩΔ, or some variant.⁶⁵ It is unclear when these coins were issued. Since they do not have a date, Meshorer places them in his second group of Herodian coins, minted in Jerusalem after 37 B.C.E.,⁶⁶ however that hardly narrows down the date since Herod ruled until his death in 4 B.C.E. Jones, who connected the issuance of the eagle-coin with the placement of the golden eagle on the Temple, suggested that it was issued toward the end of Herod's life and both were meant as political gestures to Rome.⁶⁷ However, as discussed above, there is no reason to suspect that the eagle was placed in the Temple so late in Herod's reign.

Along the same lines, some scholars have suggested that the eagle-coin was actually meant to depict the golden eagle on the Temple.⁶⁸ Those who wish to claim that both the eagle-coin and golden eagle are representative of Rome,⁶⁹ run into a contradiction. If the eagle on the Temple were representative of Rome, then it would have been depicted in the typical Roman style with wings spread; the eagle-coin, on the other hand, depicts the bird with wings folded, in Hellenistic style, reminiscent of the Ptolemaic coin (see below).⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the golden eagle may have been represented in partial profile with folded

⁶⁴ Meshorer 2001: 69.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.* for the most recent catalogue publication, to my knowledge, of the coin.

⁶⁶ Meshorer 1982: 20.

⁶⁷ Jones 1938: 148.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Reifenberg 1947: 18; Meyshan 1959: 119; Meshorer 1982: 29 (cf. Meshorer 2001: 67-69); Richardson 1996: 213.

⁶⁹ Such as Jones 1938: 148; Meshorer 2001: 67; and Richardson 1996: 213.

⁷⁰ Both Meshorer (1982: 29 n. 76) and Richardson (1996: 213, 214 n. 87) realize this but still make the argument! Richardson further suggests (2004: 240) that the golden eagle on the Temple was a low relief sculpture covered with gold leaf, however he cites no comparanda to substantiate the hypothesis.

wings, but there is no way for us to know. Instead of making the conjectural leap of connecting explicitly the two images, it is more prudent—and, in my opinion, more likely—that they were simply two symbols with the same meaning, instead of one referring to the other.

Several proposals have been put forth in the interpretation of the eagle-coin. Kanael, who believed the coin was minted in 37 B.C.E., suggested that the eagle was meant to symbolize Victory,⁷¹ just as Augustus had used it on his coins. Without the wreath bestowing divine consent, though, the connection between the eagle and Victory is mere speculation. Meyshan suggested that the eagle, both on the coin and the Temple, was meant as an affront to the Pharisees.⁷² Not only does his argument oversimplify the situation and make unfounded assumptions regarding the Pharisees, but it also assumes a political error of such magnitude on Herod's behalf as to make the notion highly unlikely.

In addition to connecting the eagle with the Temple and Rome, Meshorer also attributes a Jewish significance to the eagle-coin. He sees it as the Jewish symbol of power and government, referencing the Holy Animals—*Hayyot ha-Qodesh*—of Ezekiel 1:10.⁷³ Although we will return to this in the next two chapters, suffice it to say for now that it is an unlikely connection because it would require singling out one image from the literary reference, leaving unexplained the absence of the other images.

Several of Herod's issues depict symbols borrowed from Hasmonean coins. The Temple furniture, wreath, pomegranate/poppy head and double cornucopia were all used by

⁷¹ Kanael 1952: 263-64.

⁷² Meyshan 1959: 119.

⁷³ Meshorer 1982: 29.

the dynasty Herod replaced.⁷⁴ Despite Herod's personal and political conflicts with the Hasmonean family, it should not surprise us that he chose to make such a symbolic connection. After all, the Hasmoneans were, in the eyes of the populace, the legitimate rulers.

Herod's inclination toward adopting imagery precedent, however, was not limited to the Hasmoneans. The eagle-coin was in fact depicted in the same style as the Ptolemaic eagle that had been employed in Hellenistic coinage since the late fourth century.⁷⁵ Perhaps the Hellenizing tendencies of the Hasmonean kings—in spite of their initial anti-Greek policy—were never strong enough to allow for the eagle to make its way onto their coinage. In contrast, Herod, who should be seen within the same context of the Hellenistic East, was very much a monarch of his time. He therefore used familiar imagery from Ptolemaic coinage, as did other kingdoms and cities around him. P. Fleischer has noted the lack of “dynastic isolation” among the Hellenistic kingdoms, particularly concerning imagery.⁷⁶ So, for example, between 44 and 30 B.C.E., Ascalon minted a series of coins with the same style of eagle on the reverse. The obverse of several coins depicted Ptolemy XV, while others depicted an unidentified bearded male.⁷⁷ Likewise, nearly every Nabatean king since Obodas II (reigned 62-60 B.C.E.) minted multiple issues bearing Hellenistic-style eagles on the reverse.⁷⁸ Both of these areas bordered Herod's kingdom and were circulating eagle-coinage during his reign.

⁷⁴ Idem 2001: 33-40.

⁷⁵ Poole 1963: xvii.

⁷⁶ Fleischer 1996: 39.

⁷⁷ Hill 1965: 106-08.

⁷⁸ Meshorer 1975.

According to Meshorer,⁷⁹ the Nabatean coin imagery was modeled after the Tyrian sheqel, which similarly displayed the Hellenistic eagle. The Tyrian sheqel and half-sheqel, was the standard silver coinage which was used in Judea during Herod's reign.⁸⁰ While the coin was issued continuously from 126/125 B.C.E. to 65/66 C.E., those issued before 19 B.C.E. are distinctly higher quality and are found more readily in the district surrounding Tyre; those minted after 19 are more common in Palestine.⁸¹ Meshorer suggests that the Tyrian sheqel stopped being minted in 19 as a result of the influx of the Roman tetradrachma. However, because the Tyrian sheqel was necessary for the Temple tax, Herod was given special permission to begin minting a silver sheqel and half-sheqel bearing the mark of Tyre, but also the monogram "KP," standing for *Κοσμος* or *Κρατος Ρωμαίων*.⁸² This is a persuasive argument, particularly since it would explain the end of the issue in 65/66 C.E., coinciding with the start of the revolt.⁸³ But whether or not one accepts Meshorer's explanation for the Tyrian sheqel, it is clear that such a Hellenistic-style eagle-coin circulated widely in first-century Judea.⁸⁴

The numismatic evidence from Herod's reign makes two important points. First, Jews of the period were quite familiar with the image of the eagle. It is unlikely that they

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Idem 1982: 6. According to B. Qiddushin 13a and B. Bekorot, it was the only silver coinage accepted for the Temple tax.

⁸¹ Ibid. 6-7.

⁸² Ibid. 8-9.

⁸³ In addition, it explains an otherwise enigmatic reference from T. Ketubot 13.20: "Silver, wherever mentioned in this place [the Pentateuch] is Tyrian silver. Which Tyrian silver? This is Jerusalemite." See Ibid. 8-9.

⁸⁴ In contrast, Herod Agrippa I minted a coin at Caesarea Maritima with a Roman-style eagle—wings spread, head to side, wreath in beak—with the image of Gaius on the obverse (Hill 1965: 238). He also minted coins with images of family members and gods.

were offended by this symbol on coins since it was an unavoidable image they encountered in daily life; and in the case of the Tyrian sheqel, it was *necessary* for Temple practices. Second, Herod employed the eagle-symbol on his coins in keeping with the standard practice of his day. As with the other symbols he used, it helped make a connection with the dynasties that came before him. Neighboring kingdoms and cities employed the same images because they were an effective means of transmitting a similar meaning.⁸⁵ But because the eagle-coin hearkened back to the Ptolemaic dynasty, the shared Hellenistic message among those who used eagle-coin was likely one of economic stability. It would be too speculative, in my view, to propose any meaning within the eagle-coins specific to Herod or his subjects. Nevertheless, Herod's eagle-coin and the Tyrian sheqel are an important markers of the connection between Jews and their Hellenistic surroundings.

We come now to the third question posed above: How was the eagle understood elsewhere in the Hellenistic world? This is a large topic that cannot be dealt with in full here. The numerous examples of eagle statuary throughout the East place the eagle in primarily temple-cult settings, where the symbol is typically associated with either the godhead or the solar deity. In Syria and Nabatea, the god Ba'al Shamin is frequently depicted as an eagle. For example at Jebel Druze, a panel depicts Ba'al Shamin in the form of an eagle presiding over anthropomorphic images of Helios and Luna/Selene.⁸⁶ In the first half of the first century C.E., the eagle is again seen as Ba'al Shamin, as portrayed on the lintel of his temple at Palmyra.⁸⁷ Likewise, at Kh. et-Tannur, where the godhead was identified as Zeus-Hadad,

⁸⁵ Fleischer 1996: 39.

⁸⁶ Glueck 1965: 472.

⁸⁷ Drijvers 1976: 28, Pl. XXXII.

the image depicted is an eagle.⁸⁸ Although the identity of the god is sometimes ambiguous, as on a panel from Baalbek,⁸⁹ others are present quite explicitly, as is the case when the eagle is combined with a human figure to represent Ganymede.⁹⁰ Such motifs indicate both the godhead—Zeus—as well as the human relationship to him.

But the eagle is also identified with the solar god.⁹¹ At Baalbek, the eagle had been associated early on with the god, Hadad—a Near Eastern god whose attribute is more often the bull⁹²—but during the third century B.C.E. the site became identified with Helios, hence the renaming of the city, Heliopolis.⁹³ The eagle as the image of Helios is also evident at Emessa, where a bronze statuette depicts a three-dimensional Hellenistic-style eagle bearing the name “Helios.”⁹⁴

One final example from Hellenistic Palestine is worth noting. It comes from ‘Iraq al-Amir, where the impressive early second century B.C.E. palace of Hyrcanus, the Qasr el-Abd, once depicted several large eagles in engaged relief.⁹⁵ Here, the eagles have been interpreted as referring to a sense of royalty by depicting an attribute of Zeus.⁹⁶ Larché attributes this to a purposeful link with, not only the more Greek aspects of the Hellenistic world, but

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Jidejian 1975: Fig. 268. For stylistic comparison, see above, chapter two.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Fig. 289.

⁹¹ Goodenough VIII: 125-30, who connected the Jewish eagle in both the Temple and in later synagogues to the solar deity.

⁹² Farbridge 1970: 63.

⁹³ Cook 1914: I, 550.

⁹⁴ Ibid. I, 603-04.

⁹⁵ Larché 1991: 243-51.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 250.

specifically the Ptolemaic kingdom,⁹⁷ who employed the eagle as an identifying badge early on.⁹⁸

The extensive artistic evidence from the Hellenistic East indicates that in first century the eagle was generally understood as either an attribute or manifestation of the godhead, with some aspects of the solar deity. Was this then the way in which Herod meant the golden eagle on the Jerusalem Temple to be understood? If his intent was that the Temple serve as a voice to the Hellenistic world, then it seems that it would have been unavoidable. Herod, himself the product of Hellenistic culture,⁹⁹ no doubt knew the symbolism of the eagle. It is therefore likely that Herod placed the eagle on the Temple in order to identify the Jewish deity as a godhead, or in the case of the God of Israel, *the* godhead. I do not suggest that the eagle was meant to depict Yahweh himself, but rather simply associate the deity with the Hellenistic godhead, in a somewhat syncretistic manner, in order to help explain the singularity of the Jewish God to a non-Jewish audience.¹⁰⁰

This should not be all that surprising to us. In fact, it fits quite well with the literary evidence. First, concerning the motive of the *sophistai*, we argued above that, despite Herod's suspicions, they probably were acting in the name of piety. Scholars have long pointed out that it was not necessarily images that Jews found offensive, but rather images which had the potential to be used for idolatrous purposes.¹⁰¹ The *sophistai* would have been

⁹⁷ Ibid. 251.

⁹⁸ Poole 1963: xvii.

⁹⁹ Richardson 2004: 277 discusses how Herod showed his Hellenistic influence in his architecture.

¹⁰⁰ Grant 1971: 202-08 makes a similar argument about the eagle symbolizing the "might of the God who resided therein."

¹⁰¹ See above, n. 19.

aware that in Solomon's Temple, figural imagery was common in the form of *cherubim* (1 Kings 6:23-26; 7:29, 36).¹⁰² The golden eagle was an offence to them, not because it represented any particular political agenda, but rather because it edged too closely to idolatry. Although they probably recognized that the eagle was not meant to represent Yahweh himself—an offence which surely would have brought this protest out as soon as the eagle was presented¹⁰³—the sculpture suggested a similarity between the Jewish God and the Near Eastern godhead, introducing foreign worship within the Temple precinct. From Herod's viewpoint, the eagle was part of the overall Temple construction which he had set up as a pious offering. To tear it down was an act of sacrilege. Moreover, as Herod argues in *Antiq.* 17.163, the act was an outright insult to him. Here, at the end of his life, he was witnessing his legacies being torn down—both in the literal sense, as his pious and most revered construction was vandalized, and in the metaphorical sense, as the cultural and economic ties he built with the surrounding peoples were crushed by those politically radical and religiously zealous subjects whom he could never please.

Goodenough argued that at least a majority of Jews—both in Herod's day and later—would have found the eagle-symbol an acceptable image on the Temple and, later, in synagogues.¹⁰⁴ This seems all the more likely when one considers that it was one of the few figural symbols with which the first century Jews of Jerusalem were familiar, and that they tolerated a sculptural image of this symbol on the Temple for at least a short while.

¹⁰² A point with which Josephus seems to struggle. See *Antiq.* 7.72-73; Marcus 1934: 255 n. c.

¹⁰³ Cf. *War* 2.184-203.

¹⁰⁴ Goodenough VIII: 124.

Having briefly considered how Jews of the Hellenistic and Herodian periods understood the eagle-symbol, we will now examine how Jews in later centuries saw the image. In our next chapter, we will therefore first consider Jewish literature.

CHAPTER FOUR:

EAGLES IN JEWISH LITERATURE

As discussed above, we cannot presume that Jews of the periods associated with our archaeological evidence were familiar with Josephus' writings. While such an early text did of course persist through those centuries, it was not within Jewish circles that Josephus circulated, but rather Christian. This should not be surprising since Josephus works were early-on rendered into Greek for a non-Jewish audience, and served as an important testament to Jesus' environment. In light of the account's inability to shed light on the symbolic value of the eagle in the Byzantine period, it behooves us to examine Jewish literature that might have been known to the associated Jewish communities.

By placing the eagle-symbol within its appropriate literary context we will begin to decipher its cultural meaning.¹ It is worth emphasizing here that we are not *necessarily* looking for a specific text that reads, "The eagle is the symbol of . . ."—such a text does not exist. Instead, this chapter is concerned with the following: (1) the conceptualization of the eagle in terms of its key attributes; (2) the metaphorical use of the eagle; (3) the sorts of discussions and narratives in which the eagle appears, i.e. the literary context; and (4) the cultural context of the eagle symbol. We are concerned with both the *Sitz im Leben* of the

¹ In a sense, this follows the line-of-reasoning described by Z. Weiss in his interpretation of the Sepphoris mosaic: "If one can prove that a specific literary tradition appears prominently in the motifs of the mosaic, it may be possible to shed light on other issues which are not depicted directly in the mosaic but are extensively discussed in the literary sources. This would enhance our understanding of the motifs in this floor and help articulate the ideological message hidden in the colorful stone of the mosaic," Weiss 2000: 24. As opposed to Weiss, though, we are not here attempting a programmatic reading of the eagle imagery. We are simply establishing the literary symbolic framework.

later literature, especially tannaitic and amoraic rabbinic literature, which employs eagle imagery, as well as the interpretations of the earlier literature which may have impacted the symbolic language of Palestinian Jews. For this reason, literature that is dated early can still be quite relevant if we suppose that it continued to circulate among Jewish communities. There can hardly be any doubt that this is the case for biblical literature; it is also likely the Palestinian Jewish communities were familiar with some pseudepigraphic and mystical texts, as well.² As a result, the exact dating of the texts is less relevant, so long as they predate the period of the latest archaeological evidence (i.e. ca. sixth century).

Although there is much debate over the details, there is little doubt that the seventh century was marked by cultural flux throughout the eastern Mediterranean as a result of the political shifts. We should not assume that the conception of symbolic images prior to the seventh century would necessarily continue unabated after this period. In addition, the majority of rabbinic material after the seventh century came from the Babylonian schools, not Palestine. Therefore, rabbinic literature that post-dates the seventh century will be least useful for our purposes. The authors of these works were displaced from the artwork under consideration both temporally and geographically.

One should also bear in mind that the authors of the post-seventh century documents may well have been influenced by exactly those artistic representations in question. Recent scholarship has become increasingly aware of the rabbis' proclivity to adapt to their cultural context—and not, in the case of their immediate Jewish community, vice-versa. S. Miller

² See Charlesworth 1983: xxi-xxxiv for overview of relevant Pseudepigrapha, and Alexander 1983: 229-39 for a brief overview of Hekhalot literature. I do not incorporate those works from the Qumran library that are not attested elsewhere or are otherwise deemed specifically sectarian. While they may have impacted the symbolic language of Jews outside of the community, they are too displaced temporally for us to consider their impact on Jews of late antiquity.

has argued convincingly that the rabbis in fact developed midrash that could quite easily engage the iconography in an inclusive manner.³ It is reasonable to suppose therefore that their choices in midrashic topics and their subsequent interpretations were impacted a great deal by the images they encountered in the synagogue, i.e. a way of incorporating the images into midrash as a matter of flexibility.⁴ As a result, later texts would only transmit the manner in which the rabbis dealt with the images after the fact; they would *not* help to explain how the artists and patrons who were prompted to display the image understood the symbols. For this reason, we will neglect post-seventh century Jewish literature and find the tannaitic and Palestinian amoraic evidence more helpful.

We should however first turn to the Hebrew Scriptures. There can be little doubt that the authors of the tannaitic and amoraic literature were thoroughly familiar with the Bible, particularly the Law of Moses. While the rabbinic sages are of course not directly related to the original authors, or even the redactors, of the Hebrew Bible, their vocabulary of symbolism was in part shaped by scriptural studies. The study of Torah appears to be sort of

³ Miller 2004. Cf. Eliav 1998, who proposes that the rabbinic accommodation of *statuary* in particular was instead a matter pertaining to *Avodah Zarah*, i.e. idol worship. The general rabbinic attitude toward statuary, according to Eliav, would have been tolerant, so long as it was understood that the statues were not meant for worship. Although I agree with Eliav's thesis, this is of course still a form of accommodation. That is to say, the notion that the rabbis were tolerant or even comfortable with statuary does not indicate that they would have ever felt a *need* for such images or have fully condoned their employment in Jewish communities. Nevertheless, the rabbis—as represented in their literature, and very generally speaking—became increasingly tolerant, though not necessarily supportive, of images from the second to seventh centuries, presumably in response to the changes in cultural trends.

