



## INSIGHTS INTO EGYPTIAN HORUS FALCON IMAGERY BY WAY OF REAL FALCONS AND HORUS FALCON INFLUENCE IN THE AEGEAN IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE: PART I

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### Abstract

*The falcon is the most frequently represented bird in Egyptian art. The discovery that falcons were depicted more often than realized in Aegean art, during the author's studies of Aegean faunal iconography, prompted this article which delves into their natural history as a way to understand the falcon gods of Egypt as well as Egyptian and Aegean falcon depictions. This study found that in both cultures the traits of the depicted falcons center around the Peregrine (Falco peregrinus) and Common Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus) with some Lanner (Falco biarmicus) head traits. The black malar facial stripe, hooked beak, and tomial 'tooth' of falcons characterize all Egyptian falcon depictions. In ancient Egypt the falcon was revered and it appears to hold a special place in Egyptian iconography with everyday images of falcon species not being present.*

### The Characteristics and Nature of Falcons, and Falcons in Egyptian Religion and Art

Among the raptors of the ancient skies of the Eastern Mediterranean were the graceful sickle-winged birds of prey, the falcons of several species. In Egypt from ancient Predynastic times falcons had been regarded as a manifestation of Horus the sky god – and King of the sky. In the Aegean, falcons were the subject of art also, and because of the cult context in which they appear, a supernatural significance is suggested for them as well. To understand the types of falcon imagery utilized by these ancient cultures and their possible interconnections, we must first understand the characteristics of the falcon itself.

#### BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FALCONS

Falcons are raptors, carnivorous aerial predators, and aggressive birds-of-prey of the genus *Falco*. They generally feed on

smaller birds, small mammals, lizards, snakes and large insects. The largest falcons, e.g., the Peregrines and Lanners, usually feed on medium size birds. This aggressive disposition will be considered below.

Falcons are reverse sexually dimorphic; the females are the larger and stronger and heavier, while the males are smaller by about 30 percent and are lighter (Figure 1). This has always been known, and the sex of chicks always figured in falconry and falcon rearing. The larger female, however, is *not* dominant, and males are not inferior to the female. Their differing sizes are explained as allowing the pair to hunt for different kinds of prey within the home range. When the chicks are first born the male does most of the hunting; as chicks grow and need more food the female does most of the hunting. The female is stronger and more boldly marked, and perhaps the more successful hunter due to her size and strength. The female's larger size may be an adaptation to protect against aggressive males harming the young.



Figure 1: Common Kestrels. The larger female (at right) perches in front of the one-third smaller male with its blue-gray head. From G. Handrinou and A. Demetropoulos, *Birds of Prey of Greece*. 1983. Courtesy of A. Demetropoulos.



Figure 2: Characteristic falcon wing shapes: at left, narrow, tapering, pointed sickle form wing shape in flight. At right, wing position in a dive (stoop) attack on prey. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peregrine\\_Falcon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peregrine_Falcon) (with permission)

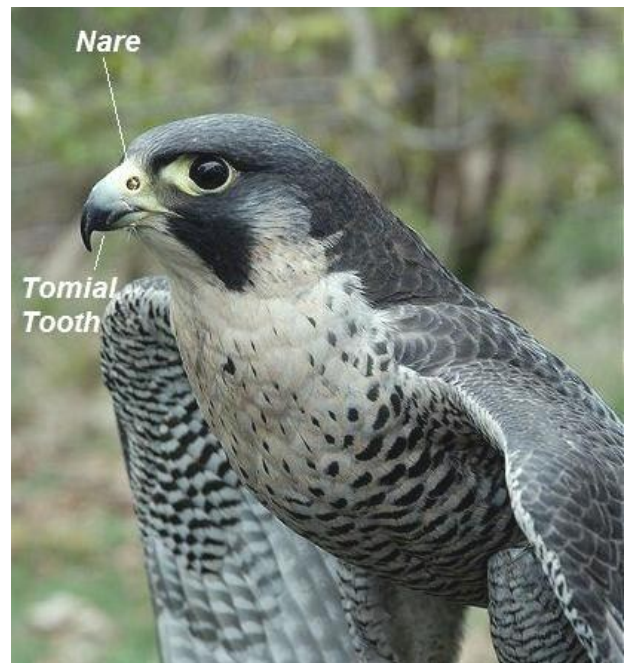


Figure 3: Peregrine female. Clearly visible are the sharp beak, the tomial 'tooth', the black eye set off by light yellow orbital ring and rim, the nare or nostril, and the fleshy yellow cere. Photo courtesy of Steve and Wendy Hall. *Adirondack Wildlife*. Photographer, Steve Corvelli.

The falcons' wings are highly distinctive and set falcons off from other predatory birds such as the broader winged hawks and eagles (Figure 2). The wings are elongated, slender and taper to a point with a pronounced sickle shape (the name "falcon" means hook-shaped or *falcat*). Wing tips bend downward at the carpal joint in flight, allowing speed with rapid turns and dazzling direction changes during hunts and in chasing prey.

