

Late Himyarite Vulture Reliefs¹



Fig. 1. Haddat Ghulays as viewed from Zafar /al-Gusr (al-Qasr). The white arrow shows the find-spot of the relief. The black one shows its present location.

In 2002 Alexander Sima took part in the field activities of the University of Heidelberg Zafar Expedition and recorded inscriptions in the site museum as well as those in the surrounding area. The following is dedicated to a young friend and colleague - an inexhaustable source of information - who in no small way guided and supported our fieldwork in the Yemen before and after his first sojourn to Zafar. It seems fitting to take up a period here to which he devoted himself, the late Himyarite age.

Haddat Ghulays Relief

During Alexanders peregrinations around Zafar, he came across various "new"

inscriptions and reliefs. The motif of one in the village Haddat Ghulays could scarcely be made out in the first photo which Alex presented to me, owing to a thick fresh coat of paint on the relief. But three years of sunlight solved this problem and beneath the peeled paint emerged the motif carved in a reddish mottled marble. A cable laid over the bottom of the relief obscures the lower edge. Despite this and the relief's generally weathered condition, the motif immediately was recognisable as obviously unique. Given a lack of parallels, initially to fit it into a larger historic-cultural context proved difficult. Visits in 2004 and 2005 allowed more determined attempts to photograph the rather inaccessible relief mounted on top of the facade of the house of Muhammad Ahmed Ghulays (Figs. 1-3). This 54 x 36 x 12 cm relief block depicts a large bird of prey, a 'vulture' (for the identification see below) facing toward the viewers left with a peculiarly long neck and on the left edge a monogram rendered in the late Himyarite sunk calligraphic style. Below left the arch curvature is articulated by means of a row of leaf buds. Since the relief is embedded in cement, its underside is not visible.

Owing to weathering and the coarse crystal structure of the stone, the inscription was illegible. A biodegradable casting compound solved this problem. The resulting positive

¹ A generous grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and from the *Kultur-Erhalt* program of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany enabled our work. I also thank the General Organisation for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM) for permission to carry out our projects in Zafar. In particular Ali Sannibni, GOAM archaeologist for Dhamar province, allowed us to photograph the relief in the watchmans house. I thank Christian Robin for going over a version of this paper. The reliefs and not the inscriptions, which Isa Ali al-Šabani (our GOAM representative) advised me on, are the primary concern of the present contribution. The inscription shall be dealt with in another study. Unless otherwise stated, the author produced the text-figures. Norbert Nebes kindly criticised a version of the Masnaat Mariya drawing. David Stanton advised me on vultures.



Fig.2. Vulture relief on the facade of the house of Muhammad Ahmed Gulays in Haddat Gulays near Zafar.



Fig. 3 Haddat Gulays relief (final drawin: I. Steuer-Siegmund).



Fig. 4 Haddat Gulays relief, cast of the inscription.

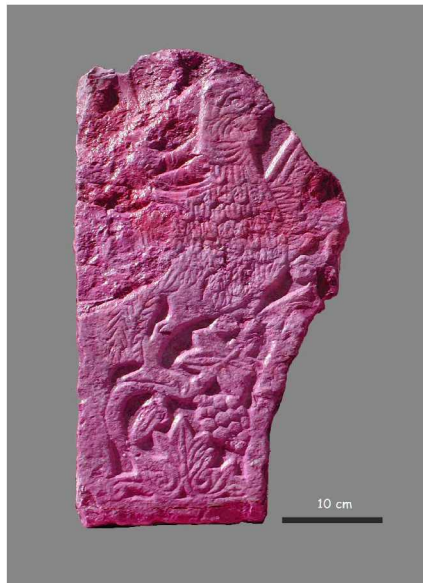


Fig. 5 Eagle relief in reddish sandstone (Zafar Museum zm101).

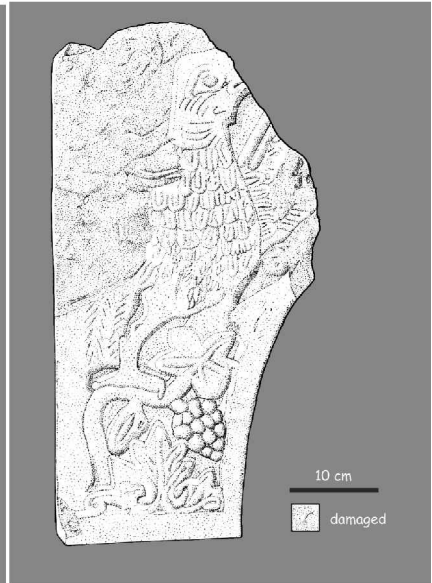


Fig. 6 Eagle relief (Zafar Museum, zm0101).

plaster cast made from it (Fig. 4) renders the Himyarite letters visible. A moon symbol is posed on top of a monogram consisting of r + n + l or g (h. 13 cm). Beneath smaller letters are cut (h. 3.5 cm): d + + d.?