⁴ Belting 1994: 3 makes a similar argument regarding Christian doctrine: “[Theology] supplied the unifying formulas for an otherwise heterogenous [sic], undisciplined use of images. When it achieved its aim and defined a tradition [based on the imagery], the polemical dust settled to leave a compromise masquerading as pure doctrine, in which everything appeared, retrospectively, clear and simple.” In this line of reasoning, later midrash may have been retrospectively imposing theology upon images, when in fact it was *compromising* in order to incorporate such images. It is the instinct of many rabbinic scholars to read midrash in the artistic imagery without a concern for who affected whom. See for example Weiss 2000.

prerequisite for the aspiring *talmidim*. Indeed, a familiarity with both the Prophets and Writings is also assumed throughout rabbinic literature.

Having said this, we must resist the temptation to over-interpret the relevant biblical passages on their own. The biblical writers were displaced from the rabbinic writers by at least three centuries, and, for the time period of this study, as much as eight. It would be unwise to assume that the authorial intent of the biblical symbolism was known to the rabbinic writers. Nevertheless, the explicit attributes of biblical symbols—like the eagle’s speed or the lion’s strength—were certainly familiar to the tannaim and amoraim. Therefore, we will consider some occurrences of the “eagle” in biblical literature, as well as rabbinic, to help decipher how this symbol was understood in ancient Judaism.

The term נשר (and its various forms) appears a total of thirty times in the Hebrew Bible.⁵ The eagle is typically used in Scripture in at least one of five ways: (a) relating to food laws, (b) as a metaphor for speed, (c) as a metaphor for flight, (d) as a metaphor for youthful strength, or (e) as an arbiter of some sort of supernatural power. The pentateuchal passages concerning purity and dietary laws,⁶ are not all that helpful for our purposes. There

⁵ See Lisowsky 2000. It should be noted that biblical references to נשר usually should be translated “eagle,” however in some cases has been translated (probably correctly) as “vulture.” (For the modern confusion with these terms, see below, chapter three.) Interestingly, it seems that while the various authors attributed different characteristics to these birds, they referred to them by the same term. For example, Prov. 30:17 refers to a *nesher*, characterizing it as one who greedily devours, and Mic. 1:16 refers to its bald-headedness. These traits should be more properly understood as belonging to what we would consider a vulture. More often, however, the *nesher* is associated with the strength of its wings, height and speed of its flight, and tendency to molt (Ps. 103:19), traits which most identify with the eagle. See also Brown 1978: 676-77, who suggests that while either translation is acceptable. Mic. 1:16 is the only compelling reference to a vulture. Cf. Holladay 1988: 249. As for the rabbinic sources, Jastrow 1996: 942, makes no mention of the definition “vulture” for *nesher*, preferring the translation “eagle”; so also Sokoloff 1990: 362. In addition, I came across no rabbinic passages that necessarily called for the translation “vulture.” As an interesting side-note, Jastrow points out that “*Nishra*” was an “Arabian deity,” citing B Avodah Zarah 11b. Cf. Sokoloff, who makes no mention of this translation.

⁶ Lev. 11:13, 18; Deut. 14:12, 17.

is no *obvious* symbolic meaning of the eagle behind the ordinances of *kashrut*.⁷ Metaphors for speed, flight, and youthful strength are positive attributes of a powerful entity, and the literary contexts seem to support this. Often one or more of these metaphors are combined with (e) to demonstrate the power of God. To illustrate this, let us examine some of these occurrences of *nesher* in Hebrew Scripture. In cases where we have specific references to these passages in rabbinic material, we will examine those, as well.⁸ An examination of the scriptural passage alongside its rabbinic reference may help us to understand the contemporary conception of the image. Once we have exhausted our examination of scriptural passages referring to eagles and cited by rabbis, we will then turn to the non-biblical references to the eagle in rabbinic literature.

The best-known reference to eagles in the Hebrew Bible is probably Ex. 19:4. In this passage, God says to Moses on Mt. Sinai, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on the wings of eagles and brought you to me.”⁹ The frequency of this passage, especially in the later aggadic midrashim, indicates that it was probably well-known by both the scholars and laymen in Jewish circles of late antiquity. The passage shows how eagles were an instrument of God’s salvific power in the exodus from Egypt.

⁷ There may be have been some symbolic reason for the eagle as a forbidden food, but the scriptural passages do not explicitly indicate so, nor do the rabbis discuss this in the tannaitic or amoraic literature.

⁸ As discussed above, we will deal only with rabbinic literature dated to before the seventh century. Although there are earlier elements to post-seventh century works, especially in the particularly helpful aggadic midrashim, the difficulties in dating such material preclude its use here. All non-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic primary sources were accessed via the Bar Ilan Respona Project’s *Global Jewish Database*, 11th edition. Translations from rabbinic materials are, unless otherwise noted, my own.

⁹ I have slightly modified the JPS translation here, emphasizing the plural “eagles” in order to highlight their role as *instruments* of God and *not* a theophoric version of God himself (at least, the text does not explicitly imply so). All biblical translations are that of the 2003 edition of JPS—*The Jewish Publication Society Hebrew-English Tanakh*—unless otherwise noted.

Although the passage is referred to often in the late materials¹⁰ there are no references to it in the Mishnah, Tosefta, or either of the Talmudim. In the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael (Bo’ and Yitro),¹¹ the two references do not explicitly attribute any additional symbolic meaning to the eagles. The first reference (Bo 14) has to do with the location of the site of Sukkot—one of the Israelites’ encampments—and when exactly they encamped there, i.e. if it was precisely when they were born “on the wings of eagles.” The second reference simply suggests that the passage refers to the day when Rameses had a moment of “lightness.” The passages attribute no special power to the eagles, and they even avoid the obvious interpretation that they are instruments of God’s salvific power. This should not entirely surprise us, however, since the Mekhilta is primarily concerned with halakhic midrash.

Another reference to Ex. 19:4 comes from the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai¹² on *pereq* 19:

“I bore you on the wings of eagles” (Ex. 19:4). R. Eliezer [says] this is the day of Mt. Sinai. “And I brought you to me” (Ex. 19:4). This is the house of the worlds [?]. R. Eliezer, son of R. Yose the Galilean, says [as it is written] “When the eagle rouses his nestlings” (Deut. 32:11). The way of the eagle is to enjoin his wings over his young so that they will not be agitated. So also, when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, gave the Law to Israel, he did not appear to them from one direction, but from four directions; as it is said, “And the Lord came from Sinai,” and so forth (Deut. 33:2). Which are the four directions? “And God will come from Teman” (Hab. 3:3).

¹⁰ A total of twenty-seven times in the aggadic midrashim, most of which post-date the amoraic period.

¹¹ The Mekhilta is dated to sometime after the time of Judah ha-Nasi, giving it a *terminus post quem* of the third century. See Moore 1960: I, 136. As with other halakhic midrashim, it is considered tannaitic; see Sanders 1977: 59-60.

¹² The date of the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai is problematic. Cited by medieval authors, this Mekhilta of the school of Akiba comes down to us through the Midrash ha-Gadol—a Yemenite collection of Pentateuchal midrashim—as well as some scattered fragments from the Cairo Geniza, published in 1905. See Hoffman 1905. It has been dated to as early as the third century, partially because none of the rabbis named post-date the time of Judah ha-Nasi. See Moore 1960: I, 138-40 and Strack 1965: 207, and the literature cited there. Most scholars now consider it to be later, though not irrelevant for the tannaitic period; see Sanders 1977: 59-60.

And so also, “On the wings of eagles” – the way of the bird is to place his young between his knees so that he gives a warning, on account of those who are stronger than him. But the eagle that does not give warning on account of those who are stronger than him sets [his young] on his shoulders. And he places [them] between his talons – it is a warning from the twisted stones and from the arrows that humans throw at him to make him drop [his young]. He [i.e. the eagle] makes himself a barrier between his young and the humans. So also the Place [i.e. God] makes angels of service a barrier between Israel and Egypt; as it is written, “And the angel of God [who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and followed behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them, and it came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel]” (Ex. 14:19-20). Just as this eagle spread his wings, correcting because of the moment, so also Israel was walking for years ten miles and were returned for years ten miles, upon each and every commandment; and so he says, “You grew more and more beautiful, and became fit for royalty” (Ezek. 16:13).¹³ Just as this eagle rises from down below to up above in a short moment, so also Israel rises from down below to up above in a short moment. In their rising, they went up, though that is not the way of the land; also in their descent, they went down, though that was not the way of the land, and so he says, “When they go, I will spread my net over them, I will bring them down like birds of the sky; I will chastise them when I hear their bargaining (Hos. 7:12).

This commentary, expounding upon the eagles of Ex. 19:4, offers several interpretations. The first makes use of Deut. 32:11, in which an eagle rouses his nestlings and then carries them on his wings. The eagle here is gentle in waking the young. The gentleness is analogous to how God came from four directions at Sinai, so as not to be too overbearing.¹⁴

The second explanation of 19:4 has to do with the eagle protecting his young. The analogy is to how God protected the Israelites in their flight from the Egyptian army. While the expounders do make a connection between God as the salvific protector and the eagle, the eagle itself is actually analogous to the “angel of service,” that is, the sub-deity in Ex. 14. Both the eagles and the angels are instruments of God’s power, and *not* manifestations of

¹³ Meaning of the Hebrew and the analogy is somewhat uncertain here.

¹⁴ This explanation is discussed further below.

God himself. In this way, the eagle serves as a symbol of both the power of God and the means of his salvific nature.

The analogy of the eagle to the angel of service is, to my mind, a bit awkward in this discussion of Ex. 19:4. While the first part of the passage discusses the time at which the instance and manner in which the instance took place, the second part is concerned with the logistics of who is doing what. The proposed question behind the discussion of “on the eagles’ wings” seems to be the following: Why does *God* bear them on *eagles’* wings? Would not the *eagles’* be the ones doing the bearing? The rabbis here are trying to reconcile the eagles’ role in God’s act. How do they do this? They make an analogy with Ex. 14:19-20, indicating that the eagles, like the angel of service, are *instruments* of God and not God himself. It stands to reason that the authors had a problem with the eagles in Ex. 19:4, and they felt that a clarification was necessary—the eagles were *employed* by God, not manifestations of God. If this clarification was indeed necessary, perhaps the rabbis were aware of a notion linking God to the eagle in some fashion.¹⁵

The next biblical reference to an eagle comes from Deuteronomy. Deut. 28:49 describes the manner in which a foreign nation will be brought by God against the people of Israel—it “will swoop down like an eagle.” This simile of a foreign nation is an extension of God’s power in that he is the one bringing it. Here we find a combination of a metaphor for flight and the explicit power of God, though in this case, *against* Israel.

¹⁵ For an interpretation on Ex 19:4 from Hekhalot literature, see below.

Although there are very few early references to this passage in rabbinic literature, Lamentations Rabbah is a likely place to find exposition on such a dismal topic.¹⁶ Lamentations Rabbah 4:22 opens with “Light are those who flee from the eagles of heaven.” It is evident here that the eagles refer to the Romans, particularly Trajan in this case.¹⁷ The interpretation goes on to describe the destruction of the Jews under Trajan, referring to God’s issuance of a foreign nation as an eagle who swoops down (Deut. 28:49).

Although Deut. 28:49 is rarely mentioned in tannaitic and amoraic sources, this passage from Lamentations Rabbah is important in its connection between eagles and Romans. While this passage is likely referring to the Diaspora Revolt under Trajan in 115-117 C.E., it seems that the eagle is still understood as a Roman symbol by at least some rabbis in the later periods.

In addition, the fact that Deut. 28:49 is rarely mentioned is itself noteworthy. Would the rabbis have been uncomfortable envisioning an eagle as a foreign nation sent as punishment from God? Certainly the rabbis were familiar with God punishing the Israelites through foreign nations, as this is a major theme throughout the prophetic books. To transfer this theme to the eagle however, may have been a precarious venture for the rabbis in the late Roman and Byzantine periods. The eagle was still at that time a known symbol of the Roman empire, particularly the military. Coded names, like “Edom” (see below), were at times favored over the more explicit symbol by cautious rabbinic authors.

¹⁶ Lamentations Rabbah, like Genesis Rabbah, is typically considered one of the earlier Palestinian aggadic midrashim. Moore 1960: I, 168 puts it just after the Palestinian Talmud (early fifth century), as does Strack 1965: 218-19.

¹⁷ The term “eagles of heaven” (*nishrei shamayim*) is simply a common epithet and could just as easily be translated “eagles of the skies.”

Another passage from Deuteronomy—mentioned already above—is discussed frequently in rabbinic literature. Deut. 32:11 describes an eagle who rouses his young by hovering over the nest. Along with verse 12, it reads¹⁸:

[11] Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings,
He hovers over his young,
[So also] he [i.e. God] spreads his wings and takes him [i.e. Jacob, the personification
of the people of Israel]
Bearing him upon his wings.
[12] He alone did guide him [Jacob],
No alien god at his side.

The passage uses the careful flight of the eagle over his nest as a metaphor, providing God himself with wings, with which he bears the Israelites. “He,” of the third line above, is necessarily God and not the eagle, grammatically speaking.¹⁹ God “spreads his wings.” It is God himself who is given the explicit trait of the eagle’s wings, complete with conveyance-ability. The passage demonstrates God’s ability to guide the eagle’s meticulous flight (v.12). In context, it is meant to show God’s power over and against that of a foreign god (אל נכר).

In Sifre Deuteronomy,²⁰ we find a similar discussion of Deut. 32:11 as we did above in the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. Again, the interpretation is in light of the gentleness of God’s arrival at Sinai. In expounding upon the spreading of his wings, the authors make a connection with Deut. 1:31, referring to how God bore the Israelites in the wilderness, as well as Ex. 19:4, “on the wings of eagles.” Here, they made a distinction

¹⁸ I have modified the JPS translation here.

¹⁹ The direct object for “takes” is the singular “Israel,” whereas the direct object for “rouses” is the plural “nestlings.” Parallel construction would have necessitated “takes them” had the author meant the eagle “spreads his wings.”

²⁰ Sifre Deuteronomy is tannaitic in origin, but was probably compiled and redacted by the amoraim. See Strack 1965: 206-08; and Moore 1960: I, 145-46. This particular section comes from the aggadic portions of the work and can probably best be attributed to the school of R. Ishmael.

between the eagle as an instrument of God in Ex. 19:4 and the eagle's wings as a characteristic of God in Deut. 32:11.

The same association with God's arrival at Sinai is made in the tannaitic collection known as *Midrash Tannaim to Deuteronomy*.²¹ The notion of an eased approach so as not to excite the children is again expressed. The details, however, are somewhat distinct, indicating either a separate tradition, or, more likely, an older tradition that has been reshaped into various tannaitic midrashim as edited by the amoraim.

A different interpretation of Deut. 32:11, though, comes from T. Hagigah 2:6.²² Unlike the above excerpts, the context here is not a line-by-line commentary, but rather a discussion on how Simeon ben Zoma visited paradise and subsequently went mad:

It happened that R. Joshua was walking in Astarte [?] and ben Zoma was coming opposite him. He [ben Zoma] reached him [R. Joshua], and did not give a hello. [R. Joshua] said to him, "From where to where [are you going in such a rush]?" Ben Zoma said to him, "I was considering the account of Creation, and there is between the waters up above and the waters down below not even a handbreadth (Gen. 1:7), as it is said, 'And the breath of God hovers over the face of the water' (Gen. 1:2) And it says, 'Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings,' and so on (Deut. 32:11). Just as this eagle flies upon his nest, touching but not touching, so also there is not between the waters up above and the waters down below even a connection of a handbreadth." R. Joshua said to his students, "Already ben Zoma is on the outside." It was not a few days before he was dismissed.

Ben Zoma's analogy here is meant to explain how the waters of Creation existed physically. His use of the eagle is to illustrate his suggestion that "God's breath" (Gen. 1:2) marks the distinction between the upper and lower waters of Gen. 1:7, hovering over the waters as the

²¹ These materials were extracted from Midrash ha-Gadol and published by Hoffmann 1908-09. Fragments from the Cairo Geniza have been published by Schechter 1904: 446-52, 695-97. This has similarly been dated to as early as the third century, but is probably considerably later. See Moore 1960: I, 146-48.

²² The story here comes within a section sometimes referred to as the "mystical collection," comes after the well-known discussion of the *pardes* episode, in which four rabbis visit the garden (of paradise). The section includes includes T. Hagigah 2:1-7, and is paralleled with variants in Y. Hagigah 77a-c, Genesis Rabbah 2:4, and B. Hagigah 11b, 14b-15a. For discussion, see Halperin 1977: 125-78; and idem 1988: 31-36.

eagle hovers over its nest in Deut. 32:11. His understanding of the relationship between “God’s breath” and the waters is analogous to the eagle and the nestlings. R. Joshua’s comment—probably meaning that he has already lost his mind²³—is primarily a reaction to ben Zoma’s questionable discussion of *Ma’aseh Bere’shit* (the account of Creation). The topic was, in general, taboo for both public discussion and independent consideration.²⁴ While the objection is certainly part of an overall injunction against Merkavah mysticism,²⁵ it is reasonable to suspect that R. Joshua objected to ben Zoma’s interpretation specifically, as well.²⁶ Apparently, R. Joshua objects to the implication that “God’s breath” is analogous to the rousing eagle of Deut. 32:11. It is interesting that, while considering *Ma’aseh Bere’shit*, Ben Zoma’s mind turns to a fairly unrelated passage mentioning an eagle. As with the discussion of Ex. 19:4 in the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (above), there is evidence here of a cautious forbearance in connecting the eagle or its attributes explicitly with God or his divine acts.

One last mention of Deut. 32:11 comes from Midrash Tanhuma on Deuteronomy.²⁷ In the discussion on *parshat ‘Ekev* (Deut. 7:12-11:25), Deut. 32:11 is used as supporting evidence while discussing Prov. 30:17 (which is previously used as supporting evidence in discussing Deut. 22:7). Prov. 30:17 is as follows:

²³ Halperin 1977: 169.

²⁴ M. Hagigah 2:1. See Alexander 1976.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, as well as M. Hagigah 2:1; B. Shabbat 80b, and B. Hagigah 11b-16a. On Hekhalot literature and Merkavah mysticism, see below, chapter five.