Another key feature that distinguishes falcons from hawks and eagles is their highly distinctive vertical black facial marking called the moustachial streak, moustache or, technically, the malar stripe that descends from the front eye corner down across the white or pale cheek and usually curves back at its lowest point. It can be crescentic or hook-form as in Kestrels (Figure 1), or broad as in Peregrines (Figure 3). The second distinct falcon facial feature is the tomial tooth, a sharp pointed downward extension of the upper mandible that fits into a notch in the lower mandible (Figure 3). This 'tooth' is used to kill prey by severing the vertebrae behind the head. The beaks are sharply hooked with an overhanging tip. The usually yellow fleshy cere at the beak's base encloses the ring-form nostrils (nare) and gapes at the beak's corners.

The black eyes are a falcon genus distinction. Large and round, both the pupil and iris are jet black and stand out boldly in a surrounding wide yellow orbital ring. Such eyes are indicative of the highly acute vision of falcons. The nostril is ring-form with small bony tubercles inside that allow the bird to breathe more readily during high speed prey attacks. (The ring-form nostrils are stressed in Egyptian images). The brow overhangs the eyes resulting in an angry scowling expression. The four-toed feet have

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viciously sharp talons. The thighs are covered in a rectangular feather group called 'boots' (streamlining the body for rapid flight).

The attractive qualities and coloring of the plumage is a noticeable feature of many falcons, as may be seen in the feather arrangements and the markings of the wings, body and tail. For example, each of the dark back feathers of the Peregrine is outlined in a light rim, making the layering of the feathers clearly discernible. The upper and underwing feather arrangement of the wings differs considerably, as does the marking patterns of the

various feather groups, which are bold and differ in each species (e.g., the Peregrines' markings are more complex than the Common Kestrels'). Wing feather tips are black. Types of wing feathers - flight feathers, coverts, etc. (see Figure 4) - received close attention and were clearly represented in falcon depictions. There are other characteristic falcon features, such as the black rear face hook that makes up the largest feature of the emblematic facial markings of Egyptian Horus Falcon heads.

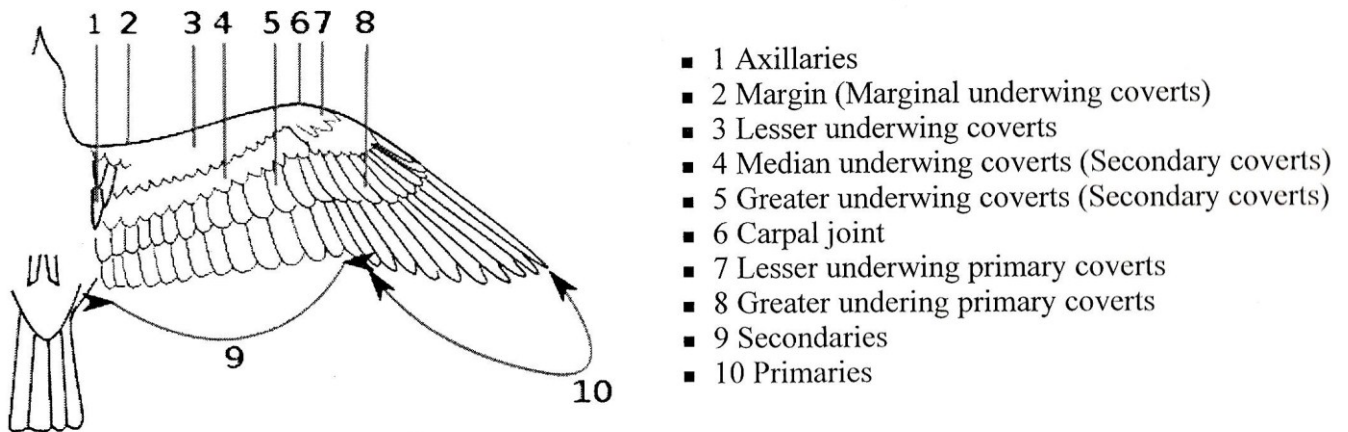


Figure 4a: From Wikipedia, released to the Public Domain. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Underwing.svg>

