

Of Love and Loathing: The Role of the Vulture in Three Cultures

Brooke Byrd

Writer's comment: In AVS 115 (Raptor Biology), one wouldn't expect to think much about mother goddesses and their dual roles in life and death. But since I was given the opportunity to write on any topic raptor related, this became the subject for my paper. I've always been attracted to things so ugly they're just fascinating, and vultures are one of my favorite examples. I started researching only with vultures in mind, then to my astonishment uncovered a deep connection with not only death, but also life, creation and, maternity. The vulture gave me the perfect way to study the ways cultures cope with the forces of life and death that affect them every day, as well as how the natural characteristics of nature and wildlife are twisted to fit people's images of the world.

—Brooke Byrd

Instructor's comment: I'll likely be tossed out of the Science Club for writing this, but the best science is done with a large dose of culture in the room. This may seem counterintuitive. After all, science is more quantitative, culture qualitative. But science does purport to consider all historical hypotheses when negotiating a current explanation, and cultural accounts hold many centuries of knowledge, however metaphorical. Metaphorical knowledge?! you cry, that isn't science! Oh but it is. Metaphors came from real observations of the world that—in their own time—just happened to lack known cause-and-effect. For vultures in early Egypt, Grecian, and Christian cultures, Brooke Byrd brings the historical forward. She blows the dust off old metaphors and surprises us with the richness of vulturehood. For me, the most exciting approach to Brooke's essay is to imagine the kernel of biological truth encased in each story, some actual witnessing of vulture behavior from a time long ago.

—Allen Fish, Avian Science Department

“Ex damno alterius, alterius utilitas”
 (“From misfortune of one, advance of the other”)

CULTURES HAVE VIEWED VULTURES in a variety of ways, from “raw necked ungainly ghouls” (Brown 1936) to condemning them for “sloth, filth and voraciousness” (Rowland 1978). Charles Darwin called them “disgusting bird[s]” that “wallow in putridity” (Grady 1997). While many have recognized their usefulness throughout history, as well as today, no one really looks beyond that. In everything I’ve ever heard about vultures in culture and mythology, they were only tied to death, battles, and carrion.

While this is very much the case in several myths and cultures, there is a much more interesting side to “nature’s ghastly gourmet” (Grady 1997). Vultures have deep connections with maternity and mother goddesses. “No bird can be traced to more remote antiquity” (Stratton-Porter 1909). These connections spread across cultures as distinctly different as ancient Egypt, Greece, and the earliest forms of Christianity. These cultures shared several views of the vulture, including its dual role in life and death. The worship and importance of the vulture throughout these cultures indicate a need for people to reconcile the two seemingly fundamental opposites of life and death. I will trace the theme of motherhood and maternity, in connection with the vulture, throughout these cultures and show how the vulture is “loathed yet cherished above all others” (Brown 1936).

The vulture held a very high place of honor in ancient Egypt. It was a symbol of “putrification, compassion, and maternity” (Rowland 1978). It was also of great interest in Greece and Christianity. The reasons for this show the vulture’s dual role in these cultures. People revered or hated the bird because of its ability to rid them of their carrion, as well as its connection to maternity and mother goddesses. I will first show some of the negative connotations that the vulture brought with it, then how those cultures viewed the vulture with positive, maternal characteristics.

This paper will focus primarily on Old World vultures, as they are the ones these cultures had contact with. However, because Old and New World vultures are often so similar in appearance, accounts of people’s reactions to New World vultures have also been included in certain areas (Lembke 1993, Houston 1994). These reactions would very likely be similar for Old World vultures, so no distinction is made in this paper. Also important to note is that in translations of the Bible,

Old and New Testaments, the word “nesher” often stood for both eagle and vulture (Armstrong 1958). Therefore, while some versions have “eagle” instead of “vulture” in the verses quoted below, I have gone with the translation that makes the most sense in the context of this paper and the vulture’s natural characteristics.

