

THE FUNCTION OF THE DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE AT YAZILIKAYA

JESSE DAVID CHARITON

MAY, 2008

A SENIOR THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

ABSTRACT

Very little research has been done on the symbolic use of the double-headed eagle motif B.C.E. This paper treats the double-headed eagle relief at the Hittite site of Yazilikaya, located in central present-day Turkey. Occupied in the second millennium B.C.E., this site was a religious and ceremonial center of the Hittite Empire. Comparison of the use of the double-headed eagle at this and other sites in the area hints at the function of the motif in that context.

INTRODUCTION

Very little research has been done regarding the double-headed eagle motif in the Ancient Near East. There have, however, been some studies done on bicephalous (two headed) animals generally. Mundkur's (1984) article "The Bicephalous 'Animal Style' in Northern Eurasian Religious Art and Its Western Hemispheric Analogues [and Comments and Reply]" is one such study. As its title indicates, Mundkur was interested in cross-cultural analogies and religious symbolism relating to bicephalous animals. He was not focused on any particular species, and his research concerned mainly 'subsistence' animals and his theories for why humans would portray such animals with multiple heads. Critics of Mundkur argued that he had a theoretical approach which did not support his argument and that he was treating binary imagery instead of strictly bicephalous animals (Mundkur, Bandi, Jett, Kubler, Murray and Wicke 1984).

Other than studies of the familiar Romanov and Byzantine versions of the double-headed eagle (Alef 1966; Krieger 1926), and a few studies of Saracen ceramics and coinage (Pier 1908), there appear to have been no outright studies of the double-headed eagle as an individual motif. Ancient Near Eastern versions are relegated to a few passing mentions in articles about completely unrelated subjects (Ingholt 1942; Özgüç 1974). But ancient Near Eastern versions do exist, and perhaps this paper, about the double-headed eagle at the well-known Hittite site of Yazilikaya, can stimulate interest in those earlier versions of the motif.

In this research I addressed three questions concerning the function of the double-headed eagle at Yazilikaya. What exactly was its function? Was that unique to Yazilikaya, or was it used in such a way throughout the Hittite realm? How does the

motif, especially its use by the Hittites, fit into the general context of the Ancient Near East? Answers to these questions are given below.

BACKGROUND

The Hittite Empire

The Hittite empire started from meager beginnings, when Indo-Europeans settled with the natives on the plain of central Anatolia. By the fourteenth century B.C.E., theirs was the most powerful political entity in the Near East. The fall of the kingdom was either directly or indirectly related to the so-called sea peoples (Beckman 2007: 111).

About 1780 B.C.E., possibly due to social and political unrest in Mesopotamia, Assyrian merchants ceased their operations in Anatolia (Macqueen 2003:20). These trading enterprises had engendered a “territorial consciousness” in the minds of local rulers (Bryce 2005:32). The definition of local boundaries determined which administration had the right to levy taxes on the merchants travelling through, and this would also lead to cooperation between neighboring rulers. However, this greater level of communication and contact between Anatolian kingdoms caused by the Assyrian trading colonies, while providing awareness of boundaries, also promoted border conflicts. Toward the end of the Assyrian colony period Pithanas, ruler of the eastern Anatolian city of Kussara, sacked the city of Nesa (Kanesh, modern Kültepe), after which Nesa became the capital of the Kussaran state (Bryce 2005:36).

The reasons for attacking Nesa are probably more substantial than simple border conflict. Attached to the city was the headquarters of the whole Assyrian trading colony network in Anatolia. This would allow the ruler of the city to profit from better trading

deals with the Assyrians. Also, the main trade commodity traded by the Assyrians was tin, necessary for the production of bronze weaponry (Bryce 2005:37). The control of materials for weaponry would have greatly benefitted Pithanas' son and successor Anittas as he expanded his realm through military conquest to include the whole Kizil Irmak basin, including the city of Hattusas, and assuming the title 'great king'. Within a century the proto-empire established by Anittas fell apart, and reasons for this are not completely understood, however he had unified the peoples of the area and prepared them for what was to come.

The beginnings of the Hittite Old Kingdom are still enigmatic. Information about that period comes mainly from tablets excavated at the site of Kültepe (ancient Nesa) which, when coupled with the archaeology of the site, "provide the most detailed information of an ancient trading network available to modern scholarship." (Zimansky 2005:321). Along with the role played by trade in the fall of Anittas' state, other problems associated with the rise of the Hittite Old Kingdom include the ethnicity of the Hittites, and the social interaction between them and the native Anatolians. The Hittites are believed to have been of Indo-European origin, although their name derives from Hatti, the native name for the region. The ethnicity of Anittas is unknown (Bryce 2005:36); but that the Hittites were Indo-European has been known for nearly a century and is evidenced by their language, which was deciphered in the early twentieth century. Indo-European speakers may have entered Anatolia as early as the fourth millennium B.C.E. and during the Assyrian colony period mixed with the local Hattians (Bryce 2002:8). Thus, from the very beginning the Hittite civilization was a heterogeneous combination of Indo-Europeans and natives.