²⁶ Issues of cosmology and astronomy are indeed discussed in the rabbinic sources, e.g. B. Shabbat 75a, concerning bar Qappara’s views on the matter. They should not be dismissed outright as *non-rabbinic*.

²⁷ Midrash Tanhuma, which went through at least two recensions in antiquity, was dated by Buber to before Genesis Rabbah, probably in the late fourth or early fifth century. See Moore 1960: I, 170; and Lauterbach: 1901-06: 45-46. The translation here is that of Townsend 2003.

The eye that mocks the father and disdains the homage due a mother—
The ravens of the brook will gouge it out. Young eagles will devour it.

Midrash Tanhuma on *parshat* ‘Ekev comments:

Why will ravens pluck it out and eagles devour it? The Holy One said: A raven, which is cruel to its young, will come and pluck it out without profiting from it; and an eagle which is merciful to its young, will come and will profit from it.

After discussing the raven, the midrash continues:

Where is it shown for the eagle, that it is merciful? Where it is written: “As an eagle stirs up its nest [and hovers over its young]” (Deut. 32:11).

The passage from Proverbs does not presuppose that the eagle is merciful; but rather, it is a form of punishment, presumably divine in origin, for those who dishonor their parents. Moreover, the statement in the midrash by “the Holy One” is in fact not biblical. The author puts the words into God’s mouth as a rhetorical device. In a sense, the notion that the eagle is merciful is the starting point, supported (loosely) by Deut. 32:11, and used to explain the passage from Proverbs. In addition, there is an apologetic tone toward the eagle. It is as if the author felt compelled to contrast the devouring—or ravenous—nature of the raven to that of the eagle; the latter’s actions are positive and in service of God. It therefore seems that the authors of Midrash Tanhuma presupposed that the eagle is merciful and a servant of God.

The image of the eagle is used in several other passages from the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, few of these are discussed by the rabbis. One of the better-known biblical occurrences of the eagle image is from Ezek. 1:10 and 10:14. The text describes the prophet’s vision of God on a chariot, being pulled by four creatures. Each creature had four faces: a human, a lion, a bull, and an eagle.²⁸ This vision forms the basis of Merkavah

²⁸ These three animals are the most common in synagogue art, though they of course have long-standing traditions in ancient near eastern art. See *inter alia* Keel and Uehlinger 1996. See further, chapter five.

mysticism.²⁹ The *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* (“Holy Animals” or “Holy Creatures”) are featured prominently in Hekhalot literature.³⁰ However, generally, the rabbinic sources are interested in the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* only as far as admonitions against their public discussion are concerned.³¹ We will return to the relation of the eagle to the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* and Merkavah in chapter five. For now, it is enough to say that these animals, including the eagle, should be associated with the service of God.

In Ezek. 17, an allegory explains how God will favor the lowly over the lofty. It describes how two “great eagles” will take from the lofty branches of a cedar and re-plant elsewhere. In the explanation that follows, God indicates that one of the eagles is the king of Babylon, who re-plants the upper class of the children of Israel, while God himself is the other, who re-plants everyone else in “the highlands of Israel” (17:23).

In this chapter of Ezekiel, God refers to himself as a great eagle, however, he also refers to the king of Babylon—i.e. an instrument of God—as such. While it is significant that the eagle here takes on supernatural powers, it would be overly speculative to say any more. Like the passage from Ezekiel 1 and 10, without a later commentary, we can deduce very little regarding the late ancient comprehension of this allegory.

This is similarly the case for most of the other scriptural reference to eagles. As mentioned above, several occurrences indicate that the creature was known for its speed (2

²⁹ Halperin 1988: 38-48.

³⁰ Ibid. 398-396; Schäfer 1992; Elior 1993/94: 24-26.

³¹ E.g. B. Avodah Zarah 43b, where the making an image of these four faces is prohibited, presumably because of the general injunction against Merkavah mysticism, or more specifically *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and *Ma'aseh Bere'shit*. It should be noted that this statement opens a discussion, and is not in question but rather taken for granted. No finds, to my knowledge, have ever uncovered an explicit depiction of the four-faced creature described in Ezekiel. See further below, chapter five. On rabbis and Merkavah mysticism in general, see Halperin 1977.

Sam. 1:23; Jer. 4:13; 48:40; 49:22; Hab. 1:8; Job 9:26; Lam. 4:19); for its flying ability (Jer. 49:16; Obad. 4; Hab. 1:8; Job 9:26, Prov. 23:5; 30:19); and for its youthful strength (Isa. 40:31; Ps. 103:5). While these are all positive attributes, they are also somewhat generic. We can probably assume that these sorts of traits were still attributed to the eagle in the late period; however, because the rabbinic sources do not comment on these passages in particular, it is difficult to know exactly how they conceptualized the symbol of the eagle in these immediate contexts.

Nevertheless, other occurrences of eagles in rabbinic literature, *not* directly connected with a biblical citation, can help shed light on the rabbinic conception of this symbol. In B. Baba Batra 16b, there is a discussion of Job 39:1, where God asks rhetorically: “Do you know the season when the mountain-goats give birth?” implying that he of course does. The talmudic comment elaborates—with God speaking in the first person—indicating that when the mountain goat gives birth, the newborn is likely to fall from the cliff. God then sends forth an eagle to save the new-born, since he knows the exact moment when he will be born and thus fall. Here again, we see that the eagle, as described by the rabbis (not the biblical writers), is an instrument of God’s salvific and merciful power.

Another reference to eagles comes from B. Sanhedrin 92b:

And should you ask, in those years during which the Almighty will renew his world, as it is written: “And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day,” (Isa. 2:11), what will the righteous do? The Lord will make them wings like eagles’, and they will fly above the water, as it is written: “Therefore we will not fear when the earth be removed and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (Ps. 46:3).³²

This passage indicates that the righteous will receive eagles’ wings in the world to come. Although the explicit point of the wings is to make sense of the passage from Psalms, it

³² Translation from Epstein 1935-48.

seems somewhat disconnected and even forced. That is to say, the passage from Psalms is brought in as supporting evidence; it is not part of a longer exposition on the psalm. Incidentally, Ps. 46:3 (in its own context) has nothing to do with the world to come. Of course the rabbis characteristically take passages out of context as supporting evidence, so this should not entirely surprise us. What is interesting here, however, is that they seem to have a preconceived notion that the righteous will receive wings in the messianic days. The idea does not come from any biblical text—they would have cited it if it did. The image of the saved-righteous with eagles' wings in the world to come may have some interesting implications were one to consider the Christian cultural context. However, the passage does not say that the righteous will actually turn into eagles—that is to say, the important symbol is the *wings*, not the eagle. Therefore, it does not exactly concern the present study.

The last rabbinic reference to eagles worth mentioning comes once more from the Babylonian Talmud. In a discussion concerning the intercalation, B. Sanhedrin 12a mentions two scholars who were traveling from Rakkath (i.e. Tiberias³³) to Raba and were “captured by an eagle.” In literary context, the eagle here is necessarily a Roman soldier.³⁴ As Epstein noted, this incident may have taken place during the reign of Constantius II (337-361 C.E.), who forbade the Jews from annually arranging the calendar cycle.³⁵ Whether this is so, it had to be prior to the patriarchate's removal from Tiberias ca. 415. Putting aside the dating and historicity of this event, however, it stands to reason that as late as the sixth century, the editors of the Babylonian Talmud still understood the eagle as representing Rome. The

³³ Epstein 1935-48: 12a, n. 11, citing B. Megillah 6a.

³⁴ The discussion goes on to explain that the “Edomite” (a frequent appellation for Rome in the Babylonian Talmud) did not allow the intercalation proceedings to take place.

³⁵ Epstein 1935-48: 12a, n. 16.

editorial context of course is in the Sasanian east; by extension, we should assume that those still living under Byzantine rule would have recognized this symbol of the eagle as pertaining to the military all the more.³⁶

In addition to the biblical and rabbinic references to eagles, we should consider references from pseudepigraphical works. Because some of the texts may date to as early as the first century, we will limit the evidence considered below to those texts that were originally composed in Hebrew or Aramaic and in Palestine. Most of these texts survive through Syriac and Greek manuscripts, indicating that they continued to circulate for some time after their composition, albeit in non-Jewish communities. Whether or not these texts would have circulated widely in the Jewish communities of Palestine in question, the conceptualizations of the eagle-symbol they transmit are as relevant as the early rabbinic texts in that they may represent the general language of symbols in the cultural context (see chapter one).

Among the earlier works we will consider is a passage from the author known as Pseudo-Philo. This parabiblical work chronicling the history of Israel from Adam to David probably dates to the first century C.E.³⁷ The relevant passage, 48:1, concerns the priest Phinehas; it reads as follows:

And in that time Phinehas laid himself down to die, and the Lord said to him, “Behold you have passed 120 years that have been established for every man. And now rise

³⁶ This is also the case with the “Eagle Vision” of 4 Ezra 11-12, in which Rome is depicted as a three-headed eagle, punished by God for persecuting the Jews. This text dates to the late first or early second century C.E. See Metzger 1983.

³⁷ Harrington 1985: 299-301. The original Hebrew text, more than likely composed in Palestine, is no longer extant. The work displays a heightened angelology, not uncommon for first century Jewish texts, as displayed so notably in the Qumran literature.

up and go from here and dwell in Danaben on the mountain and dwell there many years. And I will command my eagle, and he will nourish you there [...].”³⁸

The obvious use of the eagle here is as an instrument of God who will be sent to feed Phinehas. The author here conceptualizes the eagle in much the same way as the biblical passages do.

Another relevant passage possibly dating to as early as the first century C.E. comes from the *Life of Adam and Eve* 33:2:³⁹

And Eve gazed into heaven, and saw a chariot of light coming, (drawn) by four radiant eagles of which it is not possible for anyone born from the womb to tell their glory or to see their faces,⁴⁰ and the angels went before the chariot.⁴¹

Unlike the above passage from Pseudo-Philo, which adheres to the more prevalent biblical notion of the eagle as an instrument of God, this passage is more closely related to Ezekiel’s vision. The image of the chariot as well as God surrounded by a hierarchy of worshipping angels recalls Merkavah mysticism.⁴² The radiance of the eagles and their unfathomable faces give them a divine quality. Indeed they are not ordinary birds that God utilizes, as in other passages, but rather divine beings or sub-deities. The eagles essentially take over the

³⁸ Translation by Harrington 1985.

³⁹ In lieu of any historical references, Johnson 1985: 252 places the text in the earlier period, based on the relationship of the subject matter with other “Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, rabbinic traditions, and perhaps Paul.” Based on the external evidence of the earliest Greek and Latin translations, though, this text could be as late as the third or fourth century. Cf. Halperin 1988: 96, who places the traditions, if not the text itself, as early as the first century. As with Pseudo-Philo, it was originally written in Hebrew, probably in Palestine.

⁴⁰ Three manuscripts instead read here, “The beauty and glory of which it is impossible for tongues of men to describe.” See Johnson 1985: 287, n. 33b. It seems the central point these manuscripts is to avoid the notion that the eagles’ faces cannot be fathomed. It is unclear as to why (or even if this was a later change or earlier version). In light of the above interpretations, it may be that an unfathomable image brings the eagles too close to the characteristics of God, though this is only a speculation.

⁴¹ Translation by Johnson 1985.

⁴² Halperin 1988: 96-100

role of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* who pull God's chariot in Ezekiel's vision. Therefore, instead of being instruments of God's power, the eagles are here conceptualized as *servants* of God.

In the works of 2 Baruch and 4 Baruch, both probably first or second century C.E.,⁴³ we find references to the eagle as a messenger. 2 Baruch 77:19-26 depicts the eagle as being instructed by Baruch to deliver a message. The eagle here is not endowed with any supernatural qualities, other than being "created by the Most High."⁴⁴ In 4 Baruch 7:1-12, God sends an eagle to Baruch so that he may in turn send a message to Jeremiah in Babylon. In a slight variation on 2 Baruch, 4 Baruch depicts him engaging in dialogue with the eagle:

And conversing in a human voice, the eagle said to him, "Hail, Baruch, the steward of faith!"⁴⁵ And Baruch said to him, "You who speak are chosen from all the birds of heaven, for this is clear from the gleam in your eyes; so show me, what are you doing here?" And the eagle said to him, "I was sent here so that you may send every word you desire through me." And Baruch said to him, "Can you take this message up to Jeremiah in Babylon?" And the eagle said to him, "Certainly; this is why I was sent" (7:2-6).⁴⁶

Clearly the eagle is more than an instrument of divine power, as in 2 Baruch, but a divine being in its own right, hence the power of speech. Since the eagle is commissioned by God and announced by an angel (6:15), it is reasonable to understand it here as a servant rather than an instrument. The conceptualization of the eagle in these two passages is closer to that of the angels who work as messengers of God and interact with humans. They are here

⁴³ For former, see Klijn 1983: 616-17; for the latter, see Robinson 1985.

⁴⁴ Translation following Klijn 1983. Actually it is Baruch who has the extraordinary quality of being able to command the eagle, much like Noah and the dove, Elijah and the ravens, and Solomon and the bird, as Baruch puts it (2 Baruch 77:23-25).

⁴⁵ As Robinson 1985: 422, n. 7a points out, this allusion to "faith" is a similar use as in the Pastoral Epistles, betraying the later Christian editing of 4 Baruch.

⁴⁶ Translation by Robinson 1985. The passage continues with the eagle in Babylon where it meets Jeremiah at a funeral procession. In a certain Christian interpolation, the eagle resurrects the deceased "that they might believe" (7:19). The reworking makes it difficult to see what was in the Jewish version.

dissimilar to the eagles as mere instruments of God or the *hayyot ha-qodesh*, who perform a single and specific function.

The pseudepigraphic work known as 3 Enoch and attributed to R. Ishmael contains several notable reference to eagles.⁴⁷ 3 Enoch falls into the textual category of Hekhalot literature. It concerns a journey of the author, in which he visits God's throne and receives an extended revelation from the archangel Metatron, as well as an insider's tour of the heavens. Its highly developed cosmology and angelology are typical for the genre and Merkavah mysticism.

The first reference to an eagle comes from 2:1:

R. Ishmael said: Then the eagles of the chariot, the flaming ophanim and the cherubim of devouring fire asked Metatron, "Youth, why have you allowed one born of woman to come in and behold the chariot?"⁴⁸

The chariot here refers to the chariot of God, and the eagles are the divine servants who pull it, serving essentially the same role as the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* in Ezekiel's vision. It is significant that the eagles, like the ophanim and cherubim, speak to Metatron in front of R. Ishmael. As with the eagle in 4 Baruch, the ability to speak put their role beyond that of mere instruments of God, used to pull the chariot. They are instead *servants*. This is made all the more clear in several manuscripts where "eagles" is replaced with "attendants."⁴⁹

In section 24 Metatron describes to R. Ishmael the different sorts and attributes of the chariots of God. Each line begins with "He has the chariots of . . ." and is followed by a noun or adjective, and supported by a biblical passage. In 24:11, we read: "He has the

⁴⁷ The Hebrew text of 3 Enoch probably dates to the fifth-sixth century; see Alexander 1983: 225-29 for overview of the various dating suggestions. While there are several Palestinian features within the text, the final redaction of 3 Enoch probably took place in Babylonia; *ibid.* 229, 234.

⁴⁸ Translation of Alexander 1983.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 267 n. a.

chariots of eagles, as it is written, ‘I carried you on eagles’ wings (Ex. 19:4).’ They are not eagles but fly like eagles.”⁵⁰ “They” refers to the chariots,⁵¹ that is, the chariots fly like eagles. So, when God says in Ex. 19:4, “I carried you on eagles’ wings,” he means, “I carried you by means of my chariots.” In this sense, the eagle is a symbol for the chariot. This is not obvious from the biblical text, and is necessarily explained by the author of 3 Enoch in order to interpret God’s eagles as his chariots. Nevertheless, the association of the eagles with the chariot is noteworthy, if not ubiquitously understood.

As Alexander notes in his editing of the 3 Enoch,⁵² angels are often described as having the bodies of eagles (e.g. 26:3; 44:5). Although the fact that they had the body of eagles does not mean they *were* eagles, it is significant from the viewpoint of visual imagery. Given these texts, the image of an eagle’s body would recall that of a servant of God and an angel.

Before interpreting these issues alongside the material evidence from chapter two, let us first review briefly what all these passages indicate about the symbol of the eagle in Jewish literature. First, the eagle is the symbol of salvific power in the form of an instrument of God. Not only do we see this explicitly in Ex. 19:4 and Prov. 3:17, but also in the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, B. Baba Batra 16b, Sifre Deuteronomy. It seems that frequently, when the situation calls for flight specifically, God employs the eagle as his winged creature *par excellence*.

⁵⁰ Translation *ibid*.

⁵¹ *Ibid*. 309 n. f.

⁵² Alexander 1983: 295.

In addition to being an instrument, though, the eagle is sometimes a servant. I differentiate the two terms here—instrument and servant—by positing the former as something that is merely used, while the latter is something sentient and capable of refusing but intent on serving. We see the eagle acting explicitly as a servant in the pseudepigraphic *Life of Adam and Eav*, as well as 2 and 4 *Baruch* and 3 *Enoch*. Less explicit is the *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai*, where the eagle is analogous with the angel of Ex. 14:19-20.

The same *Mekhilta* and *Sifre Deuteronomy* make a clear analogy between the eagle and God when discussing Deut. 32:11. The eagle with his young is like God with the Israelites. Both are parents who bear their children and protect them. In addition, the eagle, like God, is merciful, as seen in *Midrash Tanhuma* and *B. Baba Batra* 16b.

Despite the similarities, the rabbis are careful on at least two occasions to avoid the suggestion that God is analogous to the eagle. The passages from the *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai* and *T. Hagigah* suggest that the rabbis knew of a tradition in which God was connected explicitly with the eagle. Whether this was a notion within Judaism, or simply a wider cultural concept with which Jews were familiar is unclear. Either way, these two passages preserve a hint of some sort of dialogue concerning the symbol of the eagle as an attribute of God.

However it was understood in relating to the divine, there is an apologetic sense toward the eagle in *Midrash Tanhuma* on ‘Ekev. The notion of the eagle being a positive figure vis-à-vis the raven presupposes that the eagle elsewhere was seen as being in some way close to God, either as an attribute, servant, or instrument.