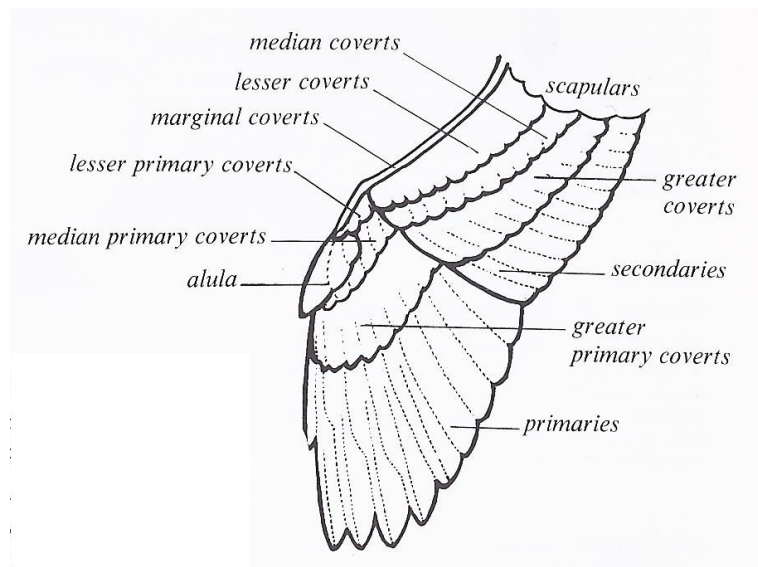


Figure 4b

Figures 4a and 4b: Feather groups of the falcon's wings. 4a is the underwing, 4b is the top of the wing. From *New Generation Guide: Birds of Britain and Europe*, ed. C. Perrins. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987, Figure on p. 61.





Figure 4c: Female Peregrine with wings extended displaying the important complex underwing pattern of markings of the coverts and flight feathers. Photograph courtesy of Steve and Wendy Hall. *Adirondack Nature*. Photographer, Steve Hall.

#### THE AGGRESSIVE NATURE OF FALCONS

One of the most fundamental characteristics of falcons – their aggressiveness – must be considered in detail. The aggressiveness of falcons is well attested in their predatory and killer nature,<sup>1</sup> but in Egyptian imagery none of the real falcons' aggressiveness is represented. The falcon gods are calm and restrained. No Horus falcon image shows overt aggression, but artisans did supply the falcon god images with the falcons' weapons: the sharp hooked beaks and the killer 'tooth' and talons. Every image of the falcon gods was given these killer instruments. Does this signify the falcon gods basically were aggressive and killers like real falcons and there was no need to show it, or were these simply required iconographic features?

The Horus falcon's aggression - instead of being pictured - is represented in myths. In one myth the falcon's aggression linked with Horus of Behedet (Behdety), god of the midday sun, of Edfu, is described. It relates that ...“it was discovered that the followers of Set were plotting against Ra during his earthly reign. Ra sent his son, Horus, who flew into the sky in the form of a winged sun disk. From the sky he could see all of Ra's enemies and he *swooped down like a falcon and attacked so ferociously* that they ran away....” A similar myth tells of Horus Behedet “... locked in perpetual battle with Set and his army of darkness to make sure the sun rises every morning.”<sup>2</sup> The killer beak and tooth and talons on all the falcon god statues and images leave no doubt that the falcon's aggression was recognized, if not explicitly pictured.

Griffins with falcon-heads are the aggressors in Egyptian iconography. Instead of falcons, the griffins were assigned the

role of violent aggressors in images, and sometimes even a god-like king became an aggressive griffin. These monsters, a hybrid with a falcon's head and wings with the body of a lion, doubled the power of the two separate predators. An impressive portrayal of the king as griffin comes from Twelfth Dynasty Dahshur. On the gold and semiprecious stone pectoral of the royal woman Mereret,<sup>3</sup> of Senwosret III's reign, the king is pictured as two falcon-headed griffins, wearing the horned tall two-feather crown. He is shown in the symbolic act of crushing and pummeling his prone and supplicating enemies with his paws. The griffins' folded falconiform wings are spread along the slender lions' backs, and small quivers of arrows are handy at the two griffins' shoulders.

On the other hand, with painted falcon designs from Melos, as will be seen, the lowered brows and sharp hooked beaks of the speeding falcons give an impression of fierce falcons. If falcon violence does not come out in the Egyptian griffins' behavior strongly, it is more pronounced in Aegean griffin images. There we have depictions of sinister griffins. This stands out in the theme of griffins and lions attacking each other, as in the ivory plaque from Delos.<sup>4</sup> More startling is the scene of griffins with tomial toothed shear-like beaks and sharp crescentic talons slaughtering an entire herd of fallow deer -- fawns, does and horned bucks, all together, in a frieze carved on an ivory pixis from Athens.<sup>5</sup>

Aegean griffins are shown tamed and leashed, controlling their aggression. In a scene from Akrotiri depicting the Theran goddess with her ornately winged griffin (Figure 5) in attendance<sup>6</sup> the beast is leashed, as the griffin is on the Vapheio sealstone. The griffins' aggression is suppressed in these images,

but it is implied in that the griffin would presumably protect the goddess with tooth and claw if attacked, and attack if she commanded.



Figure 5: Detail of the wings and head of the Saffron Goddess's griffin from Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera. (Ca. 1625 B.C.). This griffin and its ornate patterned wings – reflecting actual feather groupings - can be taken as the canonical form of the Aegean griffin. Photograph from: *The Wall-Paintings of Thera* by Christos Doumas, 1992, Pl 128. Reproduction permission provided by The Thera Foundation, London.