The period known as the Hittite New Kingdom, or the Empire Period, began with the reign of Suppiluliuma I (ca. 1350-1322 B.C.E.) (Bryce 2005:154). It is debatable whether or not the Hittite state during this period can be termed an empire. Mario Liverani (2005:230) notes that the Hittite 'empire' was only regional in scope and had no "imperial ideology." He applies the model of "peer polity interaction" of Renfrew and Cherry (1986) in which any state in the system could see itself as the "central empire" in the system (Liverani 2005:238). Paul-Alain Beaulieu (2007:50) reminds us that the Hittite state itself was "little more than feudal assemblages of vassal kingdoms and some directly administered territory under the loose control of the royal household." There was also the constant threat, even to the capital of Hattusas, of raids from the Kashka nomads from the Black Sea coast (Robertson 2007:218). However, although this period was four centuries after the apparent economic unity of the Assyrian colony period, it can be seen from ceramics that there was centralized control by "highly standardized industries," which thus ensured economic stability over the whole region (Gates 2007:74).

As mentioned above, from the beginning the Hittite state was a heterogeneous one. During the New Kingdom that was still the case—it was a combination of Anatolian (i.e. Hittite/Hattian), Semitic (Mesopotamian), and Hurrian elements (Beckman 2007:110). The Hurrians were a people group who entered central Anatolia from the northeast, over the Caucasus Mountains, sometime in the third millennium B.C.E. During the New Kingdom the Hurrians influenced Hittite state policy by playing a role on the royal court and in the state cult (Burney and Lang 1971:48).

In the reign of Tudhaliya IV the queen mother Puduhepa was a Hurrian princess, and a high-priestess of the Sun-goddess of Arinna (James 1960:94). So important was she

that correspondence has been found which was written between her and Ramesses II and his wife Nefertari (Melville 2007:239). So it is of no surprise that her influence can be seen in the style of the reliefs at Yazilikaya, built by her son Tudhaliya IV. The period surrounding his reign was the era during which the largest examples of Hittite monumental architecture were undertaken. Tudhaliya IV also reformed (or simply consolidated) the religion of the Hittites by fusing it with that of the Hurrians. This is no doubt due to the influence of his mother Puduhepa. Yazilikaya was the largest work of Tudhaliya IV, but he also renovated the Upper City of Hattusas, adding more small temples and designing the road between that place and Yazilikaya (Hoffner 1992:106).

Yazilikaya

Yazilikaya is a natural rock sanctuary located almost two miles northeast of the Hittite capital of Hattusas, the limestone walls having been extensively carved with reliefs depicting 65 male and female deities of the Hurrian pantheon. This explains the modern Turkish name, *Yazilikaya*, meaning “inscribed rock” (Bittel 1970:91). It is the “most eminent monument of its kind in the land of the Hittites (Bittel 1970:93).

In 1834 Charles Texier became the first modern Westerner to glimpse the ruins of Yazilikaya. Scholars have been debating issues regarding the meaning and function of Yazilikaya ever since (Güterbock 1975:273; James 1960:93-95). From the beginning it was acknowledged that the reliefs at Yazilikaya and the ruins of the Hittite capital Hattusas (hitherto also unidentified) were somehow linked (Bittel 1970:93). However, although the city was identified through the discovery of the royal archives, not a single text relates directly to Yazilikaya. The problem is ongoing and scholarly discourse regarding it “has become extensive and complicated” (Bittel 1970:93). Since the

discovery of Yazilikaya, many other Hittite rock carvings have been discovered in South-Central Anatolia, but none as well preserved or impressive as Yazilikaya.

The road to Yazilikaya leaves the remains of Hattusas from the north, near the temple of the Weather God (Bittel 1970:94). Excavations in 1952 discovered that crevices in the rocks along the road contain burials dating from the 17th to the 13th centuries B.C.E. (Bittel 1970:94), probably indicating sacred space. The sanctuary itself is made of two (nominally divided by scholars into three) natural chambers (we could call them galleries, since their walls are covered in images) roughly 20 meters long (Alexander 1986:Plate 2). There was probably a spring nearby, which would have been reason for people centuries before the Hittites to have thought this space sacred (Lloyd 1956: 202). These chambers were enclosed by a temple complex which has since disappeared (Figure1).