Lastly, the eagle is still known to the rabbis as a symbol of Rome. This is demonstrated most clearly in *Lamentations Rabbah* and *B. Sanhedrin* 12a. The image of the

Roman eagle is an interesting foil to the gentle, merciful and divine conceptions of the eagle in biblical and rabbinic literature. Nevertheless, both were understood by the rabbinic authors—and probably Jews in general—as symbolic meanings of the eagle image.

The symbol's use as a salvific figure and instrument of God or sub-deity is important to our understanding of how the image was employed in Jewish artistic context. While the somewhat generic attributes of flight, speed, and ability to carry do not point to a specific ideology or religious concern, the angel-like aspects and connections to God as a divine servant foster a special reverence for this symbol in late ancient Judaism.

CHAPTER FIVE:

POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF THE EAGLE IN JEWISH CONTEXT

“With the revival of interest in the metaphysical meaning of the animals represented, the old Oriental differentiation revived, too. Of course, the meaning of the symbols as used in Jewish monuments had changed by the elimination of all polytheistic values. For these were substituted values derived from Haggadic legends.”¹

In the above quote, Avi-Yonah’s interpretation of Judaism’s re-appropriation of “pagan symbols” assumes two important points. First, it denies ancient Judaism an active role as part of the Near Eastern artistic tradition. Such an interpretation necessarily understands the ethno-religion of Judaism as entirely distinct from other ancient Near Eastern peoples and as having an incompatible worldview and concept of the divine. Only by drawing such hard boundaries between Judaism and the Near East—the latter of which is here taken as a unified entity—could Avi-Yonah envision a “polytheistic” influence over Judaism’s art.

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholarship has been increasingly critical of this sort of oversimplified dichotomy in interpreting the ancient world, particularly regarding the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. Bickerman’s seminal work, *Der Gott der Makkabäer* (1937), was among the earliest to complicate the relationship between Jews and the Hellenistic monarchs. More recently, Levine’s *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (1998) has addressed issues of the relationship between Jews and their surrounding cultures in antiquity. Avi-Yonah’s suggestions about Jewish art, however,

¹ Avi-Yonah 1981: 51.

assume that Jews were not part of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, and that any “pagan symbols” within Jewish context can only be indicative of a cultural *incursion*. It is a sort of “us versus them” viewpoint that relies on a preconceived understanding of ancient Judaism as inherently opposed to figural imagery and as isolated from any cultural or religious dialogue with neighboring peoples.

A second objection to Avi-Yonah’s statement concerns his use of “polytheistic values” vis-à-vis “the metaphysical meaning of the animals represented.” Although Avi-Yonah demonstrated external influence on the style of synagogue art, he did not consider the possibility that the symbols employed could retain any of the meaning they held in non-Jewish cultural contexts. We have endeavored to demonstrate above (chapter three) that the eagle was a symbol with which Jews were familiar and relatively comfortable as early as the late Hellenistic period. The use of the eagle in synagogue and funerary art persisted into late antiquity (chapter two), and the symbol itself is fairly well-attested within Jewish literature (chapter four). It is unlikely, therefore, that the eagle served a purely *decorative* function,² as later proposed by Hachlili.³

Avi-Yonah’s last point, however—that the values were derived from *haggadah*—is a valuable, if general, comment. It is valuable in that it allows for the possibility that some Jews understood these symbols in religious—i.e. holy or sacred⁴—terms; it is general in that

² Images in antiquity should almost never be considered as serving “purely *decorative*” functions; such a notion is a post-Renaissance idea that has little bearing on the present topic. See Belting 1994: 3-8. Cf. Eliav 1998, for non-religious art in the rabbinic mind.

³ Hachlili 1988: 333-34 following Avi-Yonah 1981: 65.

⁴ While I have employed the term “religious” throughout this work, I do not care for it in discussions of history, particularly Roman and Byzantine Palestine. In light of the modern issues in the theory of religions, I find the term inaccurate and problematic in dealing with the distant past. This is particularly so when one considers the etymology of the word, *religio*, as compared to *superstitio*. A better term than “religious,” to my mind, is

haggadah incorporates a wide corpus of topics and texts—essentially anything discussed by the rabbis that was not *halakhah*, i.e. on the Law.⁵ Although we should not assume that rabbinic texts alone can represent the whole of Judaism in late ancient Palestine (see above, chapter four), we can perhaps salvage Avi-Yonah’s method by synthesizing the artistic evidence with the literary in order to suggest some possible meanings of the eagle-symbol.

To do so, we will first reiterate some of the points made above regarding the symbol’s relation to Roman and Near Eastern art, paying particular attention to Goodenough’s interpretation of the eagle in Jewish art. We will then consider other possibilities in light of the placement and location of the image in synagogues, particularly regarding similar imagery in Byzantine art. In the end, it should be clear that, whatever the precise meaning, the eagle-symbol should be understood (1) as a sacred image expressed in the style of the period and region, and (2) in light of the internal religious developments within late ancient Judaism.

Just as the eagle-image in Herod’s Temple should be understood within the context of the Near East (see above, chapter three), so too should the eagle-images of late ancient Palestinian Judaism. Although Jews were no doubt familiar with the eagle as a symbol of the Roman military and imperial authority (chapter four), it seems unlikely that these are related to the Jewish eagle. First, the Jewish eagle-images are not depicted in the form known from Roman military contexts in the East.⁶ The flat, unrealistic stylization of the image contrasts

“sacred” or “holy.” These indicate that the noun described as such pertains in some manner to the world of the divine, often related to—though not necessarily—*religio* or *superstitio*.

⁵ Moore 1960: I, 161-63.

⁶ See e.g. Downey 1977: nos. 163-68.

with the three-dimensional realism of Roman art.⁷ Second, there is nothing in either the textual sources or the architectural context of the Jewish eagle-images to suggest such a connection. The Roman eagle-symbol used in depictions of apotheosis is also unattested in Jewish art. Such images in Roman art were typically combined with other symbols, such as images of the deceased, in order to indicate that the images refer to apotheosis.⁸ Furthermore, most of the eagles in our corpus are *not* from funerary contexts.⁹ The eagle of Jupiter is a third possibility for Roman influence. Although those in Palestine would have connected the eagle with the godhead, it was more likely a result of Near Eastern cult-imagery, rather than Roman.

As described above (chapters two and three), the eagle-symbol in the ancient Near East, particularly in nearby Syria is associated with godheads such as Ba'al Shamin, Hadad, and Zeus, as well as with the solar deity (sometimes equal to the godhead). Goodenough argued that the eagle-images in Palestinian synagogues—while not the result of *syncretism* between Yahweh and other Near Eastern godheads—were analogous in that they shared the same powers and attributes.¹⁰ The eagle-symbol would therefore be a reference to Yahweh as the god worshipped by those who used the buildings on which the image was found. As provocative a notion as this may be—to consider Yahweh as represented by an image of an

⁷ Ma'oz 1995: 254-60.

⁸ See e.g. Bianchi Bandinelli 1976: fig. 321. See further Zanker 2004; Rahmani 1999: 69.

⁹ This is not to say, however, that belief in apotheosis was limited to the Roman world. A tomb near Frikya in north-central Syria, for example, dated to 324 C.E., depicts an eagle underneath the bust of the deceased, with a winged-figure to his side, clutching a large wreath; see Butler 1903: 278-81. The context and the placement of the symbols here indicates apotheosis.

¹⁰ Goodenough: 1958: VIII, 130.

eagle—I believe Goodenough’s claim is reasonable for the earlier periods; however, it cannot be substantiated for the period to which our eagle-images date.

There are several flaws regarding Goodenough’s interpretation. First is the problem of the wanton disregard of the second commandment. This is a large and complicated topic, worthy of a more in-depth treatment than can presently be given. Most scholars now recognize that images were generally not a problem for *halakhah*-conscious rabbis¹¹; however, the notion that there was a figural representation of Yahweh in explicit transgression of Ex. 20:4 and Deut. 5:8 presents a problem for which Goodenough did not provide a solution. The argument maintains that the eagle did not equal Yahweh, but was only representative of his power and value.¹² Nevertheless, the congruity of attributes between Yahweh and other godheads identified by the eagle would verge close enough to idolatry as to require a fuller explanation on Goodenough’s behalf.¹³

Another problem is that Goodenough’s interpretation is based almost entirely on artistic comparisons, that is to say, it is not accounted for by the textual evidence. In support of the identification of the eagle with Yahweh, Goodenough cites literary references to eagles that do not show that they should be identified with the God of Israel himself.¹⁴ For example, he cites a passage from Midrash Rabbah to Song of Songs that places an eagle on

¹¹ See Eliav 1998; Fine 2005: 69-70. This does *not* mean that such images were promoted or sanctioned by rabbis, only that they proposed no halakhic grounds for prohibiting them.

¹² Goodenough 1958: VIII, 130.

¹³ The image of Helios in the center of the synagogue mosaics presents a similar problem. M. Goodman has recently argued that the image of Helios in several synagogue mosaics is a depiction of the Jewish God. Unfortunately, time did not allow me to consider this work as it relates to Goodenough’s argument.

¹⁴ Ibid. 136-41.

the throne of God.¹⁵ Conversely, he had earlier demonstrated—rightfully, I believe—that the image of the eagle perched next to the throne of Zeus was a *servant*, and not an *attribute* of the deity (see below).¹⁶ Goodenough also cites B. Sanhedrin 92a, which refers to how the righteous will grow wings like eagles'.¹⁷ Nowhere is God even mentioned in this passage (see above, chapter four). Last, he describes in detail 4 Baruch 7,¹⁸ which, as discussed above (chapter four), depicts the eagle as a messenger and servant of God, *not* Yahweh himself.

The interpretation is further problematized by the issue of dating. Goodenough could not have known that most of the eagles to which he referred would be up-dated by several hundred years, some to as late as the sixth century (see above, chapter two). As such, the eagles are placed further from the Near Eastern parallels that Goodenough had in mind. To apply Goodenough's methodology more appropriately, one would have to interpret the symbols in light of the Christian culture then dominant in the region.

One final problem I see in Goodenough's interpretation is that it fails to explain those images in which we find a pair of eagles. If indeed the eagle was meant to represent the power and/or attribute of Yahweh, why should there ever be more than one? Not only is this interpretation at odds with Yahweh's singularity as the God of Israel, it is unattested in Classical and Near Eastern parallels. Nowhere, to my knowledge, do we find a deity expressed twice in one place by the same image.¹⁹ Likewise in Byzantine art: Although two

¹⁵ Ibid. 136.

¹⁶ Ibid. 128.

¹⁷ Ibid. 137.

¹⁸ Ibid. 139.

¹⁹ Goodenough 1958: VIII, 128.

images of Christ often appear within the same panel—e.g. depicting multiple stages in the Life of Jesus—we do not find, to my knowledge, multiple images of Christ in the same form flanking a central image. In my view, therefore, Goodenough’s explanation of the eagle-symbol—however relevant for Herod’s eagle—cannot be applied to Jewish art in the later periods. The notion of the eagle as the symbol of the godhead may have been common in Near Eastern art as late as the third century,²⁰ but it does not seem to have found an audience in Jewish art that late.

Nevertheless, eagle-images in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East may have influenced the Jewish eagle’s symbolic meaning. In addition to being a symbol for the godhead in the Near East, eagles are sometimes identified with lesser deities. The Eagle Lintel at Palmyra, for example, depicts the Ba‘al Shamin eagle flanked by two “lesser eagles”²¹ on either side, as well as two smaller eagles below the wings. Also from Palmyra, a relief from the Temple of Nebo depicts the goddess Tyche, enthroned, and surrounded by several other figures, including a dog and another female figure—a lesser Tyche(?)²²—standing to the right and holding a branch up to and behind the goddess. On the back of the throne stands an eagle, wings open, with a branch in its beak.²³ The eagle and the second female figure are here linked symbolically in that they both perform the same duty by holding a branch up to the goddess.

²⁰ E.g. the eagle-images from Kedesh and Hatra, see above, chapter two.

²¹ Colledge 1976: 33.

²² Drijvers 1976: 19.

²³ Ibid. Pl. LI.

Another relief fragment from the Temple of Nebo at Palmyra depicts the solar-god—and perhaps the godhead—flanked by eagles.²⁴ Similarly, on a relief of Helios from Baalbek,²⁵ and also on a lintel fragment from Hatra,²⁶ eagles flank the central deity. In the former, they are apparently holding up the deity; in the latter, they grip miniature wreaths in their beaks, and are thus bestowing victory or favor upon the central symbol.

The eagle identified with Zeus is often depicted sitting at the deity's feet,²⁷ standing behind his shoulder,²⁸ or in his hand (most often on coins). Goodenough suggested that this image should not be equated with the god himself, nor should it be seen as some sort of attribute of the god; rather, the eagle should be understood as a *servant* of Zeus.²⁹ Indeed, both an image of Zeus *and* the eagle would be redundant.

If Near Eastern art, therefore, provided the stylistic models for the Jewish eagle-image in the late Roman and early Byzantine periods,³⁰ it is possible that one of the meanings that persisted was that of the eagle as a servant of the deity. Such an interpretation is supported by the literary evidence (see above, chapter four). The eagle-symbol in several Jewish texts appears as a messenger—e.g. 3 Enoch, Life of Adam and Eve, 2 and 4 Baruch, and the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. It would have been logical, to my mind, to depict the eagle in a similar fashion as those who attribute to it analogous symbolic value. It

²⁴ Ibid. Pl L:3.

²⁵ Jidejian 1975: fig. 50.

²⁶ Ingholt 1954: Pl. VI:3.

²⁷ E.g. in the *Casa del naviglio* at Pompeii; see Cook 1914: I, 34.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Goodenough 1958: VIII, 128.

³⁰ As argued by Avi-Yonah 1981 and Ma'oz 1995, though cf. above, chapter two.

appears then that the meaning and form of the art could not be entirely separated when the symbol passed between cultural systems.³¹

This interpretation of the eagle as a servant, messenger, or even instrument of God (see above, chapter four) would further help explain the pairs of eagles found on at least seven separate lintels in our corpus (chapter two). In the majority of examples the eagles flank a wreath, the symbol of victory and divine sanction³²—as understood also by Jews³³—as opposed to a godhead or solar deity, as in the cases described above.

It should be recalled, though, that the Jewish eagle-images are somewhat later—third or fourth through sixth century (see above, chapter two)—than many of the images cited from elsewhere in the Near East.³⁴ Conversely, Byzantine art, which is contemporary with the eagle-images in Jewish culture, does not employ the symbol as prominently as in the Palestinian synagogues (chapter two).³⁵ In the absence of parallels for eagle imagery, though, there are similar motifs of winged-figures flanking a central image that may be relevant to our discussion.

³¹ For connection between form and meaning, see Avi-Yonah 1981: 53, *inter alia*.

³² Mathews 1993: 161. The depictions of the wreath being bestowed upon a ruler or god are too numerous to cite. See, e.g., the motif in Near Eastern art (Colledge 1977: Pl. 38: n, o), Roman art (Bianchi Bandinelli 1976: fig. 209), and Byzantine art (Grabar 1968: fig. 100; Kitzinger 1977: 96-97).

³³ See e.g. the following Jewish liturgical reference: “Moses was pleased with the gift that you bestowed upon him / For you called him a faithful servant. / A wreath of glory you placed on his head / As he stood before you on Mt. Sinai . . .”; quoted in Fine 2005: 179.

³⁴ Palmyra (first and second century C.E.), Baalbek (second century B.C.E. to second century C.E.), Petra (first century B.C.E. to second century C.E.), Hatra (second and third century C.E.), Kadesh (third century C.E.).

³⁵ Other birds, especially doves and peacocks appear frequently; see Kitzinger 1977: Pls. 161-64. The eagle is sometimes found as one of many animals in floor mosaics. See e.g. the mosaic in the sixth century church at Petra; Fiema 2003: 244-45, fig. 268. The eagle appears also as a symbol of John the Evangelist, as he was described by Jerome and Augustine; see e.g. Grabar 1968: fig. 195 *inter alia*. By extension, the eagle was a symbol of the Logos which came upon John, raising him up to new heights; see Goodenough 1958: VIII, 142.

Winged-Victories or angels³⁶ often appear flanking a central image in late Roman and Byzantine art.³⁷ Although such flanking-winged-figures motifs do appear in the earlier periods,³⁸ they do not emerge as a popular motif until the fourth century in Rome.³⁹ The motif was an important image in imperial art toward the end of the fourth century. Among the more famous examples of this motif is the so-called “Child’s Sarcophagus” in Istanbul, thought to have been for a young member of the Theodosian house.⁴⁰ Here, the winged-figures present between them a proportionally large wreath. The bottom of the wreath is tied with a bow-and-ribbon, not dissimilar from the Hercules knot seen in several examples of the eagles-flanking-wreath motif in Jewish reliefs. The center of the wreath depicts the *Chi-Rho* monogram.⁴¹

³⁶ It is difficult to specify these winged-figures as Victories or angels. Either identification presupposes a particular function of the symbol within the motif. The function of the former is to bestow divine favor and glory; that of the latter is to serve God in a general sense. There are no clear stylistic elements that distinguish Victories and angels. Scholarship tends to use them interchangeably in discussing Byzantine art. In general, scholars coming from a background in Classics and Roman art prefer “Victories,” while scholars better-versed in early Christianity and Byzantine art prefer angels. Ideally, the term “Victory” should be used only for Classical and Near Eastern art, whereas “angel” should be specifically Christian or Jewish. Early Byzantine art, however, employs winged-figures that are clearly Victories—in that they place wreaths on the heads of imperial figures—as well as angels. The artistic overlap in these early centuries of a Christian empire is the source of the confusion in scholastic terminology. For discussions regarding the use of Classical styles and motifs in early Byzantine and Christian art, see Grabar 1968 and Mathews 1993.

³⁷ Duthuit 1931: 36; Bianchi Bandinelli 1971: 348; Ma’oz 1995: 264.

³⁸ See e.g. the mid-second century lintel from Hatra depicting the local ruler flanked by two winged Victories; Colledge 1977: fig. 23. See also the Victory holding the Zodiac wheel, in the center of which is Tyche in a Nabatean variation; McKenzie 2003: 190-91, fig. 199 and *ibid.* fig. 184.

³⁹ It is here that we find an example of two winged-figures bearing an encircled menorah on sarcophagus; see Goodenough 1953: III, no. 789.

⁴⁰ Kitzinger 1977: 39, fig. 75.

⁴¹ The *Rho*, for some reason, is missing the loop on the top; however considering the parallels, its identification as the monogram of Christ is unmistakable.