One Aegean artifact that underlines the griffin's unleashed violent nature, almost viscerally, is a bronze sword from the Shaft Graves (Grave Circle A, Grave IV) at Mycenae (c. 1500 B.C.).<sup>7</sup> Engraved on the sword blade three aggressive-looking griffins with lowered heads and pointed beaks, curled neck plumes, legs thrust out in front and rear, run and fly along the midrib of the blade of a warrior's bronze sword.<sup>8</sup>

Real falcons have an angry, scowling and fierce expression due to their heavy overhanging brows that shadow the eyes. This forms a shelf over the eyes, and the scowl is magnified by the piercing stare and blackness of falcons' eyes. (Figure 3). The wide open black eyes are particularly significant. They are almost sinister but they also infer falcons' sharp sightedness. In art the eyes are deliberately rendered deep black. Stressed was the perfect roundness of the iris/pupil, held within a narrow rim, set in a

surrounding light-hued orbital ring, exactly as in live falcons. Thus in the falcon images, like in real falcons, the black eyes grip our attention.

The falcons' black eyes are accentuated in Egyptian falcon god images, with the light orbit rings, and thin eye rims, and tear ducts, precisely rendered. These images are often so naturalistically precise that they impart a strong life-likeness, with the eyes mostly responsible. One of the most startling of these is the highly realistic 37 cm. tall Fifth Dynasty gold falcon head sculpture from Hierakonpolis.<sup>9</sup> In this repoussé sculpture, representation of the black eye was imitated in domed pieces of polished obsidian, whose shiny blackness has the same depth and glossy reflectivity as the living falcons' black eyes. (This image's hook beak with overhanging tip, would perfectly match a real falcon's head set beside it).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, by stressing the wide open round black eyes, aside from looking like real falcon's eyes, perhaps the ancient artisans were trying to convey the falcons' astonishing keen vision, more than three times more acute than human vision. The Egyptians would have noticed falcons' remarkable vision<sup>11</sup> which is one of the most admired falcon faculties and no doubt attempts would have been made to represent it.

#### THE FALCON IN EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND ART

Why animals were regarded as gods in Egyptian religion, such as the actual falcon as the sky god, has perplexed the modern secular mind from the beginning of Egyptology and before. There is a tendency to root the falcons in concrete cultural terms such as that their origins were founded in totemic Predynastic tribal customs. But the issue is more complex. Some cautionary remarks concerning the falcon's religious role by H. Frankfort<sup>12</sup> are helpful. He wrote that it is wrong to explain the animals as originally tribal totems. More incisively he also states that:

“...in Africa and North America, for example, it seems that either the terror of animal's strength, or the strong bond, the mutual dependence of man and beast (in the case of cattle cults, for instance) explains animal worship. But in Egypt the animal as such, irrespective of its specific nature, seems to possess religious significance ... But there is nothing metaphorical in the connection between god and animal in Egypt. It is not as if certain divine qualities were made articulate by the creature, in the way the eagle elucidates the character of Zeus. We observe, on the contrary, a strange link between divinity and actual beast, so that in times of decadence animal worship may gain a horrible concreteness. ...”

He cites as evident for this the thousands of animal mummies meant as offerings found at Sakkara.



“...We should realize that the relation between a god and his animal may vary greatly. If Horus is said to be a falcon whose eyes are sun and moon and whose breathe is the cooling north wind, we may think of this as a mere image to describe an impressive god of the sky. But the god was depicted as a bird from the earliest times and was apparently believed to be manifest either in individual birds or in the species.”

M. Lurker has offered some other, perhaps more mystical, explanations, along similar lines.<sup>13</sup> However, the actual nature of falcons does seem to have been responsible for their symbolic meanings in some cases, as in the mythic on-going battles of Horus against Set, mentioned above.

The Egyptian word for falcon was *“bik.”*<sup>14</sup> The falcon is associated with other gods as Houlihan writes “... but it is with Horus that this falcon is most closely associated. Perhaps no other bird occurs more frequently in art and hieroglyphs than does the Horus Falcon.”<sup>15</sup> Though there are other birds of prey portrayed in Egyptian art, it is the black moustachial streak of the white cheek, the tomial ‘tooth’ of hooked beak and the large round black eyes that are the main emphasized features that identify the “Horus Falcon” as a falcon.<sup>16</sup> The Peregrine falcon, though with variously modified features, and Common Kestrels are the falcon species that can be identified in Egyptian art most securely. Intrusions of the Lanner Falcon can be detected in some of the facial and head features, such as the bold black hook at cheek back. (While no image can be entirely linked with the Eleonora’s Falcon, it is considered because it was and is a major Eastern Mediterranean falcon inhabiting rocky unpopulated islands in large numbers and during migrations was frequently seen along the Nile.)

The name Horus means “the one who is high in the sky” or “the one who is distant”, as Wilkinson relates.<sup>17</sup> We tap into beliefs about the godly falcon when we understand that the eyes of the “Horus Falcon”, a cosmic being, were regarded as the moon and the sun, and the speckling of the spread underwings’ upper coverts were thought of as the stars of the night, and that behind the soaring falcons spread wings was the deep blue arc of the heavens. Too, when we absorb the idea that the divine falcon was deemed the “king of the heavens”, we have some sense of the falcon in Egyptian religious thought. We need to notice too that the sun is connected to the falcon’s flight high in the sky.<sup>18</sup>

Lurker directly asserts “the soaring flight and aggression of the falcon gave him a special place in cult. ... As king of the air the falcon became the sacred animal of the king of the gods, Horus, and also symbol of divine kingship. ... Horus was a sky god who protected the earth with his wings.”<sup>19</sup> (The large size, strength and one meter wing span of the Peregrines would be the species whose aggressive behavior is most startling and accessible).