As mentioned above, Yazilikaya was sculpted during a time in which the Hittite pantheon was being consolidated and there was an influx of Hurrian ideas. Queen Puduhepa, of Hurrian ethnicity, was largely responsible for the Hurrian influence on the royal court and monumental art (Alexander 1986:140). Scholars' opinions vary regarding the quality and workmanship of the sculptors. Some (Lehmann 1975:261) say that although it shows a close relationship between religion and art, there is a lack of development and "no talent for great sculpture." Others (Alexander 1986) have a great deal of praise for the sculptors and are even able to discern the work of individual sculptors. While the individual artisans' motives may be interesting, as Yazilikaya was a state sponsored project they are probably of no help in finding the function of one figure

in the reliefs there (i.e. the double-headed eagle). The double-headed eagle is located in the Central Panel of Chamber A at Yazilikaya (Figure2).

METHODOLOGY

My research was basically straightforward. I compared the double-headed eagle present at Yazilikaya with other Hittite uses of the double-headed eagle. Initially this was not difficult, but rather consisted of finding the few examples which do exist by trial and error. Those examples include another monumental site, that of Alaça Hüyük, and two stamp-seals from the nearby Hittite capital city of Hattusas.

I then considered the site of Yazilikaya as a whole and the context of the double-headed eagle there. Upon realizing that it was used as a support for two deities, I then considered other animal-supporters both at the same site and generally, and compared the double-headed eagle to those to determine if they served the same function.

RESULTS

Alaça Hüyük

Alaça Hüyük is roughly twenty miles northeast of Hattusas. The reliefs at Alaça Hüyük show monumental art figural/stylistic types which were later used at Yazilikaya (Alexander 1986:120; James 1960:94). The fact that the double-headed eagle at Alaça Hüyük (see Figure 3), a site which is centuries older, is also supporting a figure (although it is unknown who the figure represents due to weathering of the relief) supports the idea that the eagle was used for the same purpose at both sites.

A Hittite Stamp Seal

A stamp seal from Hattusas, from the time of the Assyrian colony period shows the double-headed eagle above a typical Hittite ‘wavy-line’ motif (Figure 4). Another seal shows “a double-headed eagle with two lions on the lower part” from the Old Hittite Period, but of unknown provenience due to its being in a private collection (Özgüç 1974: 236).

Hamath Stele

On a stele (Figure 5) from the site of Hamath in Northern Syria there is a double-headed eagle supporting a king seated at a table as if it is his “royal emblem” (Ingholt 1942: 472). This is from a later period (ca. 1200-1100 B.C.E.), but at one time that area was under the Hittite sphere of influence.

Yazilikaya

At Yazilikaya, the double-headed eagle is not very striking or unusual (Figure 6). Many of the deities are shown in close proximity to their animal attributes: the lion is associated with an earth goddess and the bull with the Weather-God. The double-headed eagle is used as a support for two goddesses—the daughter and granddaughter of the Weather-god. However, “it is difficult to relate the double-headed eagle with the daughter and granddaughter of [Teshub]” (Alexander 1986:121). However, at least one scholar (Lehmann) maintains that it is the “divine beast” of those goddesses (1975:260).

“Divine Beasts”

Throughout the Ancient Near Eastern world, most deities have had animal counterparts. Very prominent examples are the Egyptian god Anubis and his jackal, Hathor and her cow, and the Canaanite god Ba’al and his bull. The Hurrian Weather-god

Teshub was also associated with a bull (James 1960:95). Some scholars believe this points to a theriomorphic origin—that these deities came from or are attributes of the divine (Saggs 1989: 284). This is certainly a sound argument with the Weather-god Teshub and the bull, usually a fertility symbol, as the weather would need to be invoked for the fertility of crops. However, the double-headed eagle at Yazilikaya, Alaça Hüyük, and Hamath are each supporting different figures. This may be reconciled with the future discovery of what the double-headed eagle means first, theriomorphically—going backwards, and then relating that to those whom it supports.

A Mesopotamian Origin

There are precedents for the double-headed eagle motif in Mesopotamian cylinder seals. Cultures in the Ancient Near East had been using the double-headed eagle motif for centuries prior to the Hittite Empire. The Hittite use of the double-headed eagle, and their idea of it, probably came from precursors in Mesopotamia. However, as long as the meaning of the Mesopotamian double-headed eagle is not understood the adoption of it by the Hittites cannot hold much importance. There is also, however, evidence that the double-headed eagle as a supporting element, along with the lions and others, was derived from cylinder seal designs (Alexander 1986:34, 66-67, 152). In this case a function and meaning can be ascribed to the double-headed eagle at Yazilikaya—namely, that it must be the symbol of some divine attribute, probably associated with the goddesses whom it upholds.