Despite the occurrence of the motif in this funerary context, it was particularly prominent on lintels of churches and on ivory diptychs of the fifth and sixth century.⁴² In Coptic art, the flanking-angels motif utilizes a variety of images encircled by the central wreath. These include Christ, the medallion of an Evangelist, a cross-with-veil,⁴³ a rosette, as well as unidentified imperial figures and faces.⁴⁴ In addition, nine wooden reliefs from fifth-century Bawit in Egypt bear images of the flanking-angels around a cross.⁴⁵ A fifth-century lintel on the East Church at Zebed in Syria, depicts the Virgin-and-Child encircled by a wreath,⁴⁶ with two angels filling the space to either side.⁴⁷

These examples demonstrate that the central image need not be Christ, i.e. the godhead. Nevertheless, the central figures are all holy in some manner; that is to say, the symbols depicted are all related to the divine. The Virgin-and-Child and the cross are obvious symbols; the Evangelist is a reference to the Gospels; the imperial figures are references to God's rulers on earth. Even the rosette may be a symbol for the cross.⁴⁸ Regarding the winged-figures—which, given the Christian context, should best be identified as angels here—they too are holy in that they are supernatural servants of the divine. Their placement in the motif, however, suggests that they are secondary, that is, subordinate, to the central image, even when it is not Christ himself.

⁴² Grabar 1968: 80, figs. 204, 205; Kitzinger 1977: 96.

⁴³ Also sometimes just a cross; see Dalton 1925: 325, Pl. LIX.

⁴⁴ Duthuit 1931: Pls. XII:a-c, XIII:a,c, XLII:a, LVI:b.

⁴⁵ Bastra 1990.

⁴⁶ For a fifth-century depiction of two angels flanking Mary alone, see *Codex Punis* gr. 1447, fols. 257-58, as cited by Mango 1986: 35.

⁴⁷ Butler 1903: 309.

⁴⁸ Duthuit 1931.

The flanking-winged-figures motif is also found in Jewish art. Such explicit figural images are found in reliefs from at least four different sites. At the northernmost, ed-Dikkeh, in the Golan, we find a lintel bearing a small winged-figure whose body is bent at a ninety-degree angle.⁴⁹ This image is paralleled in Coptic art, where it is placed on lintels and in apsidal niches.⁵⁰ While too little is preserved to say for sure, the parallels suggest that it flanked a wreath as the central image.

At Bar'am, winged-figures flank wreaths on the lintels of the main entryways to both the small and large synagogues.⁵¹ The former, published originally by R. Dussaud, is now lost.⁵² A photograph, however, clearly shows two winged-figures flanking a wreath, in the center of which is a flower opening toward the viewer. The figures are almost entirely defaced, though recognizable by their outline.⁵³ Likewise, the lintel over the central portal of the large synagogue depicts two also defaced winged-figures. They, too, flank a wreath, though in this case there is no design or image within the interior. The wreaths on both lintels depict a Hercules knot at the bottom; these motifs are not defaced as the winged-figures.

At the site of Ramah, a lintel depicts two winged-figures in low relief flanking a wreath.⁵⁴ The form is quite similar to the late fifth-century "Child's sarcophagus"; however, the style is less natural and with simpler details. The faces of the winged-figures appear to be

⁴⁹ Ma'oz 1981: 102; idem 1995: 263-64, Pl. 11:4-5. Avi-Yonah suggested that this was in an oriental style; see Avigad 1976: 149.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 264; Duthuit 1931: Pl. XIII:b-c.

⁵¹ Jacoby 1987: 7/B, 54/A-B.

⁵² Dussaud 1912: 85-86, no. 116.

⁵³ Avigad 1993: 147-49.

⁵⁴ Ilan 1991: 66.

deliberately worn away, as does the interior of the wreath.⁵⁵ The fact that the wreath itself was not defaced suggests that the interior once depicted a figural image, perhaps the face of a lion—as on the lintel found in Safed (see above, chapter two, no. 41).

Another example of this motif appears on a sarcophagus from the Bet She‘arim necropolis, the so-called “Nikae” sarcophagus.⁵⁶ The winged-figures here have been carved in an extremely simple and schematic style, showing little in terms of detail. Their wings are open to either side, as their faces turn outward toward the viewer. This is in contrast to the faces of the angels in most examples from Byzantine art, where the figures typically display their faces in profile, turning away from the central image. On the “Nikae” sarcophagus, one hand of each winged-figure clutches the wreath and one hand grasps the ribbon extending from the Hercules knot in the center of the panel. The wreath itself is schematic and segmented. In its interior is a pentagon with a circle in the center.⁵⁷

These five examples of winged-figures flanking wreaths may represent a link between the eagle-symbol in Jewish art and the winged-figures in Christian art. Avigad noted the similarity between the eagles depicted on synagogue lintels and the winged-figure-flanking-wreath motif, both playing a secondary role in relation to the central image which they flank.⁵⁸ The eagles in our corpus are analogous to these other motifs in that they are winged-figures that flank a central wreath. If the form and placement of the eagle-images in Jewish art can be linked, then perhaps also the two symbols—eagle and winged-figure—serve the same role. Moreover, if these winged-figures in Jewish art are stylistically

⁵⁵ Avigad 1976: 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 147-49, Pl. XLVI:1.

⁵⁷ The meaning of this central-image is unclear, as I was unable to locate any parallels.

⁵⁸ Avigad 1976: 149.

paralleled by the winged-figures in Christian art, then perhaps they too should be understood as having similar symbolic meanings. It seems safe to say that the winged-figures in Christian art are indeed angels.⁵⁹ Therefore, the meaning of the eagle-images in Jewish art may be similar to that of the angel.

The literary connections between the roles of angels and eagles have already been noted above (chapter four). The Mekhilta d'Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, for example, makes an analogy between the eagles in Ex. 19:4 and the angel of God in Ex. 14:19-20. Angels are described in 3 Enoch 26:3 and 44:5 as having the bodies of eagles. In addition, the eagles, like angels, are described as servants and messengers of God in 2 and 4 Baruch. Such a connection is further suggested by the incorporation of the eagle as part of the Holy Creatures—*Hayyot ha-Qodesh*—of Ezekiel's vision, presented along with the other divine figures, including *cherubim*, *ophanim*, and *seraphim*, all of which fall under the broader category of angels, or servants of God.⁶⁰ In 3 Enoch 2:1 and the Life of Adam and Eve 33:2, the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* are replaced by eagles who pull God's chariot, thus indicating a specific duty among the heavenly servants.⁶¹

The eagles play an important role as one of the four-faced creatures, the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*, of Ezekiel's vision. These creatures are servants and messengers of God, as well as

⁵⁹ See above, n. 36. I say "Christian" art here as opposed to "Byzantine" art in general, where the image appears as Victories, typically bestowing favor on the Caesar or member of his household.

⁶⁰ Alexander 1983: 242.

⁶¹ Another interesting connection between eagles and angels comes from the story of Joseph and Asenath. According to Ginzberg 1913: V, 97, the rabbinic version of the tale relates that the angel, Michael, brings Asenath as a child from Canaan to Egypt so that her brothers would not kill her. There she is adopted by Potiphar and later encountered by Joseph. In the Syriac version, it is an eagle, not Michael, who brings her to Egypt. Obviously the Syriac version represents a Christian reading, however it is unclear whether the eagle is itself a Christian interpolation, or if this tradition was taken from some Jewish version. In either case, the identification of the angel with the eagle is noteworthy.

singers of his praise.⁶² Their heavenly duties as messengers appear in the Targum tradition and in synagogue liturgy.⁶³ In *Hekhalot Rabbati*, the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* serve as the gatekeepers to the various *hekhalot*,⁶⁴ recalling the numerous eagles and winged-figures on the doorway-lintels of synagogues. As the eagles themselves replace the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* on occasion, they demonstrate their importance as God's primary winged-creatures, capable of pulling the divine chariot, i.e. the bearers of the *merkavah*. Although the image of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* does not appear in any ancient Jewish art, to my knowledge,⁶⁵ the lion and bull—the two other animals that form these mythological creatures—do appear often, the former as frequently as the eagle.⁶⁶

Since the eagles—whether alone or as part of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*—appear as servants of God, it is relevant to consider briefly the role of angels generally in Jewish literature. The corpus of *Hekhalot* literature is particularly useful here since it describes highly developed angelologies and the texts likely date to the period of the eagle-images.⁶⁷ Like the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*, angels in general serve as gatekeepers to the *hekhalot*, as well as

⁶² Halperin 1988: 77, 123, 397.

⁶³ Ibid. 123.

⁶⁴ Schäfer 1992: 142.

⁶⁵ There are however depictions of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh* from Christian art as early as the fifth century; Cough 1973: 120. In addition these three animals, along with the human figure with wings, appear as the symbols of the four Evangelists; Goodenough 1958: VIII, 142.

⁶⁶ See above, chapter two. Also, e.g. the three dimensional lion statues from the synagogues of Nabratein, Chorazin, and Umm el-Qanatir, as well as on a sarcophagus from the Bet She'arim necropolis; see Hachlili 1988. While the lion is shown in a variety of forms, the bull, which also appears on a sarcophagus from Bet She'arim, is typically depicted with just the head, facing forward, as on the lintel from el-Ahmadiyah (chapter two). There seems to be a predilection toward these animals in synagogue imagery, either because of their role as part of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*, or as divine creatures in general.

⁶⁷ For overviews, see Scholem 1965 and Schäfer 1992. While the dating of the literature is still a matter of debate, most scholars agree that the majority of texts should be attributed to the Byzantine period; see Schäfer 1992: 7-8 and literature cited there. In addition, see Elior 2004, who connects the major themes in *Hekhalot* literature with earlier Jewish apocalyptic works.

sacred guardians.⁶⁸ In 3 Enoch and Hekhalot Rabbati they are primarily praisers-of-God, as they continuously recite the *Qedushah*.⁶⁹ Throughout the Hekhalot texts, angels are described as “princes” (*sarim*) of various things, including the “Divine Presence,” the Torah and learning, and the nations of the earth.⁷⁰

In addition to the angels’ explicit roles within the Hekhalot literature, R. Elijah has shown that they also served as teachers who could instruct humans in descending to the *merkavah*, i.e. the chariot of God.⁷¹ These instructors could be summoned for instruction and specific help in daily life, as evidenced both in the literary sources⁷² and by numerous incantation amulets containing extended lists of angels by name.⁷³ Such amulets have been found in the synagogues at Tiberias, Kh. Kanaf, and Merot—all of which are sites within the immediate vicinity of the synagogues bearing eagle reliefs.

The desire and ability to invoke angels may be directly connected to their depiction within the synagogue. H. Belting has pointed out that mundane concerns among worshippers tend to manifest themselves in calls for aid and assistance to the divine.⁷⁴ Artistic representations of the divine servants would have allowed people to envision physically those

⁶⁸ Alexander 1983: 243; Schäfer 1992: 142.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Alexander 1983: 243.

⁷¹ Elijah 1993-94: 17. More recently, Elijah has argued that there is a direct connection between the Hekhalot literature and the Qumran literature, positing the former as “a revival of the myth of the angelic priest priests and an immortalization of the earthly, tangible Temple and priesthood as reflections of the infinite, invisible dimensions of the Merkavah and the angels”; Elijah 2004: 260. See further, *ibid.* 232- 65. See also further below.

⁷² Alexander 1983: 242.

⁷³ Naveh and Shaked 1985; *idem* 1993: 19-20.

⁷⁴ Belting 1994: 6. In addition, the Hercules knot was also seen as a “mystic symbol” in Roman art; see Maguire et al. 1989. I thank Doug Boin for bringing this to my attention, though I regret that I was unable to follow up on this point prior to the submission of the present study.

servants as sent directly from God.⁷⁵ From this perspective, one can easily place the practices of *Ma'aseh Merkavah* within the context of the material culture of these synagogues.

While it is as yet unclear how widespread Merkavah mysticism was in late ancient Jewish society—particularly regarding the use of incantation amulets—it seems likely that angels played a significant role in the common conception of the divine. Angels were depicted explicitly in the synagogues of ed-Dikkeh, Bar'am, and Ramah by using the same symbolic conventions as contemporary Christian art, i.e. the winged Victories of Classical motifs. For some reason, synagogues seem to have found it preferable to depict divine servants as eagles.

The reason for this preference is unclear. It is possible that there was a general feeling of reluctance to depict the more explicit figural imagery of the angels with their human-like features, in light of the second commandment. This explanation seems unlikely, though, given the figured images in mosaic pavements found around Palestine in the same period.⁷⁶ Another possibility is that the eagle was revered as analogous to angels because of its role as one of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*. Such a view is not entirely unlikely in light of the presence of lions and bulls in synagogue art, as well.

One last potential explanation for the apparent predilection toward the eagle-image regards the tradition of this symbol in ancient Judaism. As suggested in chapter three, the eagle was probably a well-known and acceptable image to Jews as early as the Hellenistic

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ One could argue that there was a difference in perception given that the mosaics were two-dimensional and the reliefs were three-dimensional. I find this argument unconvincing though, since the sculptures are typically low-reliefs with flat details. The second commandment prohibition is geared toward images worshipped, and would only incite a halakhic objection to sculpture carved in the round; see Eliav 1998.

period. In light of this argument, it is reasonable to suppose that the Jews of late ancient Palestine simply returned to the one figural symbol with which they had identified—albeit on a limited scale—in the past.

J. Elsner wrote: “When delicately interpreted, changes in art can provide an illuminating bridge into the changing ideology of a culture.”⁷⁷ The emergence of the eagle-image within Jewish art raises the question of what sorts of cultural changes were taking place. While angelological and apocalyptic literature had been a hallmark of late Second Temple Judaism, the popularity of Hekhalot texts—a sort of subcategory of apocalyptic literature—in the Jewish communities of Byzantine Palestine may represent a renewed emphasis on mystic genres in light of Christianity.⁷⁸ Analogous motifs within sacred architecture may underlie parallel ideologies between late ancient Judaism and Christianity. Whatever the implications of this relationship, it is worth noting that both envisaged a complex hierarchy of heavenly beings, manifested in similar artistic portrayals.

Conclusion

In our final chapter we have attempted to bring together the archaeological and literary evidence of eagles in the Jewish culture of late ancient Palestine. Considering its location in synagogues and on sarcophagi, the eagle-image should be considered a holy or sacred image and not merely a decorative object with no theological significance. In light of the similarities in the forms of motifs within Christian art of the period, as well as in light of the widespread presence of Hekhalot literature in Jewish Palestine, it seems probable that the eagle-symbol was understood as a servant of God, i.e. a form of angel. The depiction of the

⁷⁷ Elsner 1995: 191.

⁷⁸ Elion 1997: 222-24; see further Magness 2003, regarding the effect on synagogue art in light of the Helios and zodiac motif.

symbol in synagogues suggests that it was a particularly revered image, representing to the synagogue patron a desired connection with and the ability to relate to these heavenly beings.

Art historians generally understand religious art as invoking another world.⁷⁹ This is true for both the patron and historian. For the latter, an examination of the synagogue images has thrown light on the beliefs of those who built and worshipped in these buildings. For the former, the synagogue art invokes the world of heavenly beings, bringing the viewer closer to the divine, as described in the Hekhalot literature of the period.

Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the limited scope of this study, several avenues have been left unexplored. The connection between the eagle and other symbols in Jewish art has been alluded to but not developed. Most scholars who research artistic symbols today would probably agree that studying a single image as if it were isolated from those around it is an entirely artificial construction of the modern scholarship. In this sense, it would prove particularly useful to examine further the role of the eagle along with the other symbols in the synagogue, particularly the lion and bull—animals which also serve as part of the *Hayyot ha-Qodesh*—as well some of the distinctly Jewish symbols, like the menorah.

Additionally, it would be helpful to conduct further research on Christian views of the eagle-symbol. The fact that Jews chose to display this image more frequently than that of the angel is surely significant; equally so is the question as to why Christians *avoided* the eagle-symbol. A stronger comparative analysis could be made if the literary and material evidence of the Christian East were better explored.

⁷⁹ Elsner 1995: 192.

Z. Ma'oz has suggested a connection between the synagogue art of the Golan and Upper Galilee and that of Coptic Egypt.⁸⁰ I believe that his argument is sound, and the evidence does indeed suggest some sort of connection, particularly in the case of the eagle. Not only are angels well-represented in Coptic art, but the eagle is also attested with more frequency relative to Byzantine art in general.⁸¹ As such, this study would benefit from a further examination of the nature of this connection.

Lastly, it will be left to further research to explore the broader historical implications of these eagle-images in late ancient Judaism. The fact that the examples of eagle reliefs are generally clustered in the Golan and Upper Galilee—though certainly not exclusively—raises the question of the precise brand of Judaism practiced in these synagogues and the nature of the related communities. It has been suggested that the Helios and zodiac imagery in synagogue mosaic floors of the same period represents a specific ideology related to the Temple, and that their presence indicates a rise in the power of the priestly class in Jewish society.⁸² In addition, some see a direct connection between the highly-developed angelologies of the Hekhalot literature and the priestly concerns exhibited in liturgy.⁸³ Further consideration regarding the priestly elements of these synagogues would provide helpful insights into the meaning of these symbols. Moreover, the variance in image-motifs between the synagogues of the Golan and Upper Galilee—the so-called “Galilean” synagogues—and those with highly decorative mosaic floors suggests, to my mind, a difference in either the socio-economic make-up of the communities or specific ideological

⁸⁰ Ma'oz 1995.

⁸¹ See Duthuit 1931.

⁸² Magness 2003.369-76.

⁸³ Elior 2004: 232-65.

concerns in synagogue practice and perhaps conceptions of the divine in general. Unfortunately, these are larger topics than cannot be adequately addressed here, but should be further developed in future research.

Although our conclusions have attempted to interpret and provide reasons for the appearance of the eagle in late ancient Judaism, a final word of caution is warranted. As Belting noted: “Essential to the spirituality of late antiquity is a symbolic and hence polysemic mode of looking at the world ...”⁸⁴ In a world of *non*-literal imagery, multiple meanings could be discerned.⁸⁵ Thus so, we present these conclusions as a possible suggestion, far from being the final word on the subject. It is hoped that future research will continue to employ comparative artistic analysis, alongside relevant primary literature, as an appropriate method for interpreting sacred imagery in ancient Judaism.