Two things stand out about the vulture’s physical presence that cause people to loathe and detest it. The bird was well known for its terrible smell, caused mainly by its habit of eating carrion. The Greeks thought vultures “delight so much in foul smells” that they would “reject flesh which has been treated with myrrh” (Pollard 1977). Theophrastus, a “distinguished botanist” from Aristotle’s time, believed the odor of myrrh was actually fatal to vultures (Pollard 1977). A similar thought appears even later, between 1143 and 1156: “This too is said about the vulture, that, when it is anointed thoroughly with rose-perfume, it dies” (Michael Glycas in Zirkle 1936). Stratton-Porter (1909) also thought vultures must have “small sense of smell,” or they wouldn’t be able to stand themselves. She attributed the common sunbathing behavior of vultures to “trying to air themselves.”

The appearance of the bird also often caused fear and hatred, particularly its naked or thinly covered neck and dark plumage. An old legend explains the naked neck of the vulture as punishment given by King Solomon. Since they refused to shield him from the sun, he announced they would “feel the heat of the sun, the bite of the wind, and the beating of the rain” on their necks forever (Parmelee 1959). Many cultures also “considered [them] evil” because of their dark plumage (Lutwack 1994). Because of their “uncanny ability to give material form to the idea of a dark angel,” people often associated them with death (Lembke 1993). I can imagine how much like death itself a large black bird soaring over the body of a loved one would look. The association of vultures with death is very easy to understand, as well as the fear they often inspire. In cultures where death often seemed the ultimate finality, it is easy to see why people thought vultures had power over death.

In Egypt, the bird was valued because of its abilities as a carrion eater. In such a hot climate, where flesh rots very quickly, they were very important to the health of the people (Brown 1936). They were so important to this culture that a Pharaoh dictated the use of the death penalty as punishment for killing one, making the vulture the first ever protected species (Stratton-Porter 1909). The vulture’s duty was to “carry off in his beak all that might contaminate the land” and “clean the world of stench and rottenness” (Montejo 1991). Because the touching

of dead bodies was taboo in many cultures, the vulture indeed performed a necessary service (Brown 1936). With this idea of taboo, it is easy to understand the conflicting emotions that vultures inspired. While likely grateful to vultures for removing the dangerous, forbidden object, people also feared and detested them because they touch that same object. This conflict between love and loathing seems very difficult to resolve for these cultures, yet they do so through the connection between life and death.

On the other hand, early Christians feared vultures for the same reason. "To have one's body consumed by birds and beasts was the ultimate horror, for then one would never rest" (Parmelee 1959). This is evinced by a story in the Old Testament, where a woman's family has been killed and she watches over their bodies. "She did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day" (II Samuel 21:10). If a body was not properly buried, then the dead would never find any rest or meet with their ancestors (Parmelee 1959). Therefore, vultures must be kept away from the dead. For those who defy God in the New Testament, "all the birds were gorged with their flesh" (Revelation 19:17-21). Clearly, this is an end that no one wanted. For the same reason these birds were feared, religious law also condemned them as unclean. Both Deuteronomy and Leviticus considered them "an abomination among the birds" and forbade Christians to eat them (Leviticus 11:13, Deuteronomy 14:12). I find it highly ironic, yet understandable, that Christianity forbid as unclean the very creatures responsible for cleaning "up messes they did not make" (Lembke 1993). Early Christians detested the vulture for the same characteristics that other cultures relied upon.

All three cultures associated vultures with battle and omens of foreboding. In Egypt, they supposedly marked where a battle would take place by appearing at the spot seven days before. Vultures were also known for their "marvellous" powers of sight (Brown 1936). Unlike New World vultures, Old World vultures primarily find food with their sight (Elliot 1999). As a result, the vulture was a symbol of vision and foreknowledge (Rowland 1978). In certain areas, people took medicines made with vulture parts in order to receive powers of clairvoyance or divination (Mundy et al. 1992).