DISCUSSION

Whereas the double-headed eagle at Yazilikaya is not peculiar at Yazilikaya (except for its two heads, but that is negligible) because of the many other animal forms

also carved there, and is not a unique use by the Hittites, who have used the symbol, at least around the capital of Hattusas, for centuries in stamp seal designs, there must be some practical and realistic reason for its existence there (at Yazilikaya). Like other aspects of Semitic culture, it most probably came from the east (i.e. Mesopotamia) either through trade or skilled workers, that area having had a long history of using the double-headed eagle motif among its own cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

After putting the Yazilikaya double-headed eagle in context, at that site, within the Hittite culture, and in the larger geographical area, I have been unable to fully determine its function(s) at that site. However, it would make sense that it would have been the same as at Alaça Hüyük, and in other uses—therefore its function was not unique to the shrine of Yazilikaya. Other animals were used at the time as support for deities, and perhaps the double-headed eagle was little more than another symbolic characteristic or representation of a deity (or deities). Conversely, if the meaning of the double-headed eagle can be ascertained, it may add to the characteristics of those which it has been shown supporting. The use of the motif by the Hittites fits well within the general context of the Ancient near east. Just as technologies moved from Sumer northwest over time, so did the double-headed eagle.

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FIGURES

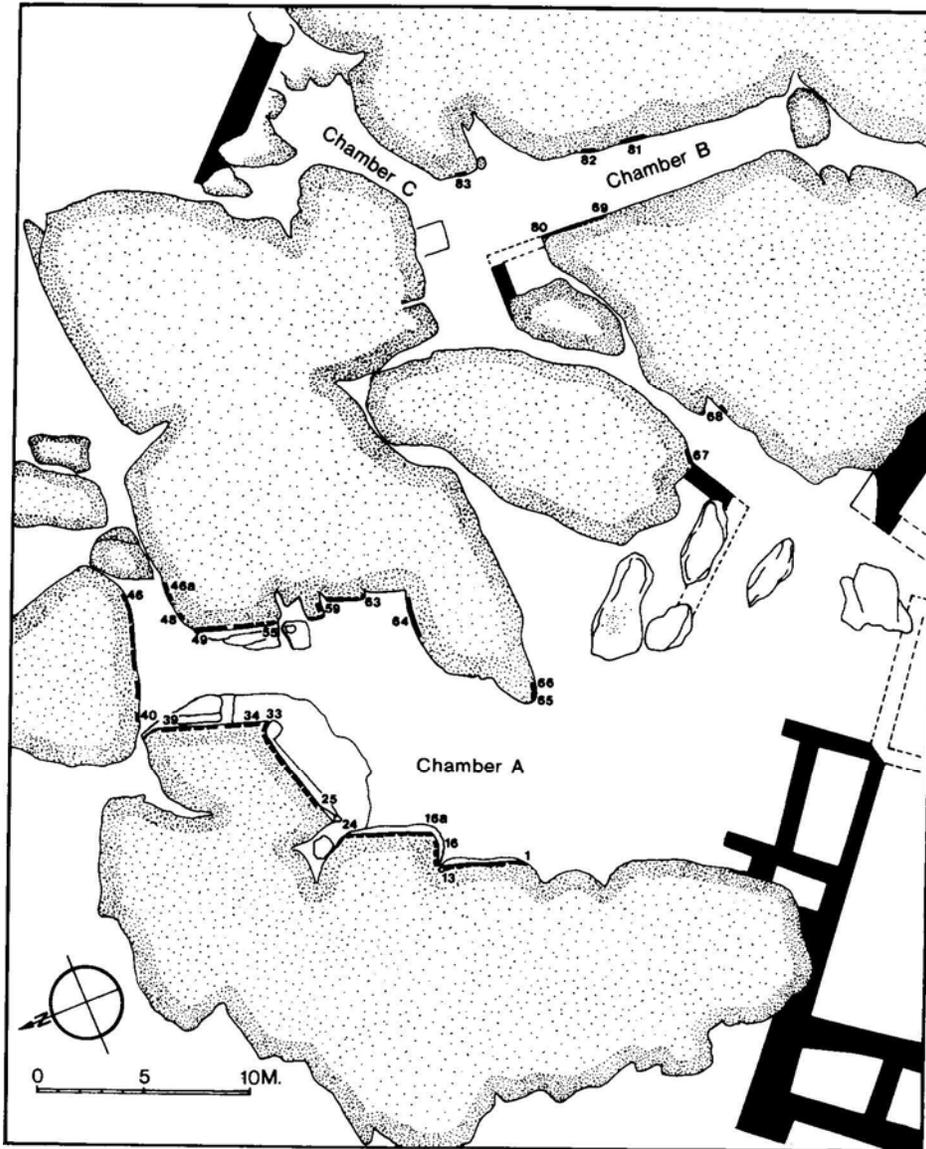


Figure 1. Plan of Yazilikaya, indicating the three chambers and the building foundations in the south-west (Alexander 1989:Plate 2)

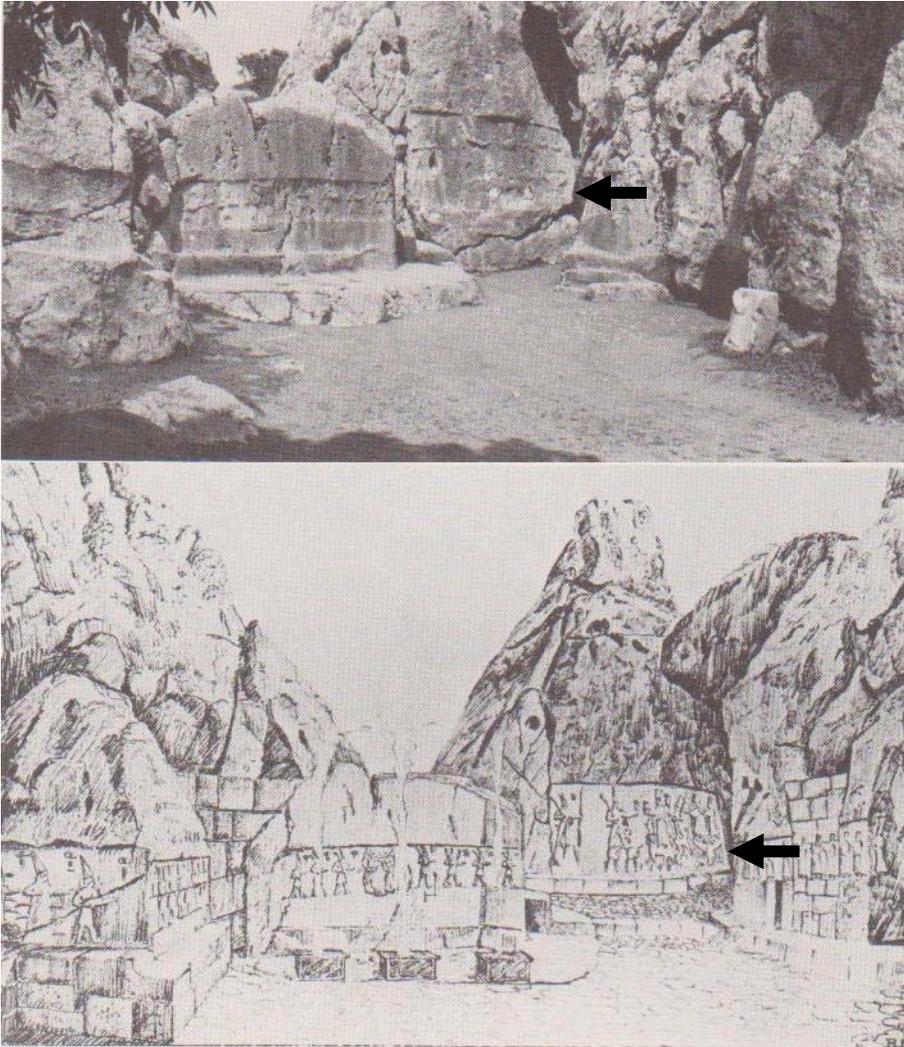


Figure 2. Yazilikaya, Chamber A; arrows point to the location of the bicephalous eagle (Alexander 1986:Plates 3 & 4)



Figure 3. Double-headed eagle on the Sphinx Gate at Alaça Hüyük (<http://www.forumishqiptar.com/showthread.php?t=69798>)



Figure 4. Double-headed eagle on a stamp seal from the Assyrian trading colony of Hattusas (Bittel 1970:Plate7)



Figure 5. Basalt stele from Hamath, showing double-headed eagle supporting a king (Ingholt 1942:Figure10)



Figure 6. Double-headed eagle at Yazilikaya (Alexander 1986:Figure 1)