⁸⁴ Elsner 1995: 218.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

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Fig. i

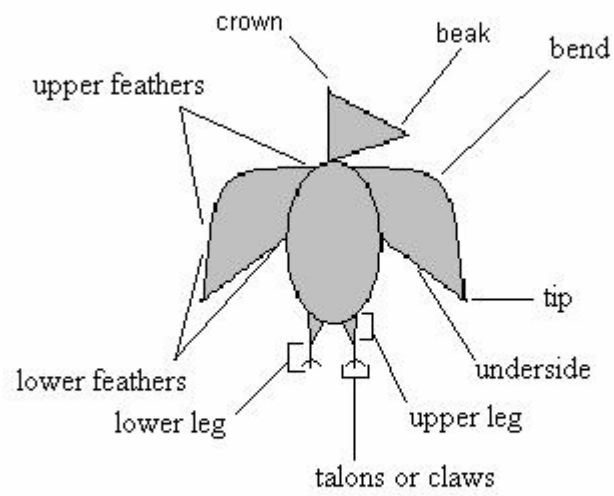
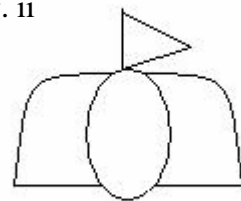
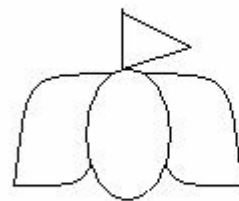


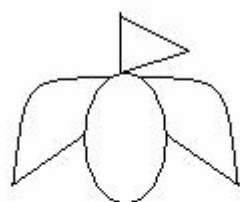
Fig. ii



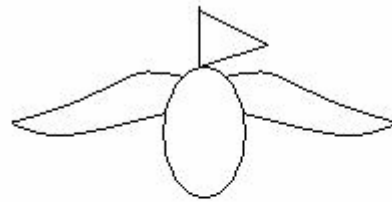
1a. Open-draped, flat



1b. Open-draped, with point



2. Open-pointed



3. Outstretched

Fig. 1

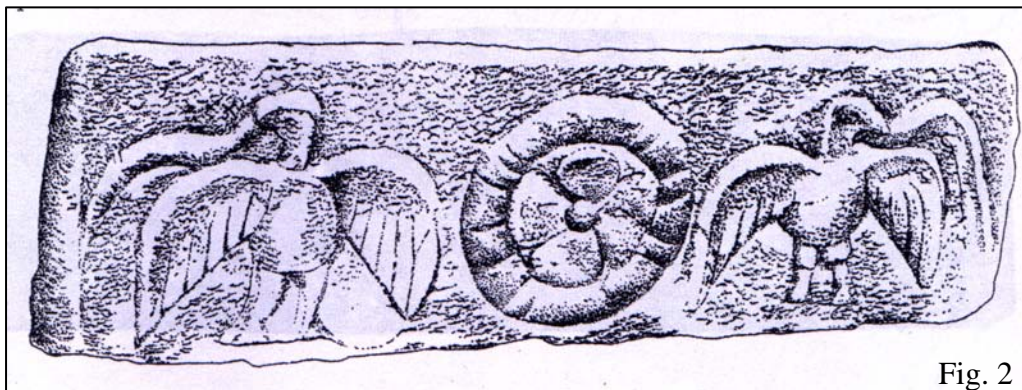
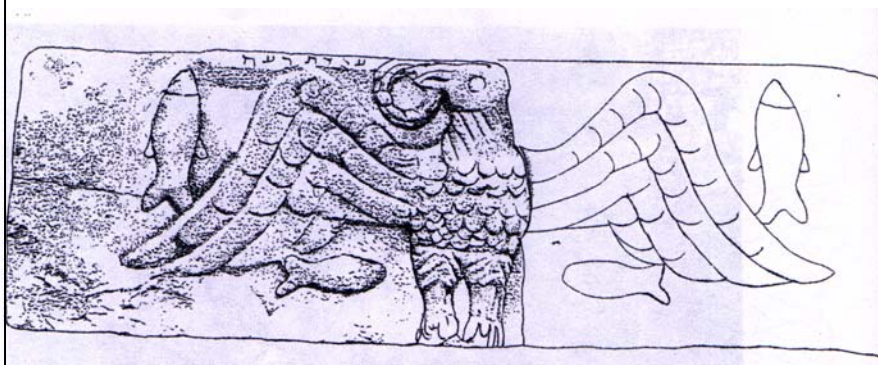


Fig. 2

Fig. 3

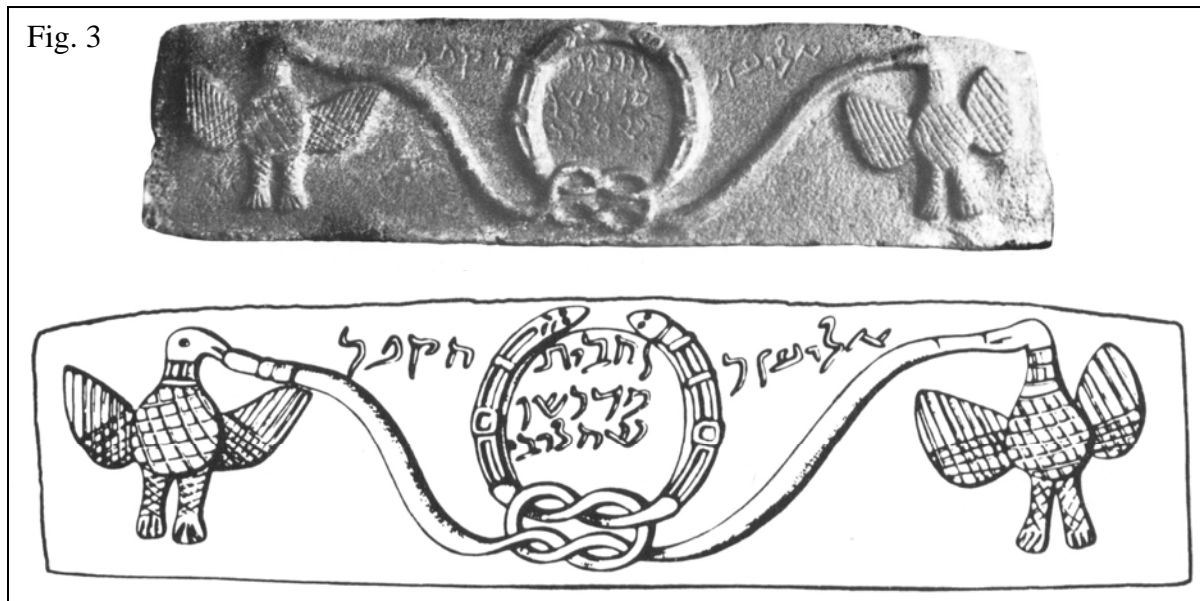


Fig. 4

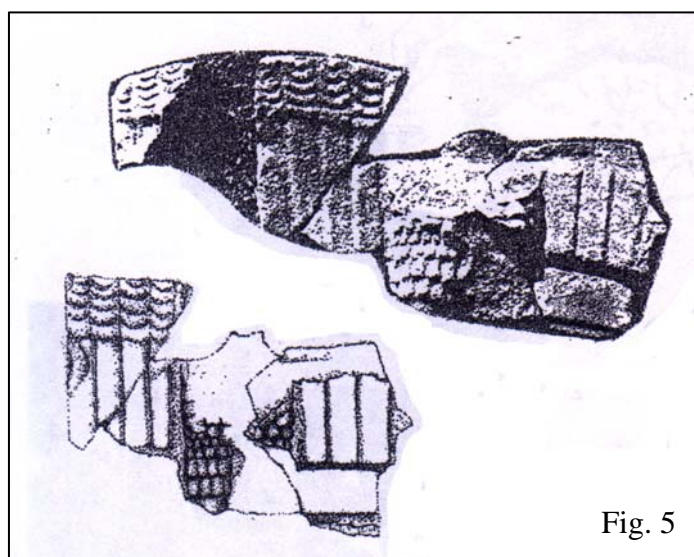


Fig. 5

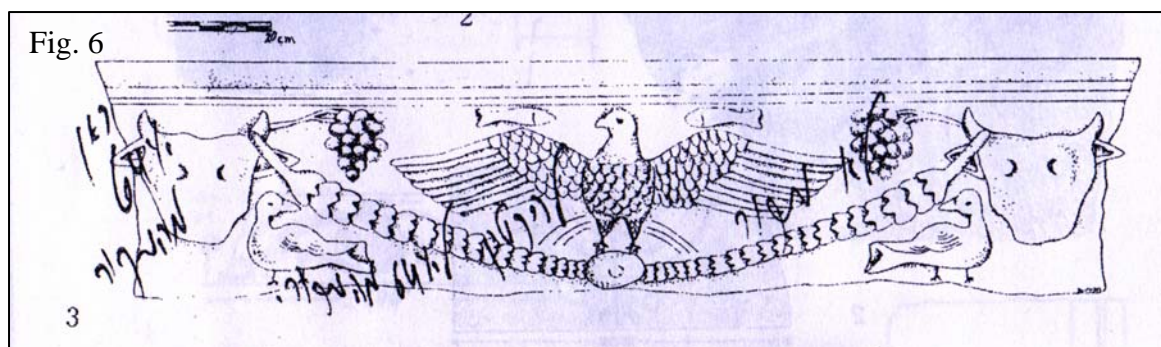


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

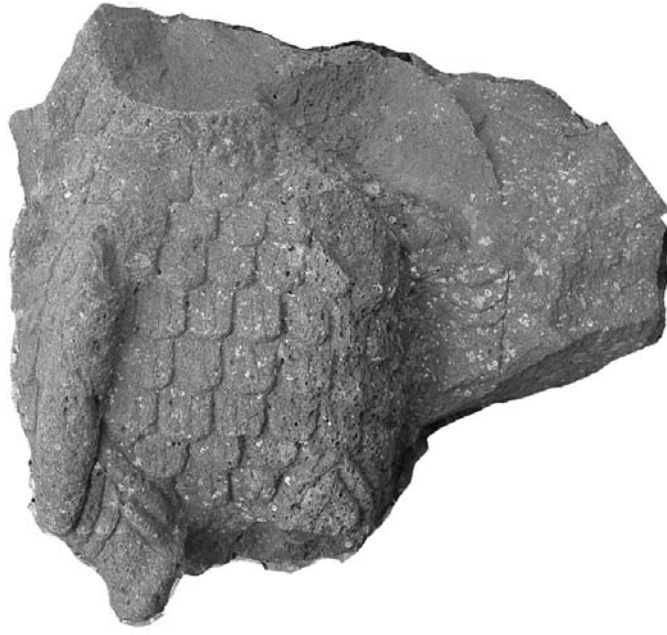


Fig. 9

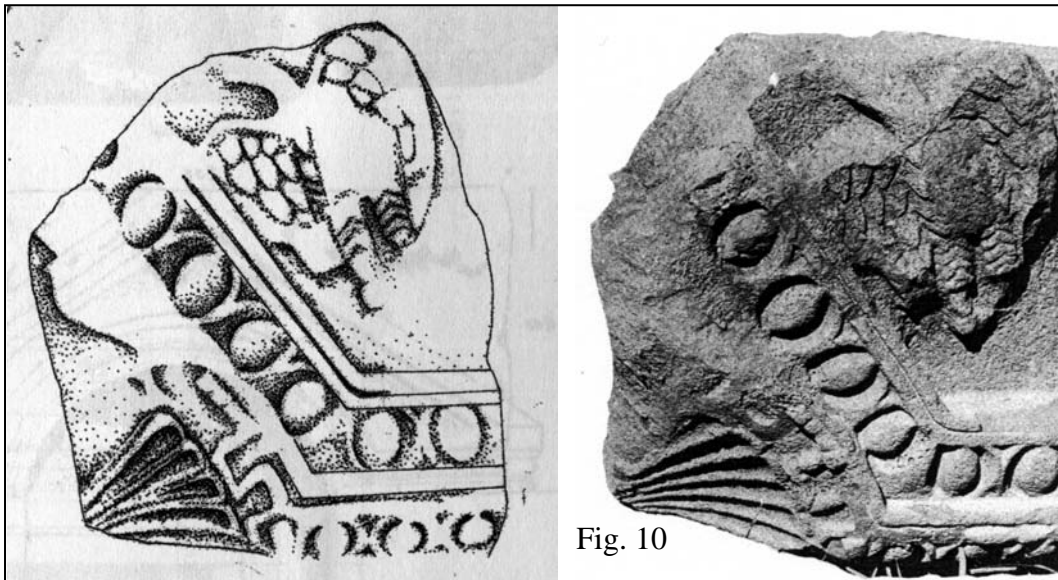


Fig. 10

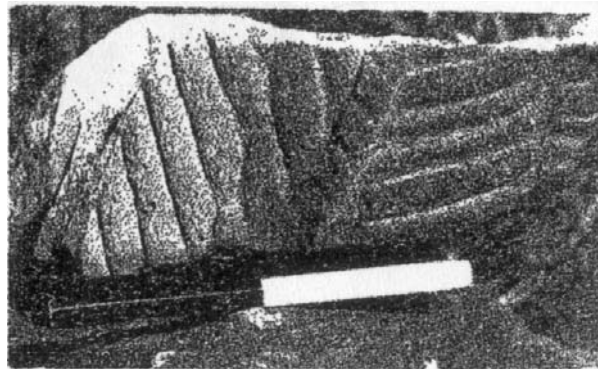


Fig. 11

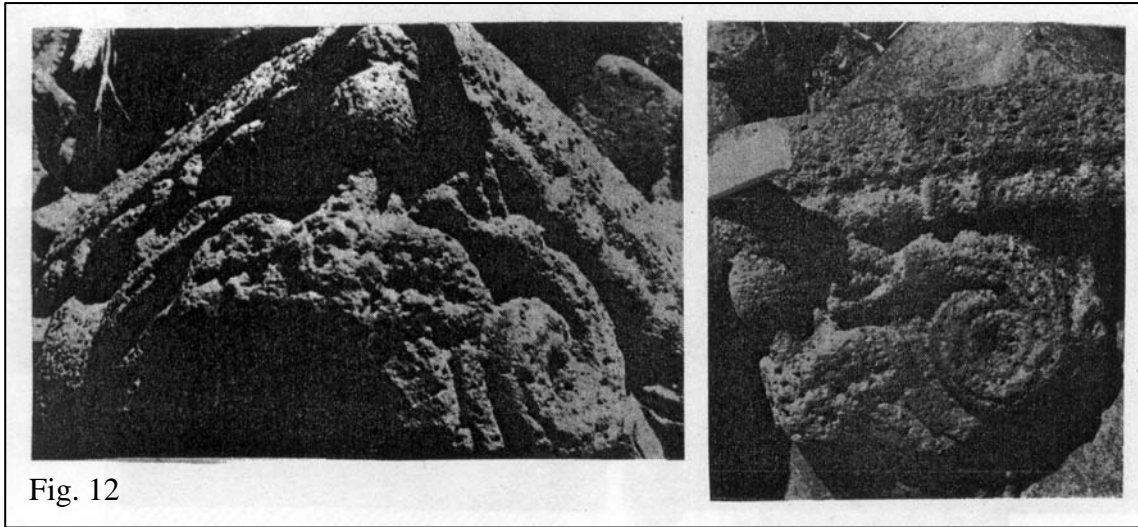


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

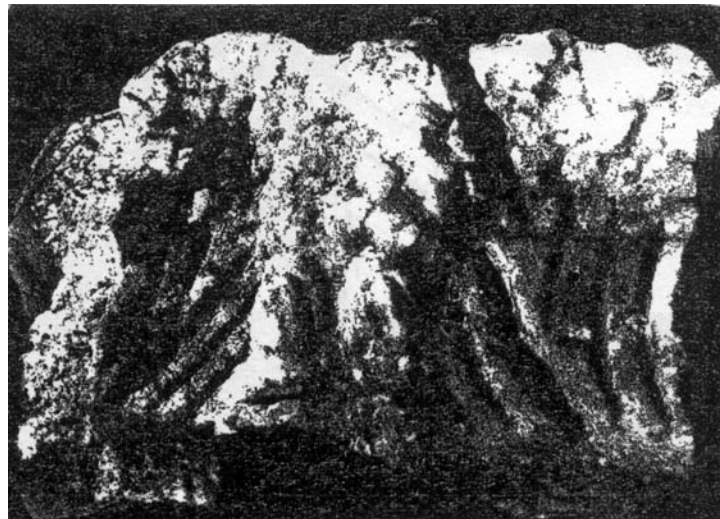


Fig. 14

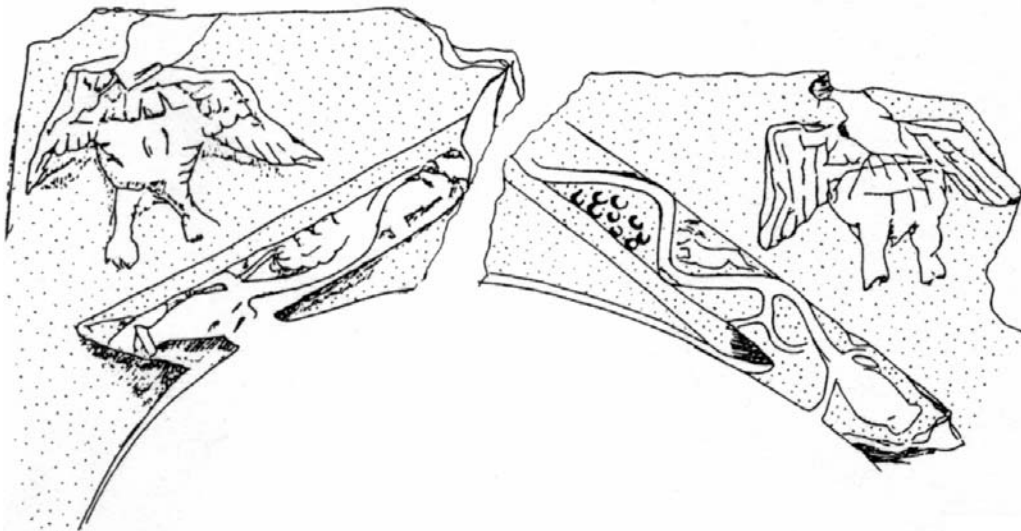
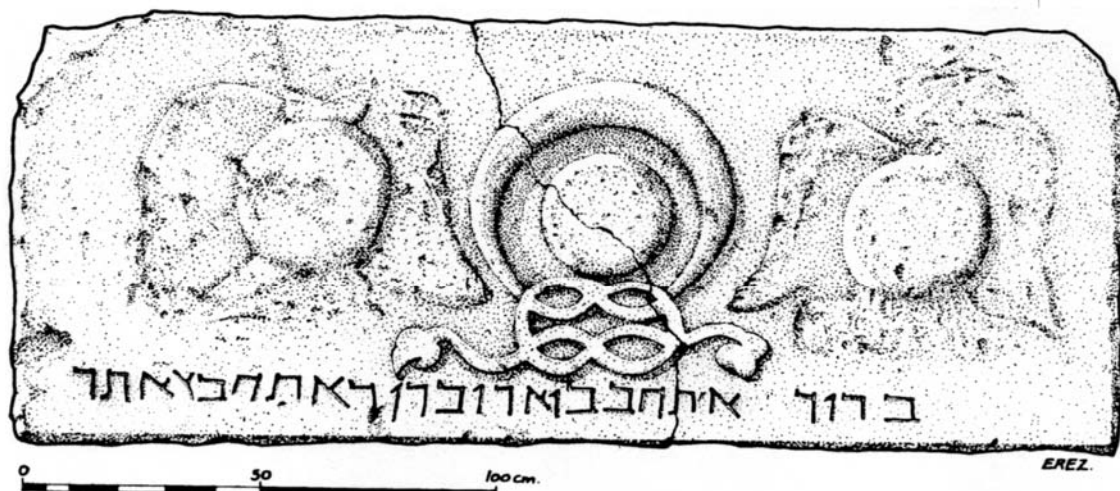


Fig. 15

Fig. 16



0 50 100 cm.

