

IMAGES OF BIRDS IN ROCK ART. ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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Archaeologists have always aimed at the co-operation of the different sciences to analyse in a multi-disciplinary approach the issues of ancient history. In this paper we try to highlight some problems connected with bird images which might interest ornithologists as well as archaeologists. The images of birds from prehistoric times, of course, cannot answer all our questions about the birds of the early periods, but they can help ornithologists in species definition, in reconstructing the landscape of certain areas and in finding out prehistoric man's hunting activities.

In the Palaeolithic Age, in spite of the many excavations, there are only a few bird images, (the bird figurines from Mal'ta and Buret', East Central Siberia are noteworthy examples). The author suggests that birds which were dangerous and not good for food are absent in Palaeolithic art. This point demands additional research from the ornithologist who may help to establish the significance of the birds in the prehistoric hunters' food and the effectiveness of different hunting methods, as well as the presence of birds in mythology and beliefs.

In the Neolithic and the Bronze Age the ornithologists acquire more data for research. The geographical scope of the findings becomes wider, as does the variety of bird species. It is natural, during these periods, that more questions appear and so the demand for input from the sphere of the sciences becomes greater. Climatic, social and economic changes in the life of the people led to developments in the arts, and to new methods in the production of images. The findings extant do not show all the bird species that, as we know, existed then but the species that do appear help to give us a fuller picture.

Bird representations are found among the Neolithic petroglyphs of Siberia, especially in Transbaykal. Often, inedible birds are shown such as eagles and falcons. It can be understood that in these images, it is not the birds themselves which were important, but their qualities and metaphoric meanings. Many birds, especially some long legged species and birds of prey, were considered to be divine beings or the most suitable images for the personification of spirits, in the far sky or beyond the grave. The speed and height of their flight, their coming in the spring from the far south and their returning there, their appearance in the dark night, all this made them mysterious and enigmatic. Birds were thought of as being able to bear mans' concious and prayers and on the other hand, to be messengers of god, symbols of his protection and incarnation of the divine (Anuchin, 1899). Anuchin's thought most completely reflects the significance of birds in the religion of the Siberian peoples. The 19th century Siberian shamans would not conduct a religious rite without having the correct bird images.

There are 8600 species of birds known to the science. From ancient times until the ethnographic present only 53 species of birds have been represented in the arts. Those



Fig. 110. Sacred bird: crane. Bronze Age (M. Martynov, *The Ancient Art of Northern Asia*, 1991, p. 161).

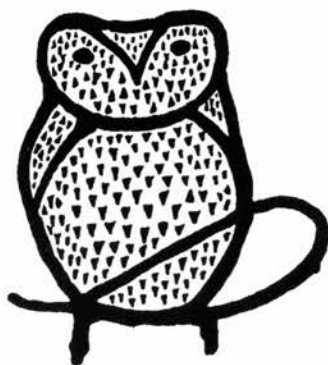


Fig. 111. Sacred bird: owl. Tom' River petroglyph (M. Martynov, 1991, p. 161).

birds obviously hunted for food were only 8 species: *goose*, *bustard*, *grouse*, *swan*, *quail*, *hazel-grouse*, *heath-cock* and *duck*. As previously mentioned, the others most probably entered into the category of totemic or cult birds. Ornithologists could provide a chart of the most outstanding features in the behaviour and appearance of the birds unknown to archaeologists, which could have attracted human attention.

Once bones and bird images found are defined, archaeologists, climatologists and ornithologists could provide a view on the motivation behind the choices made by early man, to hunt certain birds and to worship others. It is necessary to check whether the depicted bird species could indeed survive in the habitat where they were represented at that time. If the eagle could not have survived in West Siberia in the Bronze Age, it is likely that their images were introduced by migrating peoples, having the eagle as a blazon or symbol. It is also necessary to define which of the bird species would have been advantageous for hunting, except those obvious eight species we have already mentioned. Perhaps ornithologists could increase our knowledge on the methods for hunting birds and for their capture. In connection with the numerous scenes of battle between animals and predatory birds (widespread in medieval metallic castings of Western Siberia), it would be worth verifying which animals birds of prey may attack, and how. Would certain behavioural patterns of birds include sitting on the bear or the elk, (as depicted on finds from the Urals, Siberia and region of the river Kama)? The answers to these questions would help to explain symbolic and cult scenes.

Some researchers pay too much attention to analysing their own material and are less attentive to their colleagues' findings. That is why we feel the growing necessity to focus on all gathered materials. Ornithologists will be surprised by the archaeologists' method of categorising materials depending on the geographical location of the finds, but we archaeologists have never produced a monographic catalogue of zoomorphic images found at the various sites. We know that the number of zoomorphic images is almost 250,000, therefore it is understandable that without a comparative study it is impossible to acquire an overview on the meaning of the images, or their distribution and cultural belonging. To know the historical significance of each bird and animal in the spiritual and material life of the people the input of specialists from other disciplines, such as zoology, would be of much help. We are therefore advocating for a multi-disciplinary co-operation in the study of palaeo-ornithology.