The beauty of Horus Falcon images project a sense of the divine and of the beauty of the bird. The falcons’ original allure is still preserved in the fascination and love for them in falconry, which is very active today. As did the kings, knights and ladies of the European Middle Ages, Near Eastern falconry aficionados admire the temperament, behavior, hunting skills, power and beauty of their falcons on which they spend huge sums of money and care. But perhaps the basic root of their high status was based in their Predynastic history and in the traditions surrounding them. Early falcons cannot be regarded as tribal totems, as Frankfort cautioned, but they were “spiritual” protectors of Predynastic tribal chieftains, and sacred from early times.

There is truth to the concept that falcons and birds ruled the skies. In the pre-aviation world, when there were no aircraft, the skies were the domain of the birds and they *did* own the skies. Powerful falcons dominated the heavens in a tangible way -- defeating other birds as prey. Too, they were visible companions to the sun high in the sky. The high-flying falcons could be perceived as merging with the sun, as in the winged solar disk symbol, the falcon’s body becoming the sun, its wings the carrier of the sun in its flight across the blue arch of the heavens. It is not hard to attribute godly powers to falcons viewing them in this way. In Egyptian imagery the sky or the heavens were usually depicted as an arch shaped element in blue placed above the Horus falcon icon bearing the red orb of the sun positioned over his head or above images of the winged red solar disk, as in many funeral stelae.

There are a number of puzzling aspects of Egyptian representations of falcons, however. For example, there do not appear to be images in Egyptian art depicting hunting birds of prey, much less hunting falcons, though there are fishing King Fishers, and very early there are vultures and ravens picking at dead men on the Predynastic “Battlefield” Palette from Hierakonpolis in the Ashmolean Museum. Tomb paintings and Informal sketches on limestone chips or pot sherds also depicted other birds as everyday subjects - but evidently the falcon was not regarded informally.

The realities of falcons’ gender differences also present an iconological puzzle in Egyptian art. Despite the apparent size and gender differences, the Egyptians apparently exhibited a male bias in assigning the larger stronger animal the roles of masculine gods, but in this case the larger more powerful animal, the falcon, is female. This is one place where real falcons and the symbolic falcons part company. Even if the Horus Falcon’s gender may have been neutral or irrelevant, one cannot help but puzzle over this issue. Surely in Predynastic times when relations with falcons were intimate, as when real falcons were kept and served as symbolic protectors of tribal chieftains, and were displayed perched on poles as standards, the gender of these live falcons was noticed -- the female is the large one laying the eggs.

Lurker remarked “that Hathor was often characterized as a female falcon in equation with Horus as sky-god.”<sup>20</sup> Another instance where falcons’ female gender was evident was when the female goddesses Isis and Nephthys took the form of female Common Kestrels. These appear in the tomb painting of Sennedjem where the two goddesses as kestrels have the brown

head of female kestrels, instead of the blue-gray heads of male kestrels. These kestrels do not have facial moustachial streaks, but two more kestrel goddesses do have them in Nefertari tomb paintings. (Both examples are from the Nineteenth Dynasty). An interesting detail in the Sennedjem<sup>21</sup> standing kestrel is that the bird was given two cloacae while a more stylized standing peregrine from Rameses IX’s tomb has only a single cloaca,<sup>22</sup> as Houlihan points out. In birds these openings refer to the generative, intestinal and urinary organs. Thus is the kestrel with the two cloacae female and the single cloaca for a male?



Figure 6a



Figure 6b

Figures 6a and 6b: Falcon head from Egyptian art showing details of the canonical face and head motif compared with and explained by head of a live Lanner falcon. A is the Falcon head terminal of a collar (necklace) of Princess Khnumit, 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. B is the head of a live Lanner falcon.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanner\\_Falcon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanner_Falcon)



Figure 7: Female Kestrel. The black moustachial streak is conspicuous and narrow on kestrels, matching the moustachial streaks of Egyptian Horus falcons. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Natural History, Crete.

In Egyptian Horus Falcon iconography, the canonical manner of portraying the Horus Falcon gods is of major interest, principally in relation to real falcons. Figures 8, 9 and 10 illustrate Horus in his standing falcon bird form and two instances of falcon headed gods. Such portrayals of gods are naturally grand images that declare a long-lasting consistency of features and conceptions. Of notable interest are the ways the features of the head were transformed into an elegant emblem that ordered succinctly the natural and diagnostic features of the most





**Figure 8:** The first complex falcon image in Egyptian art appears on the Narmer Palette. (Dynasty 0. Ca. 3000 B.C.). This early image already renders the facial features of later Horus Falcons, but simply.

common falcons of the Eastern Mediterranean. These canonical features were to endure from the late Dynasty I period up till the Ptolemaic/Roman period with only minor variations. In Figure 6a and 6b, the canonical facial features of Egyptian falcon images are explained by comparison with a live Lanner falcon's head, but the same features are found on the Kestrel (Figure 7) and other falcons illustrated in this article. Comparison will show that the facial emblem is fairly fixed over different periods. The fixed facial emblem establishes that the artisans really did notice falcon facial features and considered them part of the canonical visual representation of falcon gods. Every falcon image or statue and falcon mummy has these distinct facial features. Wrapped bird mummies can be recognized as falcons because the facial emblem acts as a label.