EREZ.

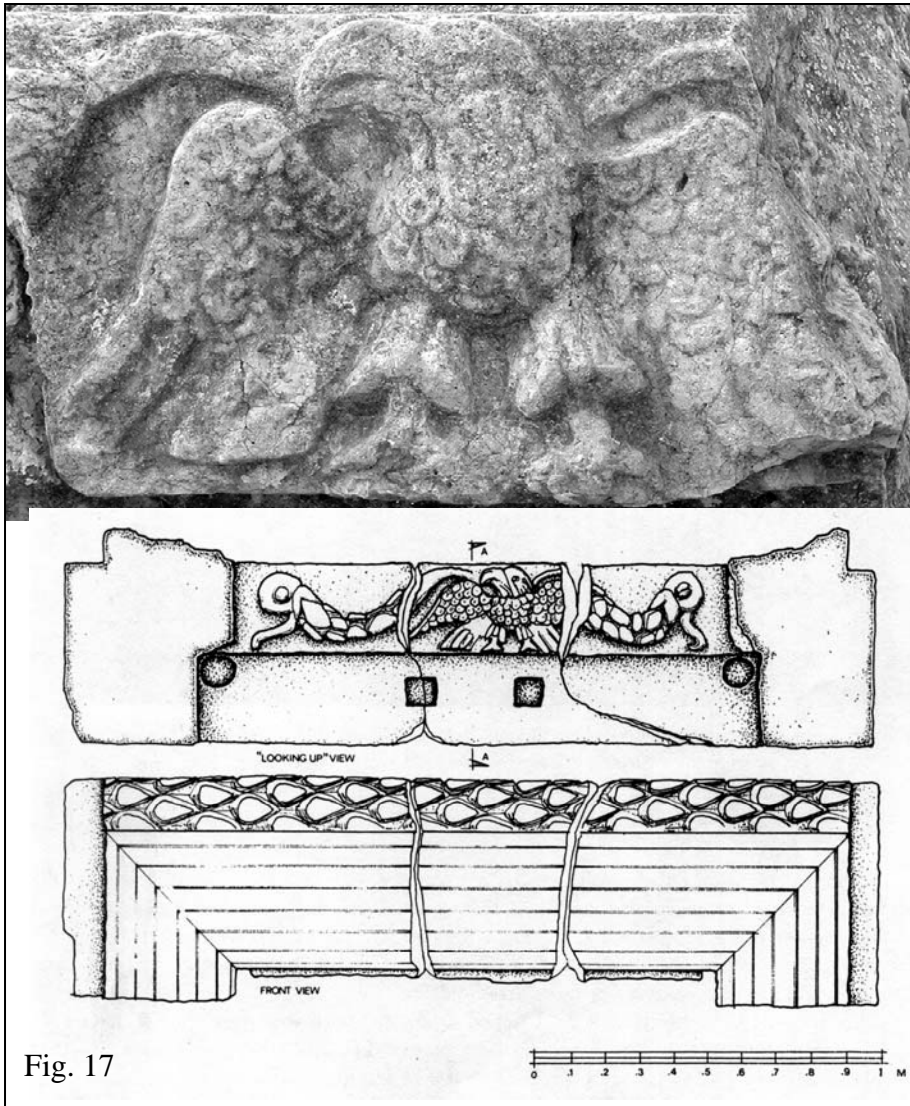
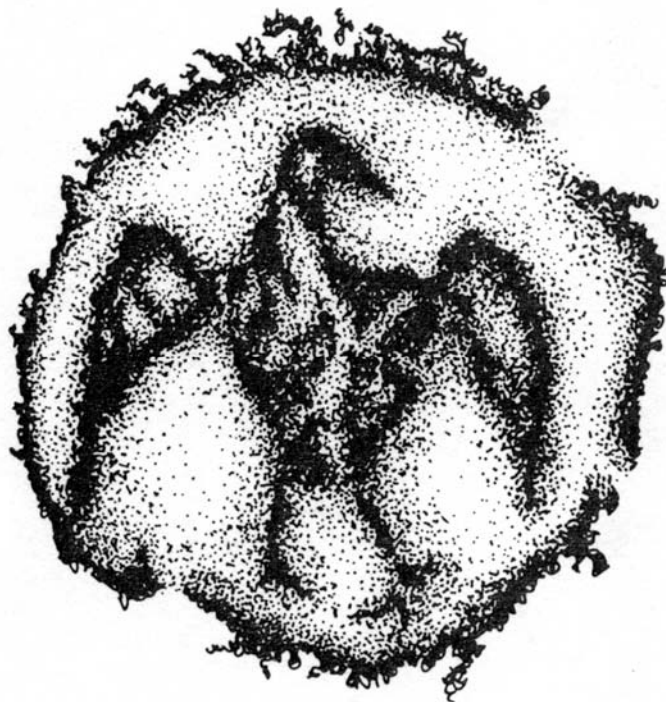


Fig. 18



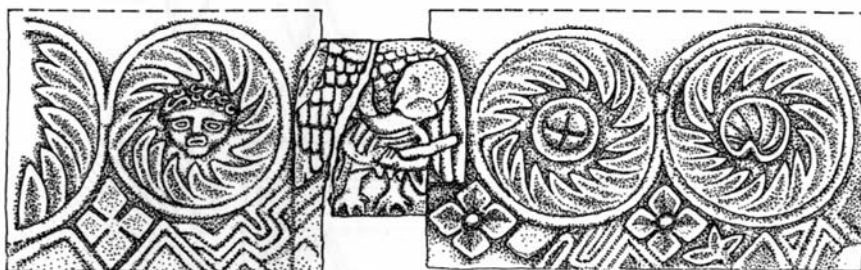
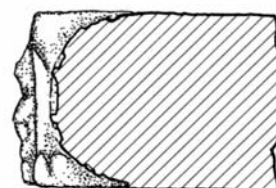


Fig. 19

Fig. 20

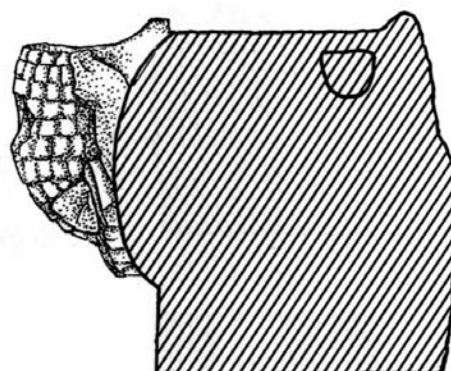
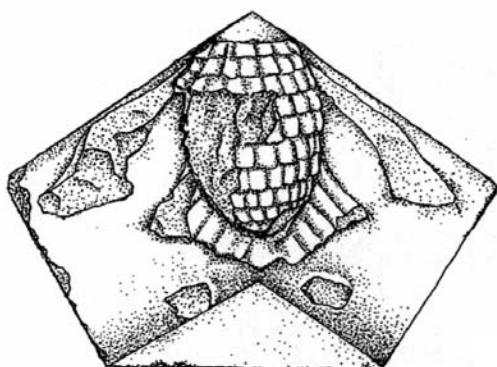