Responding to my query about the provenance of the relief, friendly locals brought me 400 m south-west of the centre of the village to an east-west oriented stone wall known as Jirn al-Jirayn, which is 50 m long and preserved to a height of some 50 cm. Some 30 years ago Abbas Mujamel Ghulays found the artefact which we are dealing with in a field named Dhadar beside the wall and brought it into the village. Thus, the find seems to have at least a recent origin near Haddat Ghulays. The find spot can be readily localised as it lies a few meters away from a cave known as Derm Alnasamh.

In the context of Himyarite art, unusual in the Haddat Ghulays relief is the linearity and stylisation of the bird's wings and long neck. The asymmetrical composition of the bird was difficult to explain until a comparable but more complete asymmetric eagle relief came to light in the Zafar Museum (Figs. 5 and 6). This comparison confirms the Haddat Ghulays relief to be half of an arch. Originally, two asymmetric eagles, in each of the two upper corners, were posed in bilateral symmetry. The Haddat Ghulays stone is a fragment of an entrance arch to a building or to a villa important enough to warrant such a splendid indicator of rank and importance. Other Himyarite reliefs in the Zafar Museum bear witness to this kind of composition for arch corners.

Masnaat Mariya Relief

To place the Haddat Ghulays relief into a larger historical context raises the question of its date and its iconological meaning. The relief, however, could not be dated until a third, magnificent, inscribed parallel in fine light grey marble came to light. In August 2004 Alexander and I while in Masnaat Mariya (ancient Samin, 11 km west of present-day Dhamar) came upon a relief in the house of the guards. Six months later GOAM and the watchmen allowed me to photograph it (Figs. 7-12). Before introducing this eagle relief, first a word regarding its provenance is appropriate. According to one of the local guards, Saleh Bogashah, in 2003 robbers dug into one of the mounds, possibly a dwelling, on top of the anciently settled escarpment, thus yielding the relief which broke into three fragments. The breaks are fresh since they are free of calcareous accretions. After the thieves removed the relief from the site, police recovered it and deposited it securely in Saleh Bogashah's house in the village. The latter led me to the alleged illegally excavated find spot (Fig. 13) and to a room some 2.5 x 4 m in interior length to width in a debris mound. How exactly the 2.25 x 0.89 x 0.14 m relief fit into or next to this chamber is unclear.

The Masnaat Mariya arch depicts two asymmetrical 'vultures' which gaze at each other composed in axial symmetry (Fig. 11 and 12). Below and between them are monograms in calligraphic late Himyarite style. The edge of the arch is delineated with vines, grapes and pomegranates. Serpentine vines with alternating motifs, which outline the lowest surfaces of the relief, especially leaves and grapes, are common Himyarite decoration. Preferred decorative/ornamental elements include grape leaves, grapes and pomegranates at this time. The inner surface of the arch relief shows roughly executed abstract plant-like and geometric elements. The inner surface of the arch relief shows roughly executed abstract plant-like and geometric elements.



Fig. 7. Vulture relief from Masnaat Mariya, left half.

Fig. 8. Vulture relief from Masnaat Mariya, centre fragment.

Fig. 9. Vulture relief from Masnaat Mariya, right half.



Fig. 10. Vulture relief from Masnaat Mariya, underside



Fig. 11. Relief from Masnaat Mariya, composite reconstruction.

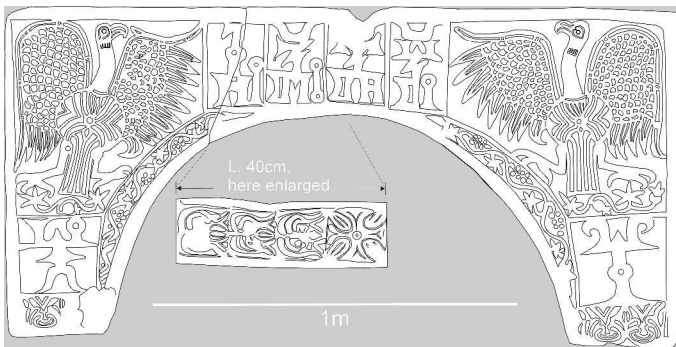


Fig. 12. Relief from Masnaat Mariya, drawing.