The rear black facial hook against white with its sharp point curving frontward at its bottom and tapering to a point forming a large reversed C stands out as the largest and most notable feature, enclosing the other facial features. It is usually backed by the solid darker shape of the nape and crown of the falcon. In nature we can see this feature subdued and merely suggested, or distinct. It starts at the back of the neck below the nape. The Lanner's head shows this well (Figure 6b).

The recurring features of the face emblem are: the large deep black domed iris/pupil, its narrow rim and the eyes' wide orbital area; the fleshy cere holding the nostril (nare) and encircling the base of the gape; hooked beak with over hanging tip, with the sharp pointed tomial tooth. And in most cases the moustachial streaks (malar stripe) is ever-present. The jagged, but regular, upper edge of the rear black facial hook is an addition to the natural face features in the emblem; these jagged points lean frontward. They seem to represent feathering above the eye. The bottom mandible is usually rendered light, or white, so as to pop-out the sharp tomial tooth's shape in silhouette. The 'tooth' of the sharp hooked beak is depicted in every image and is always stressed so it shows distinctly, possibly to underline its function in killing prey by cutting through the vertebrae just behind the head. No likenesses of falcon gods were correct or complete



**Figure 9:** Divine falcon in repoussé relief and engraving on a gold panel from Queen Hetepheres' tomb (Fourth Dynasty. 2600 B.C.). By this time the canonical falcon form has been crystallized.

without the killer 'tooth'. Without it would be like a lion without teeth and claws. If there is a sign of the violent killer falcon in the falcon god images, it would be the insistent representation of the killer tomial tooth and sharp beak. The talons are also emphasized. Essential is the whiteness or paleness



of the cheek, the throat, neck and breast that pops out the salient bold features of the face. In the sculptural versions the heavy overhanging brows are indicated, and the entire cheek area, eye and beak are depressed and apart from the raised back of the head, the crown and nape. The latter are dark in real falcons' heads and are emphasized in the depictions.

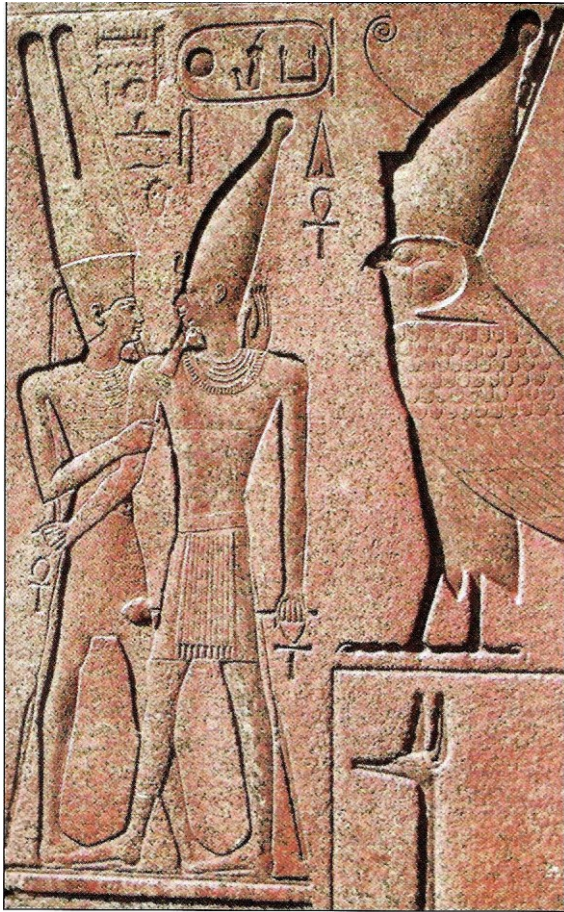


Figure 10: Sunk relief carved image of the standing double crowned Horus-Falcon on the fallen obelisk of Hatshepsut at Karnak. The representation is notable for its details. Photograph by Dennis Forbes, reproduced courtesy of *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*.

The beauty and sensitive spacing of the elements are exemplified by the falcon head terminal clasps of the Twelfth Dynasty gold collar of Princess Khnumit<sup>23</sup> (Figure 6a). The match with the real Lanner falcon's head is remarkable, with the glossy black eye with its rim and wide orbital ring, and even the blue cast of the black beak is represented.