The ancient Greeks thought vultures followed armies of men into battle because they knew they would find corpses. Their "powers of prognosticating slaughter" were well known in Greece, as well as how they also appear "mysteriously in the wake of armies" (Pollard 1977).

Lutwack (1994) considered this gathering at battlefields to feast on corpses “the worst imaginable desecration of the dead.” The vulture is “pleased because from the fighting of mighty men he will derive the profit” (Rowland 1973). Homer also uses vultures in *The Odyssey*, the great Greek epic, to show punishment and the results of war. Friedrich thinks they appear as “savage renderers of bodies” in *The Odyssey*.

In Christianity, vultures appeared more as omens of bad things to come instead of specifically relating to battle. When denouncing sinners, the speaker for God says “set the trumpet to your lips, for a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have...transgressed my law” (Hosea 8:1). The vulture’s appearance in the sky is very ominous, as it arrives when punishment is about to ensue (Møller-Christensen and Jordt Jørgensen 1965). Proverbs also shows the vulture as punishment: “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be...eaten by the vultures” (Proverbs 30:17). Yet again, they appear at the site of destruction: “there shall the vultures be gathered” (Isaiah 34:15) and “where the slain are, there the vulture is” (Job 39:30). The vulture’s appearance had another strange, yet positive, meaning in Hebrew lore. It had the duty of announcing the coming of the Messiah, supposedly by sitting on the ground and singing a hymn (France 1986). The vulture’s power of sight is also in the Old Testament, when describing a secret place: “there is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen” (Job 28:7). Because the vulture’s sight is so good, the fact that it cannot see the path emphasizes how secret it is. Also, sight is an important part of biblical vulture descriptions: “he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it afar off” (Job 39:29).

The vulture’s association with death also appears in its relationship with goddesses. Egypt was the only culture of the three where the vulture was directly associated with specific goddesses, but it also appears in Greek mythology. The Egyptian goddesses Mut and Nekhbet were very similar and often confused with one another, as well as with a separate goddess, Nut. The information on the two is often interchangeable and in some places they merged into the same goddess. In my research I found various spellings of their names, of which I have chosen to use the least confusing and most often used by scholars.

The goddess Nekhbet was the protective deity of southern Egypt (Ingersoll 1923). She was one of two principal goddesses of the period immediately before the First Dynasty (Seller 1992). Paintings often depict her flying protectively above a king or pharaoh, with wings spread wide (Quirke 1992). These paintings show the vulture’s role in

protecting kings in life and death, as they needed her to “guard their souls in [the] dangerous passage to the next world” (Turner 1973). In some Egyptian stories, Nekhbet was the wife of Khenti-Amentiu, the king of the dead (Ions 1982). In ancient Egypt, people threw their dead into the deserts, where vultures quickly took care of them. As the vulture goddess, Nekhbet’s association with death came easily. She is very much the “Terrible Mother” goddess that appears in many other cultures. She is a “goddess of death also in her aspect as bird of the dead” (Neumann 1963). “In her good aspect [she] watches over the dead in the underworld, but originally rends bodies into pieces” (Neumann 1963). I find Nekhbet to be a fascinating mythological character who perfectly embodies the dual vision of the vulture through her associations with life and death.

Mut was originally a vulture goddess from Thebes. She is more closely linked to maternity than Nekhbet and not as closely linked to death. However, since she is often confused for Nekhbet, she is important to mention. Both goddesses often took the shape of a vulture, although Mut appeared more often with the body of a woman and the head of a vulture (Ions 1982). These Egyptian goddesses had very strange roles in this culture’s mythology and religion. “The Egyptian Mother Goddess as vulture gives protection and shelter, but she is at the same time the death-bringing, corpse-devouring goddess of death” (Neumann 1963). The goddesses were also typical mother goddesses, bringing special protection to women in different ways.