Fig. 13. Findspot of the relief, Masnaat Mariya



Fig. 14. Ostrogothic fibula from Domagnano (San Marino, Italy), courtesy *Germanisches National-*

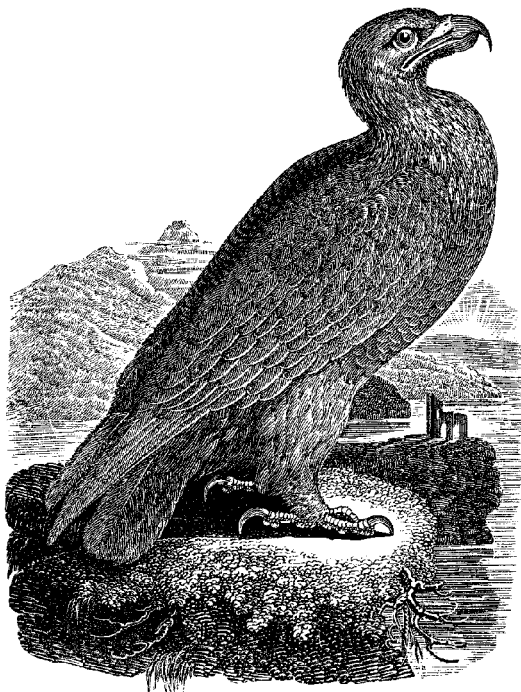


Fig. 15. Golden eagle (5000 Animals [Amsterdam 2001] 137-4).

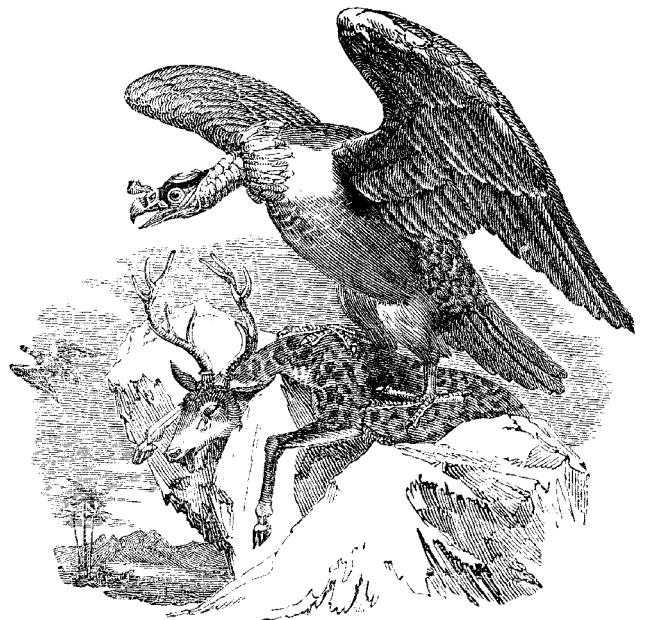


Fig. 16. King vulture (5000 Animals [Amsterdam 2001] 138-7).

Discussion

The symbolic importance of the large and powerful eagle, the king of birds, is obvious and in itself could fill an entire book. Naturalistic Roman traditions supplanted Ancient Near Eastern origins and generated a symbol of state power and sovereignty developed in use up to the present day. The inimical appearance, keen vision, graceful and powerful flight of the eagle are proverbial and well-suited as a symbol of power, for example, the field standards at the head of each Roman legion (Fl. Josephus, Jewish War 3,6,3), those of Himyarite troops (zm0450), or we encounter them in the Bible as a metaphor for God or for the strength of belief. The largest and most powerful bird, the eagle, is understandably the symbol of the head of the Greek pantheon, Zeus. Eagle fibulae (garment pins, Fig. 14) symbolise *e.g.* the rank and distinction with which East Roman rulers rewarded the leaders of their Germanic allies.

With regard to the meaning of the 'vulture' motif, Alexander Sima (2000) and Walter Müller (1994) assembled Semitic textual and visual examples of large birds of prey. Müller (1994, 102) points out that in Semitic languages the common root *nišru/našru* seldom distinguishes eagles from vultures. In antique Arabian visual representations they also are generally indistinguishable. Those from neighbouring pharaonic Egypt form an exception to the rule. In the Bible in several instances eagles are named in which vultures are clearly implied; in other cases it is unclear which bird is meant (1994, 93). Analogously *e.g.*, in German dialect *Geier* also can refer to both (Fig. 15 and 16). On the other hand, ornithologists basically distinguish different eagle species of diurnal hunters (*aquilidae* and others) from vultures (*vulturidae*). Vultures are distinguishable by their bare head and neck, weak claws, scavenger habits and timid social behaviour. They by no means have the positive symbolic attributes that eagles have. In the ancient art of Arabia understandably eagles appear frequently in the north Arabian Roman-Hellenistic sphere, but in other Arabian contexts as well. The Jews of antiquity in the Mediterranean littoral favoured the eagle motif in their art, despite occasional dissent from their ranks. Deities and personal names occur in the inscriptions which derive from the common Semitic root *nsr*, referring to this animal's qualities. The eagle/vulture are common to Old South Arabian iconography (Sima 2000, 128). We cannot expect to be able to make exact taxonomic distinctions in the visual arts. The more complete the fragment, the better the chances. Nonetheless, just how typical 'vultures' are is evident by a glance at the number of Himyarite reliefs on deposit in the Zafar Museum. Lions (20 examples) and large birds of prey including 'eagles' (5 examples) and vultures (3 examples) are commonly depicted animals, aside of course from bucrania (39 examples). Many more images show large feathered wings which might belong to angels, griffons or other creatures.