The consistency of the canonical facial emblem spans at least two millennia. We can trace this consistency of facial detail from the beginning in the less precise Narmer palette falcon (Figure 8),

the Horus Falcon surmounting a Serekh in King Djet's stele (Dynasty I), through the Fourth Dynasty in the precise 'golden' falcon symbol of Queen Hetepheres gold bed ornamentation (Figure 9), and the full Horus falcon form of the Hatshepsut's fallen obelisk of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Figure 10).

The feather "boots" found on the Peregrine are dramatically patterned with prominent V's which are clearly depicted in the rear boot of Queen Hetepheres 'golden' falcon. The powerful four-toed clawed feet are armed with long scimitar-form sharp talons. There are semicircular pads beneath the four toes.



Figure 11: Sunk relief representation of a falcon god bearing a solar orb, from an area of the temple of Khonsu at Karnak decorated in the reign of Ramses IV. Photograph by Dennis Forbes, reproduced courtesy of *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*.

In the Nineteenth Dynasty sunken relief of the solar disk borne on the head of Horus-Ra-Herakhty (Figure 11) the canonical facial features are particularly crisp in relief and set forward with a space separating them from the head cloth. The cloth's edge is given an arc shape that echoes the strong sharp pointed rear facial hook. The jagged feathering, the sharply defined rimmed eye, moustachial streak, and hooked beak, with the 'tooth' accented, are sharply rendered. The cere is distinct, and significantly both nostrils, as tiny rings, are placed above the cere. In the image of the moon god Khonsu in the tomb decorations of Prince Montuhirkopshef<sup>24</sup> (Figure 12), the sharpness of the rear facial hook, moustachial streak, eye and 'toothed' short beak stand out distinctly against the white area of





Figure 12 (left): Image of the falcon-headed moon god Khonsu. Detail from the wall paintings of the Tomb of Prince Montuhirkopshef. Photograph by George B. Johnson, reproduced courtesy of *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*.

Figure 13 (below): Horus Falcon from Deir el-Bahri, in a facsimile by Howard Carter, displays the downward and outstretched wings positioned in the canonical protective gesture. Reproduced by courtesy of the *Egypt Expedition Society* from an illustration published in *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*. Image is copyrighted by the *Egypt Expedition Society*.





the cheeks, throat, and neck. The adjacent dark blue head cloth increases the contrast, accentuating the sharp features themselves thrust out by the white of cheek, throat and breast in the area above the top of the folded wing.

The great red solar disk borne, for example, on the the Karnak Rameses IV relief sculpture head of Ra-Herakhty (Figure 11) is an important aspect of the falcon's associated iconography.

The sculptured relief carving of many of these solar disks gives tangible full body sense to the spherical solar orb. The ever-present cobra-form uraeus encircling the great red orbs is a recurring feature of solar iconography, in some instances the cobra representing the blazing heat of the sun.

An outstanding instance of the accentuated ring nostrils of Horus Falcon images is also seen on the same Karnak image of Ra-Herakhty (Figure 11). The nostril representation in that image is extraordinary as the carver represented *both* ring-like nostrils side-by-side, even the one on opposite side of head, normally out of view. He placed them just above the beak base outside and above the cere, for maximum visibility. When such repeated attention is paid to a feature we know that it is meaningful. Can we say that representations of both nostrils, and even a single one, allowed the falcon god's image the breath of life?

The Peregrine and the Common Kestrel are the falcon species most recognizable in Egyptian iconography. The Horus Falcon of Hatshepsut's Mortuary Temple at Deir el Bahri (Figure 13) comes close to a Peregrine in its feather markings pattern. And the Common Kestrel, with generalized brownish coloration of this species, appears in Sennedjem's and in Nefertari's tomb paintings. Other falcon species are not specifically denoted in Egyptian art-- except for the Lanner's rear facial hook.

The Deir el Bahri temple's Horus Falcon (Figure 13) has elongated wings, the downward held wing dark and exhibiting a complex pattern like a Peregrine's upper wing, while the open

underwing of the right wing shows the elaborate array of covert layers and flight feathers. Only the flight feathers are darkened, the shorter coverts progressively lightened till the top covert is nearly white. The greenish-blue color of the bird's upper plumage is naturalistically derived from the bluish gray of the Peregrines' back and upper wing coloration. The chest, throat, and boots are stark white. The artist is fascinated by the various feather forms and arrangements, but seems intent on conveying a sense of radiant light issuing from beneath the dark downward held wing, perhaps representing the radiance of the falcon god. The primary flight feathers are spread tensely as if catching the wind in flight. The falcon god clasps the Shen ring of Eternity in his claws while his environment is depicted over his head as a strip of blue speckled with white stars. An image of Hatshepsut once stood under his protective wings.