While in one of the stories Nekhbet is the wife of the god of death, in others she is closely associated with creative powers and fertility. For example, in one myth she is the wife of Hapi, the Nile river. The myth tells that he opened the gates of the ocean to let the life-giving Nile flow forth. Since Egyptian society depended on the fertility provided by the Nile, the river’s creator became associated with creation powers and thus maternity (Ions 1982). One also finds Nekhbet “hovering above a queen giving birth” in paintings and engravings, thus leading to her identification as the goddess of childbirth (Mundy et al. 1992). She extended protection to the queens of Egypt, as demonstrated by the vulture headdresses that such women wore (Ingersoll 1923). Several representations of Nekhbet show her wearing the crown that was “the privilege of a royal female personage or goddess” (Armstrong 1975). As the king’s escort, the queen had a vulture crown and thus carried the protective powers of Nekhbet. Therefore, it was also the queen’s job to protect the king, much as Nekhbet did (Quirke 1992).

The goddess Mut, to whom the vulture was sacred, is the most clearly associated with maternity. Her name is very similar to "maat," the Egyptian word for both "mother" and "matter" (Sjöo and Mor 1987). As "matter," she is the original creative source. Her name signifies "queen of the gods," "lady of the sky," and the "Great Mother" who gives "birth to all that exists" (Mackenzie 1913). Like Nekhbet, Mut was also connected by marriage to powers of fertility. She was the wife of Amon, who was primarily a "creative god" (Ions 1982). He associated with the ram, which symbolized fertility. Through this association, Amon also identified with one of the gods of death, who had the head of a ram. In this way, Mut's association with both life and death is very clear.

The two other cultures discussed in this paper did not closely connect vultures to their sacred figures. Athena rarely appears in vulture form, and there are stories of Hera's lovers occasionally taking the forms of vultures (Armstrong 1958, Friedrich 1997). However, Pollard (1977) thought stories of Greek "harpies" came from the "anthropomorphized" "foul habits of vultures." These "harpies" were depicted as filthy birds with the heads and breasts of women, "demon birds fused with the birds of death" (Friedrich 1997). The Greek culture appears to have more disgust for the vulture than other cultures, shown by their unwillingness to connect vultures with their goddesses. The vulture is also connected with the Virgin Mary of Christianity, as will be explained later in more detail.

Vultures were closely tied with royalty in Egypt for many reasons. Egyptians saw them as "omnipresent, far-seeing, and demanding," all of which were "aspects of royal power" (Parmelee 1959). Therefore, they became the "embodiment" of rulers (Parmelee 1959). Lutwack (1994) believes they were worshipped partially because "they dared to approach the source of all life, the sun." Observers saw them "fly so high, so near to the gods, that they seemed physically divine" (Friedrich 1997). Artists often portrayed vultures with unnatural colors to show their "full power" and "omnipotence" (Schuž and König 1983). There are several other ways beside descriptions of the gods and goddesses that vultures relate to maternity, childbirth, and women. I will describe them for each culture, then focus more closely on the common thread that ties all three cultures together: impregnation by the wind.

The vulture was strongly tied to maternity through language. Writers used the vulture glyph to create the written word "mother," clearly showing a connection between the two (Sellers 1992). The

Egyptian hieroglyph for vulture also signifies both “compassionate” and “mother” (Johnson 1981). In Hebrew, the word for “vulture” also means “pity,” “compassion,” and “mother” (Johnson 1981, Pollard 1977). I am not sure if these were arbitrary connections of language that caused the association of vultures with maternity or if this association led to the language connection, but this evidence clearly connects vultures and maternity.