The powerful talons of the birds in the Masnaat Mariya relief might point to the eagle, and less so the vulture. But in terms of the Himyarite motifs under discussion, the long naked necks of the birds in the two reliefs under discussion are taken to indicate a vulture. The Griffon Vulture is quite common and widespread in the Yemen (Gallagher/Woodcock 1980, 92-93).

²E. Goodenough 1958, 121-142 for the ancient controversies in Jewish circles regarding the use of the eagle as architectural sculpture.

³Cf., however, as a parallel, a Himyarite seal stone purchased in Sanaa and presently in the collection of W. Daum: CIAS, vol. 1.2, page 601, also published in W. Daum 1987, 89 above left.

A pair of eagle fibulae and other jewellery of a Gothic woman of the ruling class from her grave in Domagnano (San Marino), Italy dating to the early 6th century CE (H. Roth 1986, 271-272), is of importance for the dating of the Masnaat Mariya relief. A comparison of the Domagnano and Masnaat Mariya images reveals similarities so striking that their style is difficult to explain without their master having seen eagle fibulae: First, the linearly imbricated feathers reoccur repetitively seemingly as if to emulate cloisonné work. Second, the eagles have a medallion in the breast area with radiating decoration. Lastly, the edges of the wings also show the same narrow parallel border channels broken at regular intervals. Though geographically of disparate origin, both share a wholly linear style. By means of this stylistic/typological comparison, a dating for the Masnaat Mariya relief to the 6th century CE seems the best fit. This in turn provides a dating reference for the Haddat Ghulays relief, the point of departure of the present note. On the other hand, the eagle relief in the Zafar Museum (Fig. 5 and 6) is more naturalistic in its style, and thus seems to belong to an older tradition, whatever its date.

The 'vulture' relief from Masnaat Mariya and its cousin in Haddat Ghulays are important for they illuminate a key hitherto unrecognised style in Himyar's terminal phase, in the 6th century CE. Hitherto, only one South Arabian work could be attributed to the latest Himyarite period, the capitals from Sanaa cathedral preserved in the Great Mosque as well as in St Mary of Zion (Maryam Tsayon) church in Aksum. Unfortunately, the stylistic dating of the 'vulture' reliefs cannot be correlated with a suspected destruction of the capital, Zafar. One possible date, however, which comes into question is 537 by the conqueror, Abreha, as a result of a general insurrection which he describes (CIH 541). At about this time he moves the seat of government to the old town of Sanaa. If the old capital Z.af were destroyed, we would not expect much art patronage in the area thereafter.

Since the relief from Masnaat Mariya is far better preserved than that from Haddat Ghulays, it yields a clearer idea of the aesthetic of the time. In terms of syntax, typical of both the reliefs show local asymmetry combined to an overall symmetry. Striking stylistic tendencies such as the pure linearity are observable in the strong international artistic currents between Europe, Iran and Arabia at this time. The two reliefs under discussion and a few others possess high aesthetic qualities which contradict the usual characterisation of Himyarite art as decadent.

Addendum:

In December 2005 C. Robin visited Masnaat Mariya and checked the inscription on the relief. His results at the upper face reading from right to left:

1. rḥ ' m y may read Yrḥm, Yarkhum
2. r s² ' b m may read 'bs²mr, Abīshamar
3. r l ' (n) t m d may read Mrtd'Iⁿ, Marthad'ilān
4. l q b y may read Yqbl, Yaqbul

2 and 1 identify the first personage: Abīshamar Yarkhum;

3 and 4 identify the second personage: Marthad'ilān Yaqbul

The name of the lineage is given by the monogram on the left flank: Yhfr', Yuhafri'

⁴ Admittedly, even by means of an elaborate investigation it would be difficult to substantiate the ways and means for a contact of this kind.

⁵ For example, P. Costa 1992, 29-37 figs. 12-25.

The monogram on the right flank (y and q) give perhaps the name of the palace, which is unknown. It did not belong to a royal patron but rather a prince, whose name is not otherwise known.

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