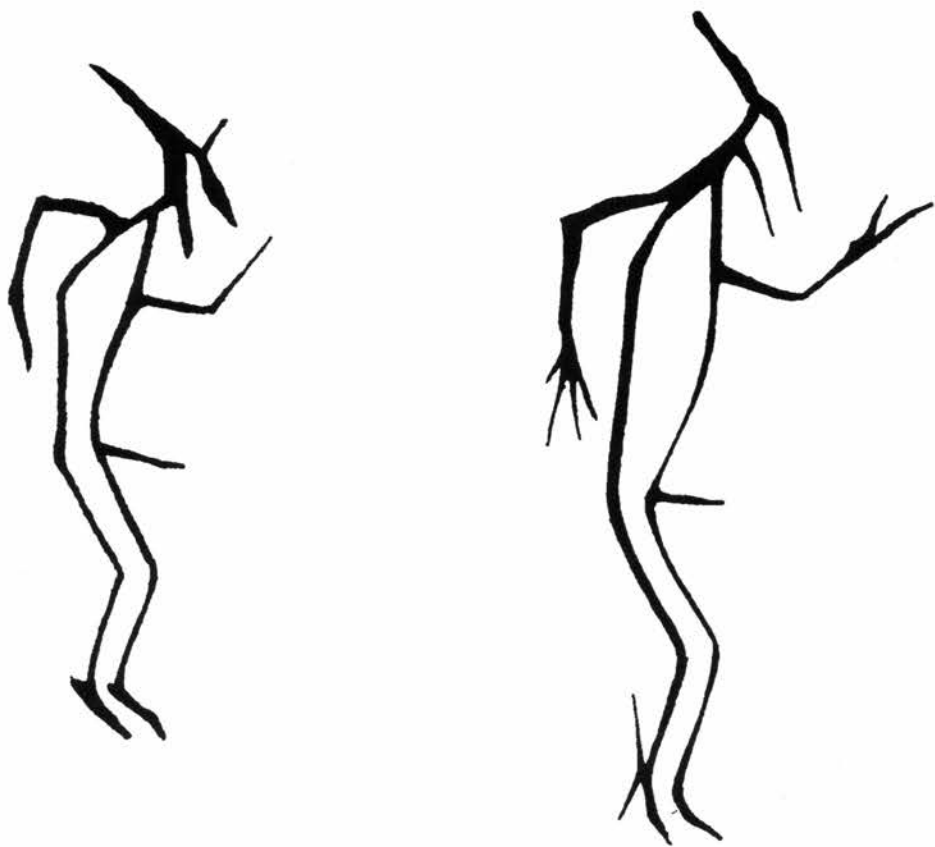


Fig. 112. Birdmen, Tom' River petroglyph. Eneolithic (M. Martynov, 1991, p. 166).

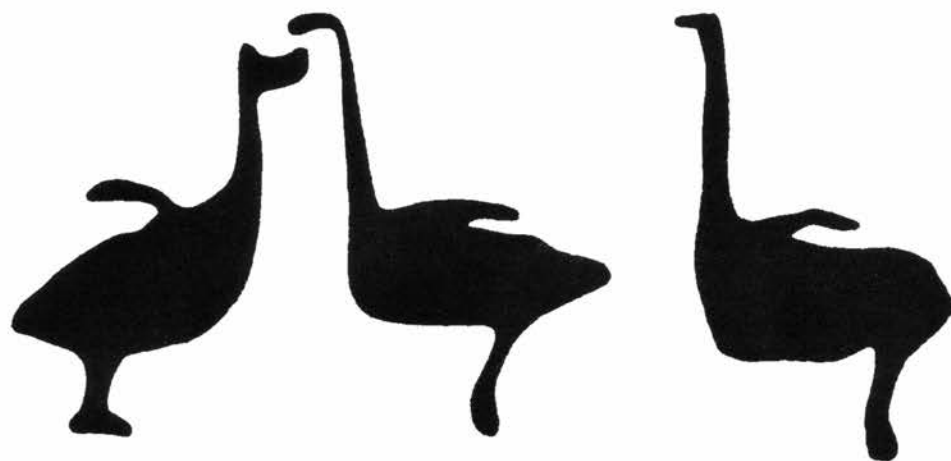


Fig. 113. Bird figures from different compositions. Pecked. Sagan Zaba cliff, southwest Lake Baykal. Bronze Age (M. Martynov, 1991, p. 150).

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Riassunto

L'autore dà un quadro delle figurazioni di uccelli nell'arte rupestre ed auspica una cooperazione multidisciplinare nello studio della paleornitologia.

Summary

The author provides an overview of the images of birds in rock art and advocates for a multi-disciplinary co-operation in the study of palaeo-ornithology.

Résumé

L'auteur présente une vision générale des images d'oiseaux dans l'art rupestre et souhaite une coopération multidisciplinaire dans l'étude de la paléo-ornithologie.