The main reason for the association between vultures and maternity is the belief that “vultures cared for their young better than any other bird or animal” (Turner 1973). Because of this, they became a symbol of “maternal love and protection” (Mundy et al. 1992). This belief stems from the thought that vultures feed their young with their own blood, which extends across all three cultures (Pollard 1977). Horapollo (in Armstrong 1975) thought that the bird “opens its own thigh and permits the young to partake of the blood, so that they may not perish from want.” This is probably what the author of the book of Job meant when he said “[the vulture’s] young one’s suck up blood” (Job 39:30). The behavior of the vulture when feeding its young with bloody carrion likely led to this commonly held belief. On a similar note, Sellers (1992) attributed the connection between vultures and maternity to the “vulture [striking] the egg with her sharp beak when it is time for the birth of a new offspring.” At least one representative of the New World vultures, the California Condor, actually does this (San Diego Zoo, pers. comm.). In *The Odyssey*, Homer makes a comparison to vultures crying over the loss of their young to demonstrate grief and compassion. In Greek culture, vultures had the “reputation of being affectionate” and “exceptionally maternal” “to their young” (Friedrich 1997).

Vulture feathers supposedly had “obstetric value,” and women commonly used them to ease childbirth (Brown 1936, Armstrong 1975). On a stranger note, the Greek army physician Dioscurides thought vulture excrement capable of producing abortions (Pollard 1977). In addition to protecting women in the forms of Egyptian goddesses vultures also protected women or were closely tied to them and childbirth in Greek mythology. In one story, the giant Tityus, or Tityos, attempted to rape the goddess Latona, or Leto. As punishment, Zeus sentenced him to eternal captivity while vultures fed upon his liver (De Gubernatis 1978, Pollard 1977). In another, Aigyptios and Neophron each fell in love with the other’s mother. As a result of their fight over this love, Zeus transformed them into two kinds of vultures (Pollard

1977). Finally, the vulture is the only one of all the birds that can tell Iphiklos why he is unable to have children and “indicate the means of obtaining them” (De Gubernatis 1978). Even in a culture where the vulture is not closely tied to specific female figures and where the people show a reluctance to do so, it still shows up in stories related to women and childbirth.

The biggest connection between all three cultures is the belief that vultures were “solely female and fertilized by the wind” (Neumann 1963). As a result of the vulture’s connection with Egyptian goddesses, but extending into Greek literature as well, people in these cultures believed vultures were only female (Pollard 1977). An excerpt from Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Romanae* illustrates this: “They say indeed that male vultures are never found; indeed, all are female.” Also, “in this race of creatures there is no male” (Zirkle 1936). As a result, vultures symbolized “feminine nature unhampered by interference outside itself” and “absolute independent authority” (Grady 1997).

Because they were only female, and “fearing scarcity of offspring,” vultures found another way to conceive (Plutarch in Zirkle 1936). The vulture “open[ed] her womb to the North Wind, [and was] embraced by him for five days” (Horapollo in Zirkle 1936). This belief spread into Christianity as supportive of the virgin birth. Around 248 A.D., Origen used this story “as an aid to the dogma of the virgin birth of Christ” (Zirkle 1936). “There is a certain female animal which has no intercourse with the male” (Zirkle 1936). He thought this proved that there should be no “incredibility” if God caused Christ “to be born in some manner different from the common” (Zirkle 1936). St. Basil later writes between 330 and 379 A.D. that God gave “in nature a thousand reasons for believing in the marvellous” (Zirkle 1936). St. Ambrose also adds, “Is that thing thought impossible in the Mother of God which is not denied to be possible in vultures?” (Zirkle 1936).

The belief that vultures were impregnated by the wind most likely stems from the fact that vultures often build their nests in secluded or high places, such as cliffs or rocky inclines. As a result, people could not find their nests and believed they had none. Aristotle believed the vulture “nests on inaccessible cliffs, and that is why its nest and young are rarely observed” (Pollard 1977). One Greek writer felt they “arrive from some foreign and unknown land,” often flocking to the site of a battle (Pollard 1977). Early Christians also knew of their nesting habits. God asks Job, “Is it at your command that the vulture mounts up and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells and makes his home in

the fastness of the rocky crag" (Job 39:27-28). This part of vulture mythology I find very easy to understand. Because people could not see the nests of vultures, they attempted to provide an explanation they could understand. However, I don't understand how this explanation and that for the compassionate vulture can coexist. If people couldn't find the nests of vultures, how could they know of their behavior toward their young? This conflict seems to suggest another reason for the connection of vultures to maternity besides their compassion toward its young.