Fig. 21

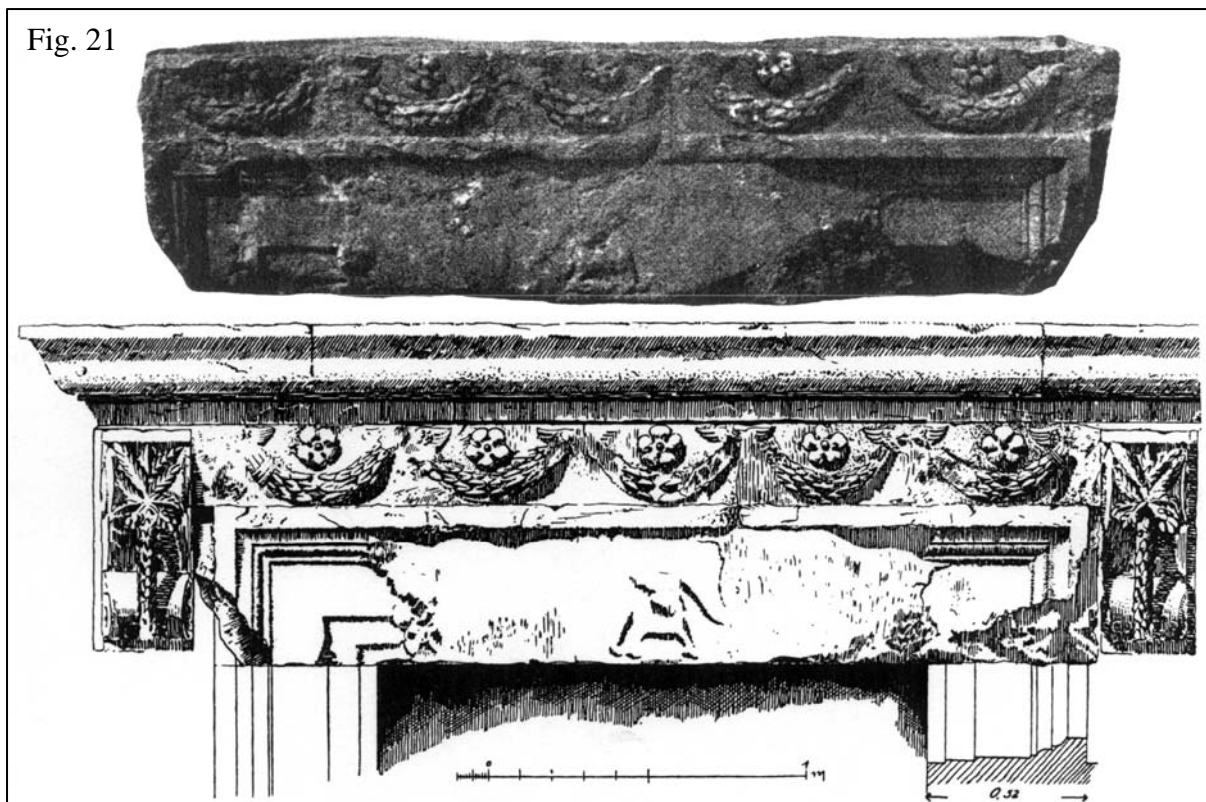


Fig. 22

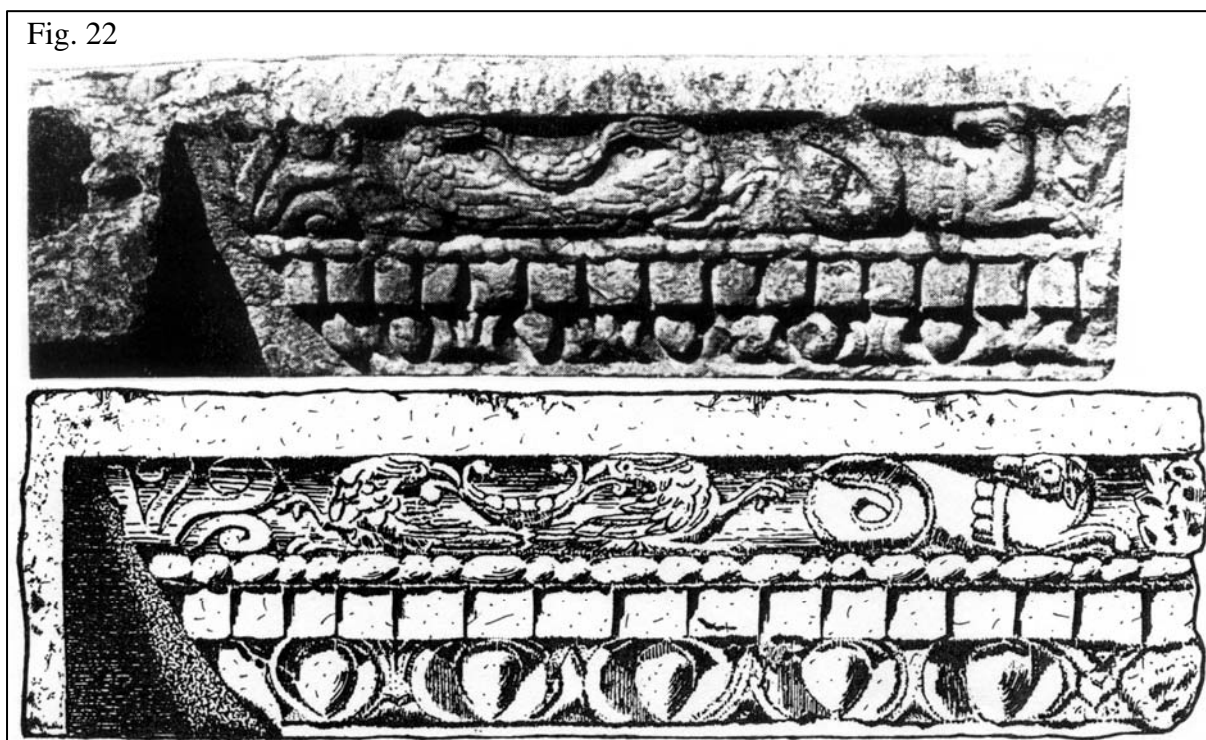




Fig. 23

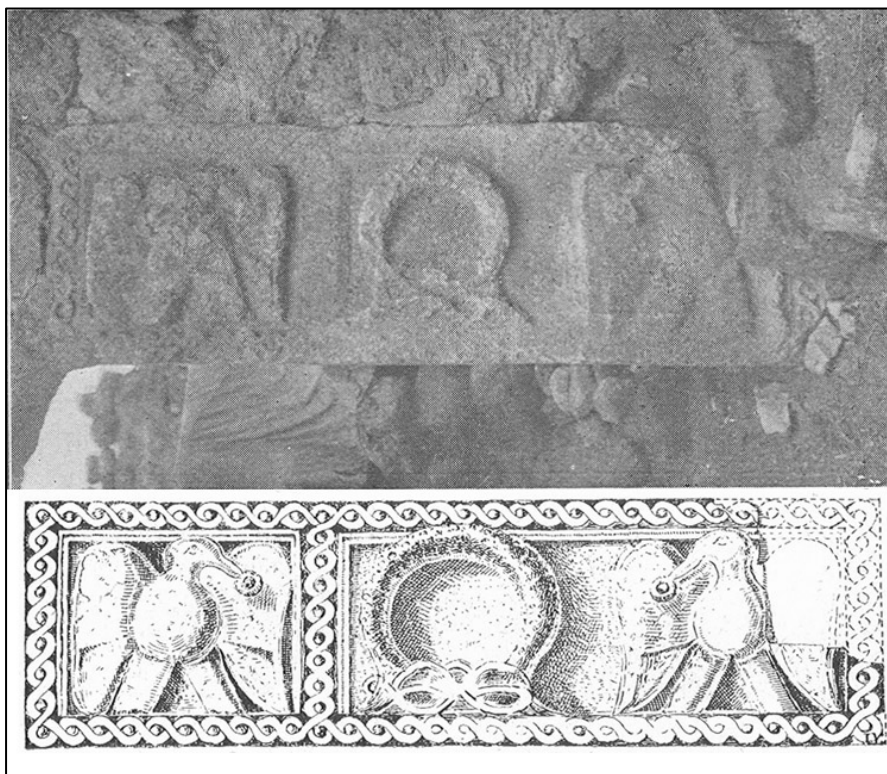


Fig. 24

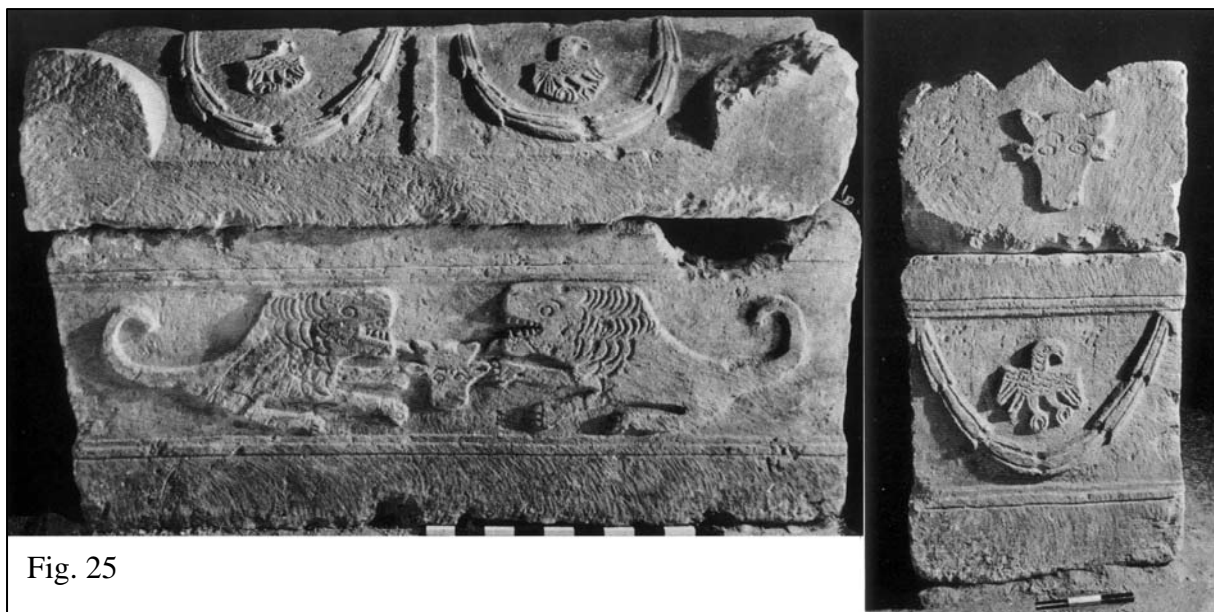


Fig. 25



Fig. 26

Fig. 27

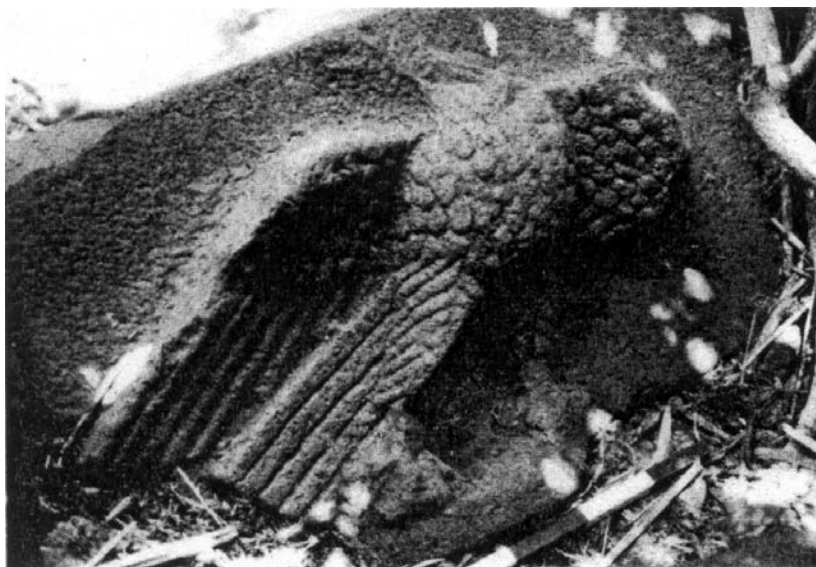


Fig. 28



Fig. 29

Fig. 30



Fig. 31

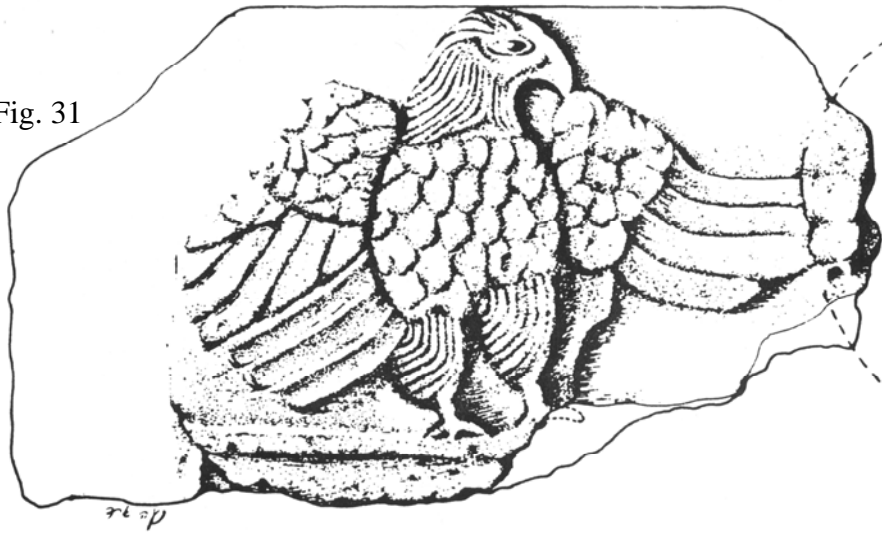


Fig. 32



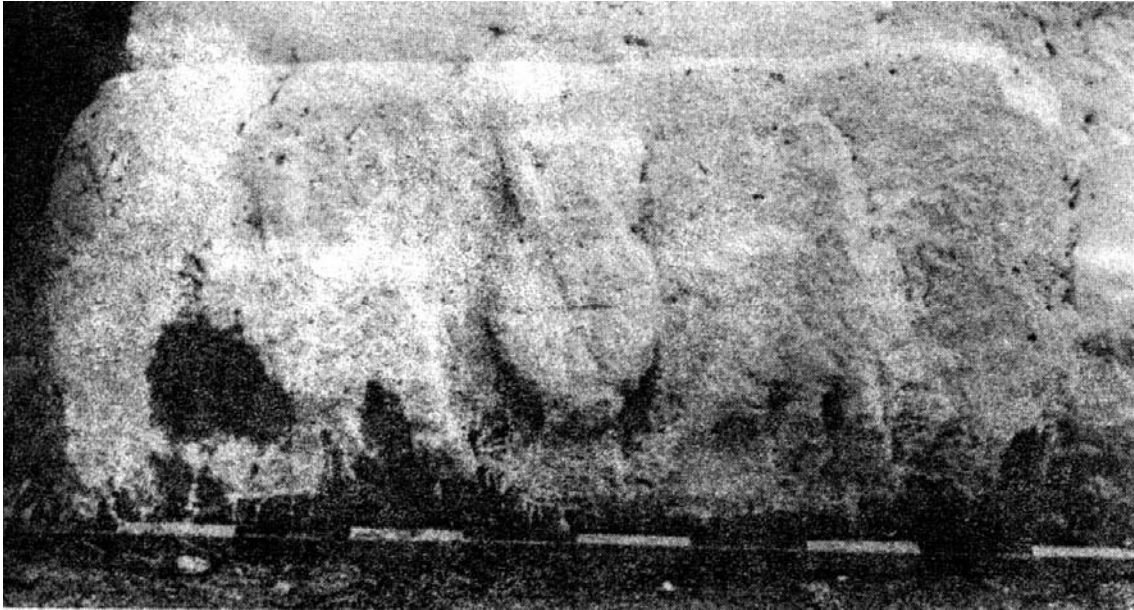


Fig. 33

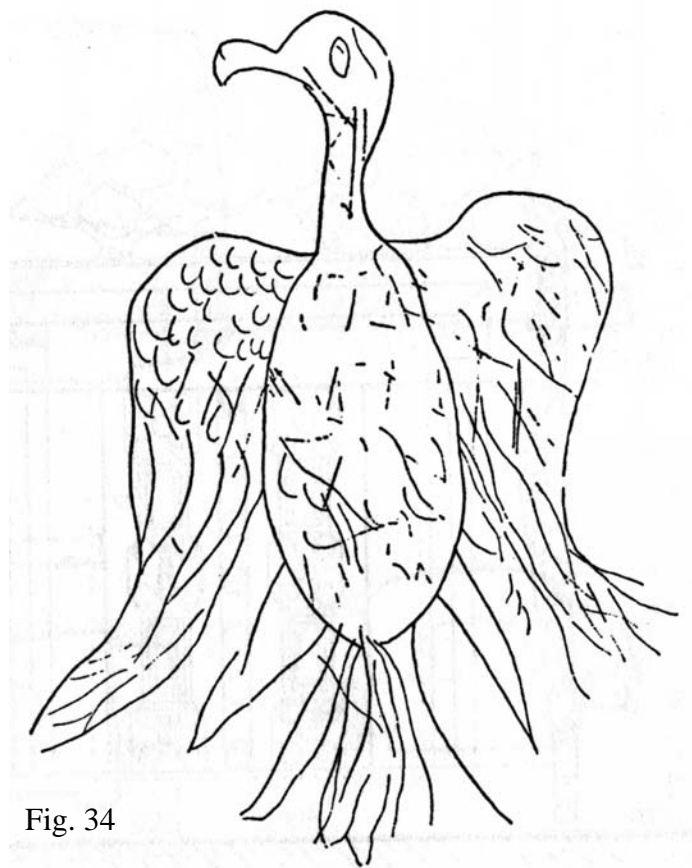


Fig. 34



Fig. 35

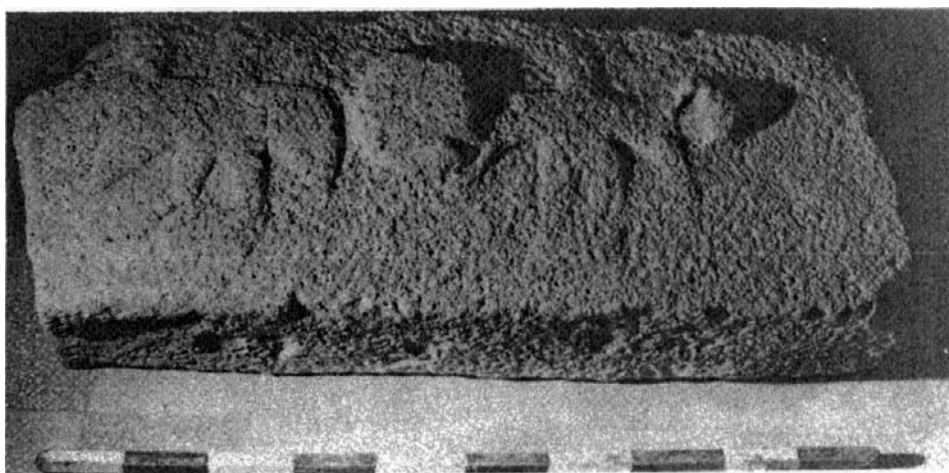


Fig. 36



Fig. 37

Fig. 38

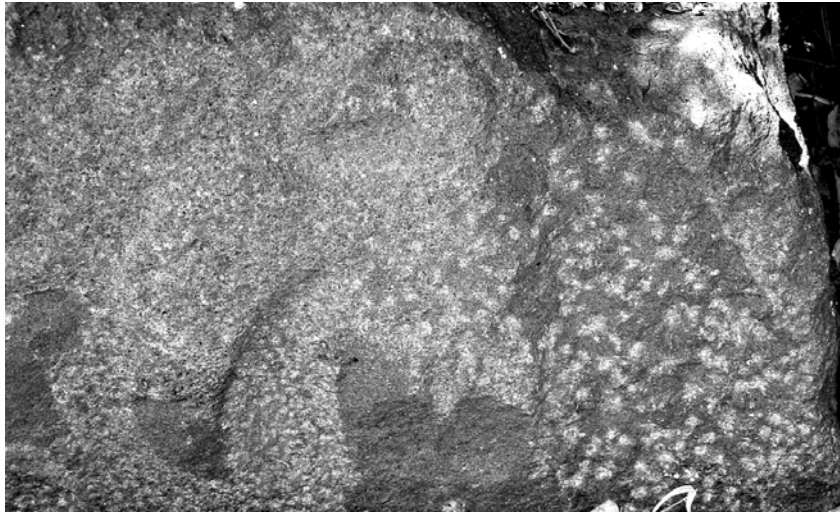
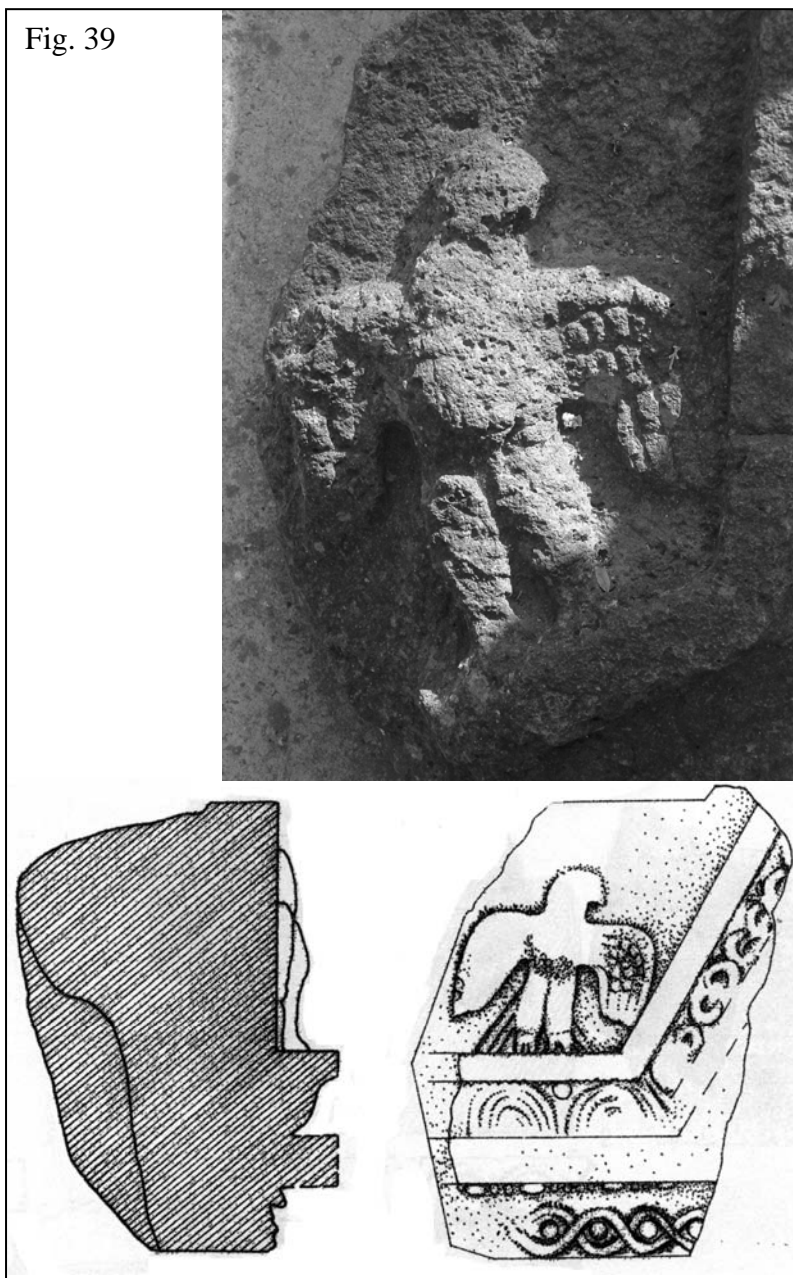


Fig. 39



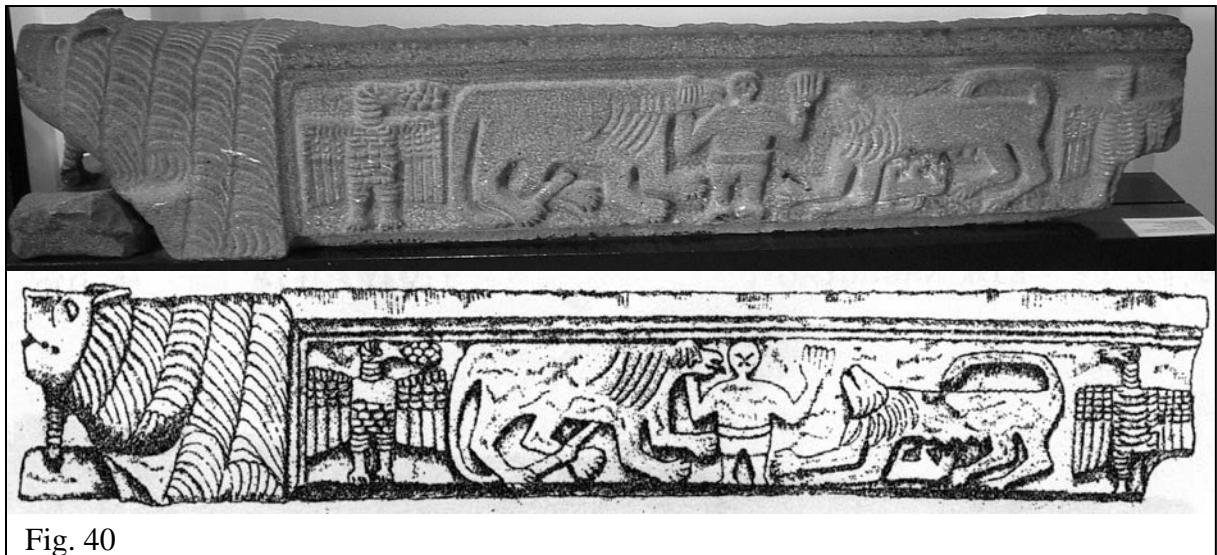


Fig. 40

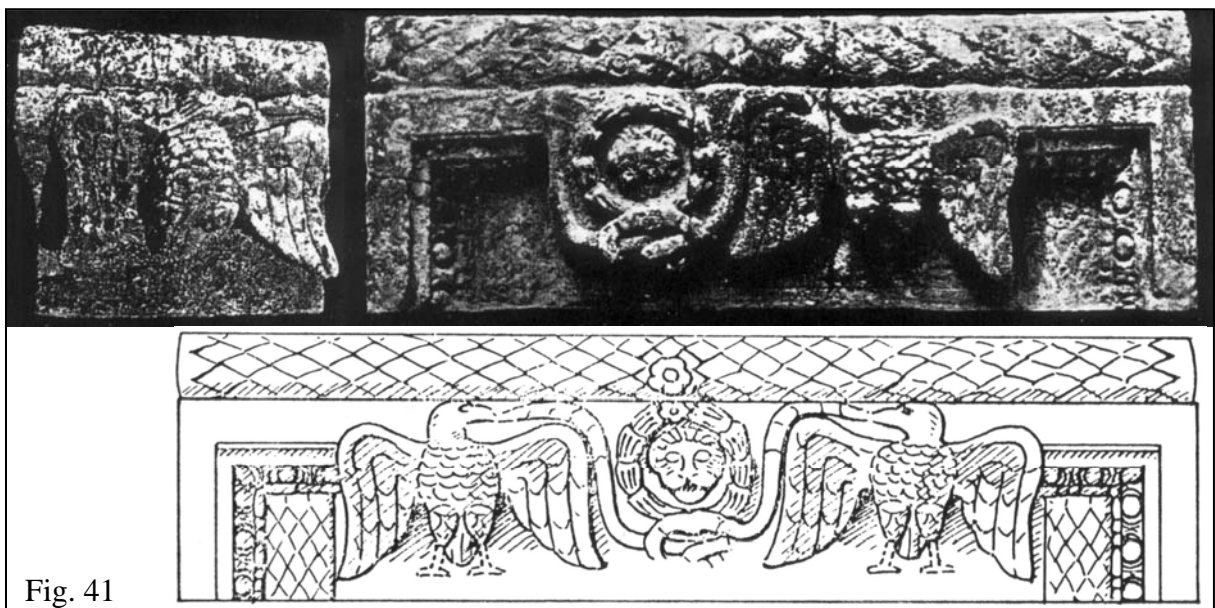


Fig. 41

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