Egyptian artists never skipped over the wings, never generalized them. They did simplify them on smaller images, but they seem to have taken pleasure in depicting each feather and its place on the wings. Patterns of standing falcons' closed wings were also rendered in rich coloring and semi-precious stones. The various types of feathers, the flight feathers and the shorter coverts received close attention and were represented carefully. The characteristics of individual feathers were handled and represented. The wings' feather arrangements differences on upper and underside of wings were registered and rendered. Egyptian artisans exploited the wing feather arrangements and markings to create the highly ornamental wings of many images of the Horus Falcon and the vulture goddess Nekhbet including the richly colorful cloisonné and painted ornamentation of the Horus Falcon gods' and vulture goddess' wings which protected and enfolded Egyptian kings. Egyptian imagery is replete with wings; birds, gods, and goddesses have them, as well as the ubiquitous solar disk.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> To affirm the truth behind falcons' aggressive reputation, one needs to observe an attack on flying prey in midair by a Peregrine striking the prey at 320 kph (200 mph) from high in the sky in a stoop flight, see the prey's feathers dislodged by the blow floating away, realize how much force is entailed, and on the ground see the scowling predator ripping into the flesh of the prey with its razor sharp pointed beak. Michael Peterson, *Birds of Prey: Winged Masters of the Sky* (2008), 119. See also video of peregrines at

<http://ibc.lynedes.com/species/pergrine-falcon-falco-peregrinus>

<sup>2</sup> J. Hill at *Ancient Egypt Online*

<http://www.ancientegyptonline.co.uk/horusbhedet.html>

<sup>3</sup> W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, rev. W. K. Simpson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), Fig. 202; Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Fig. 122.

<sup>4</sup> J. Aruz, K. Benzel and J. M. Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B. C.* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), Fig. 267; Iphigenia Tournavitou, "The Mycenaean Ivories from the Artemision at Delos," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 119, no. 2 (1995): 479-527; E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (Chicago: 1972), Pls. XXXVI and XXXVII.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hood, *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), Figs. 112, (A) and (B).

<sup>6</sup> The Theran goddess's griffin from Akrotiri shows us wings very like slender falcate wings of falcons. If we compare the slender tapered pointed wings of the griffin with those of the Eleonora's falcon, we would recognize the almost exact wing type and shape. These ornate wings' long primary flight feathers taper to a point, and the shorter secondary flight feathers of the lower part of the wing follow the real falcons' wings' structure. The black triangular markings of the flight feathers are like those of a falcon's wings, particularly the markings of Common Kestrels. Intriguing is the way the artist translated the short covert feathers of the back raised wing into an array of small blue feathers. The coverts of the front wing, the underwing, are translated into the famous spiral pattern of Aegean griffins. The wing motif includes large dots interspersed between 'hooks' and enwrapped in the center of the spirals. We can look to the Common Kestrels flight feathers as the source of the bold slanted triangular black hooks, the familiar "notched plume" wing motif. This bold feature of the wings of both griffin and sphinx is the most notable contribution to Aegean iconography of the Common Kestrel. We can regard the ornate winged griffin of the Theran Goddess from Akrotiri as the prime example of the winged Aegean griffin (Figure 5). The goddess' griffin lacks the head crest found on other Aegean griffins, however.

<sup>7</sup> Hood 1978, Fig. 176 B.

<sup>8</sup> These images attest to the practice of weapon makers appropriating violent subject matter in weapon ornamentation, such as animals killing prey, chains of predation in which animals prey on other animals, hunting scenes, and attacking griffins often among them. The aim was to give magical power to weapons. The decorative enhancements of Egyptian weapons are a prime example of this practice.

<sup>9</sup> Found in the temple dedicated to Horus Nekhen.

<sup>10</sup> M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1980), illustration, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Steiner Birding

[http://www.steiner-birding.com/birdtalk/observations/peregrine\\_falcon.html](http://www.steiner-birding.com/birdtalk/observations/peregrine_falcon.html)

<sup>12</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion, an Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948; Harper, 1961). See the section on "Sacred Animals and Otherness," 8-11.

<sup>13</sup> Lurker (1980, p. 26) on the other hand states that "...Animals became media of revelation and also bearers of supernatural powers and archetypal qualities. ... The individual animal was only an earthly image of the transcendent primeval image. Sacred animals were, therefore, the eternal 'soul'...or as the Egyptian would say, the *ba* of the gods."

<sup>14</sup> R. H. Wilkinson, *Reading Egyptian Art* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 83.

<sup>15</sup> P. F. Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* (London: Aris & Phillips, 1986), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Berke and Steve Hall, "The Peregrine Falcon," *Adirondack Wildlife*.

<http://www.adirondackwildlife.org/PeregrineFalcon.html>

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson 1992, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Filling in for first hand observations, videos are instructive. See BBC video of a Lanner falcon attacking a bird flock. BBC film. <http://www.arkive.org/lanner-falcon/falco-biarmicus/video-00.html>

<sup>19</sup> Lurker 1980, 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Houlihan 1986, 47, Fig. 60.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Fig. 61.

<sup>23</sup> A. Amenta, *The Treasures of Tutankamun and the Egyptian Museum of Cairo* (Vercelli: Whitestar, 2007), Fig. 119.

<sup>24</sup> G. B. Johnson, "KV19: Kings' Valley Picture Gallery, 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Tomb of Prince Montuhirkopshef," *KMT* 16:2 (Spring 2005): 40-53.