The belief in fertilization by the wind most likely originated in Egypt, as that was the first place the vulture achieved prominence (Rowland 1977, Zirkle 1936). Likely, it was the first time anyone was interested enough in vultures to think about their nesting habits. Pollard (1948) believes this idea of the "wind-egg" comes from a time when "the processes of birth and generation were not fully related." Birds are often represented as symbols of the soul, as well as the "divine breath of life" (Rowland 1977). This "divine breath of life" was associated with the wind, as the wind seemed to control the human soul. According to Pollard (1948), cultures thought "the soul departed at death into the winds, and life could presumably return through the winds at birth" (Pollard). This credits the wind with powers of generation and strengthens the relationship among birds, fertilization, and the soul.

The major thing connecting vultures in their attributes of life and death is the role they play in rebirth (Seller 1992). Several cultures believed, as shown above, that one goddess was responsible for both birth and death. The "woman who generates life and all living things on earth is the same who takes them back into herself" (Neumann 1963). Many cultures believed death contained the potential for rebirth. Since the mother goddess controlled the lives of people from birth to death, she was also responsible for their rebirth (Johnson 1981).

In its role as a carrion eater, the vulture has the ability to transform death into life. "It awaits death and transforms it," "transmut(ing) for rebirth" "the perishable flesh" (Johnson 1981). The "Vulture-Mother" "swoops down to pick the dead bones clean for rebirth" (Sjöo and Mor 1987). Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient priestesses donned the feathers of vultures to perform elaborate resurrection and rebirth rituals (Johnson 1981). The vulture had the final responsibility for the dead. As a parent feeding its young with the bodies of the dead, the connection of the vulture to rebirth is clear. It is able to take dead flesh and transform it into new life through its young.

The association of vultures with rebirth is often seen in archaeological evidence. There are many paintings and other works that show vultures associated with breasts. Several "mother dieties...display prominent breasts and have a bird as their totem" (Rowland 1977). At Çatal Hüyük, there is a wall with human breasts sculpted over the skulls of vultures, "whose beaks protrude from the nipples" (Johnson 1981). In another work, the two vulture goddesses put their nipples in the mouth of a king, their son, to protect him forever (Johnson 1981). In this form, the mother goddess, breast, and vulture are all clearly associated. "The bird is...the maternal breast" (Rowland 1977). The association between these two can be explained with the fact that "out of life comes death" (Johnson 1981). The life-giving part of the mother is associated with the creature that prepares dead flesh for rebirth. These two elements clearly show the cycle of life that several cultures believed in: The vulture mother watches over childbirth and fertility, protects and guides the dead, then prepares the flesh for new life.

The vulture in these three cultures guides both birth and death and provides the necessary last step in the process: rebirth. Its worship and importance allowed these cultures to reconcile the differences between birth and death, the two biggest events of their lives, and think a step beyond. The use of such an ugly, strange bird indicates to me how desperate the psychological need was to do so. I was fascinated to discover that such a hideous, often hated bird has such a close connection with goddesses and maternity, as well as death and rebirth. It is hard to find the same elements of respect in today's world, where creatures are only looked at in terms of their usefulness to humanity. These cultures came closer to appreciating the bird for its own sake but also twisted the vulture around to serve their purpose of reconciling these differences. As a result of this paper, I have come to appreciate the vulture because of its ugliness up close and its supreme beauty in the air, as well as its role throughout history and mythology. Now when I see these birds flying overhead, I think of them in very different terms. I fully agree, and I think many in these three cultures would as well, with Robinson Jeffers in his poem "Vulture:"

To be eaten by that beak and become a part of him, to share those wings and those eyes –

What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment; what a life after death.

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