

Alex Patterson

## The Bird-head Symbol, Some Speculations as to its Meaning

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### Description of the Bird-head Symbol

Petroglyphs and pictographs of so-called bird-headed figures are found in southern Utah and northern Arizona. This spread of images seems to match the area thought to comprise the Anasazi culture from AD 400-1300.

Bird-head figures consist of a human figure with a bird for a head or with a bird perched on the head. Their occurrence begins in Basketmaker times and extends well into Puebloan. Campbell Grant dated bird-headed figures in the Chinle Wash area of NE Arizona between AD 450-1100, that is, Modified Basketmaker through Developmental Pueblo eras.

In most of the cases, the bird is depicted in profile with wings folded (see illustrations for only known exception). The species of bird is often non-determinable, although many examples seem to have the shape of a duck or the drooping wattles of turkeys.

Bird-headed figures appear singly or in small groups. In groups, the figures are often shown carrying various objects. These objects appear as arrows, bows, and atlatls.

### Opinions as to Bird-head Meaning: North American Area

#### Polly Schaafsma

Some of these bird representations may relate to shamanic practices of

the period and the properties of magical flight.

In many parts of the world shamans claim to be able to engage in flights in which the soul, leaving the body, assumes the form of a bird. The duck-headed figures may represent shamans with this ability (Wellman 1975, Grant 1978).

The duck, a figure widely associated with shamanism, has a long history in both the Southwest and Mexico. In Mexico it is a prominent figure in the prehistoric art of the west coast and it plays a major mythological and ritual role among the Cora-Huichol (Furst 1974a:139). Among both the Huichol and the Pueblos, gods may assume the form of a duck, especially when they are traveling between the mountains and the sea.... At Zuni they may even be the *kachina* dead or the gods themselves (Schaafsma 1980:133-40).

A bird figure of *Kauyumari*, "Our Elder Brother Deer," who as the shamanic activist instigates the creation of the world (see illustrations). He is shown in this contemporary yarn painting from the Huichol Indian area of West Mexico. While not duck-like, *Kauyumari* is certainly bird-like, with beak, wings, and tail.

#### Campbell Grant

Grant found three bird types represented individually and in bird-headed figures, including the duck, crane and turkey.

Ducks are fairly numerous, but cranes are rare. Turkeys are by far the most abundant birds in the rock art (Grant 1978: 171).

Often birds appear perched on the heads of humans or even in place of the human head. Not all these perching creatures appear to be turkeys but in a significant number of instances, the big bird is unmistakable. (Grant 1978:172).

### Hamilton Tyler

Tyler, author of *Pueblo Birds and Myths*, may provide some insight into the pre-dominance of turkey images.

The turkey is the gallinaceous bird that represents the Earth as fittingly as the eagle stands for the sky, and its importance in myth and ceremony is equal. Turkeys are very easy to domesticate, so whole flocks may be maintained for the use of their feathers.... Being of and on the earth, they also became man's companions, both in life and in death.

Mountain Turkeys are a subspecies of Wild Turkey, the race *merriami*, which is confined to the Southwest. These birds are not the same as our domestic turkeys... (They) are trim and muscular, allowing them to travel with speed and even to soar or plane a bit—abilities consistent with their chosen habitat, which is the yellow pine belt of 6,000 to 10,000 feet in elevation.

There is no doubt that the central value of turkeys in Pueblo culture is as a source of feathers for prayer-sticks. (In constructing prayer sticks) the kinds of bird feathers used have separate meanings and messages to

the spirits... Turkey feathers are quite different. Almost all prayer-sticks have turkey feathers attached, along with other special kinds of bird feathers.

Turkey feathers are referred to as the 'clothes' of the offering. This indication of the term 'clothes' was once quite literal, because in early times, the Puebloans made and wore cloaks of turkey feathers (Tyler 1991: 78-79).

### Alexander M. Stephen

The mechanism of the prayer stick—how it persuades the gods and spirits to send down the benefits prayed for—is explained by Stephen in his Hopi Journal (1936).

A man makes a prayer stick because he wants something good, some benefit (from the gods)—Cloud, Cardinal Chiefs of the Four Directions, Ice Chief, and the Planting One. From these and other chiefs all benefits proceed.

Feathers are used in prayer sticks, because they are light (not heavy) and Cloud and all the other chiefs desire them to make the prayer feathers depending in front of the forehead (of the chief).

As Sun journeys across (the sky each day) he sees the prayer sticks... and inhales their essence. Their breath body, their likeness (putting these in his girdle). (At night down Below) Sun gives them to the Planting One who distributes them to the other chiefs as appropriate with their design).

The chiefs thank the Planting One and the makers of the (prayer sticks) and decorate their foreheads with the

feathers. They send the benefit that the prayer maker desires (Stephen 1936: 1271-2).

Prayer feathers may have a quality that could help explain bird-heads:

1. Feathers selected for use with prayer sticks have a special quality—lightness, i.e. “not heavy.” To use a modern term from aviation, prayer feathers have “lift,” like an airplane wing.

2. The gods or chiefs like to adorn their foreheads with these prayer feathers, implying that they use this “lift” on their journeys.

The same kind of feathers were tied around the forehead of a deceased Hopi at burial to make him “light” for his final journey from the grave to the *sipapu* in the west. (Stephen 1936: 825)

3. Could a bird-headed figure signify a chief, wearing the “lift” feathers on his forehead? Drawing a bird for a head or a bird perched on the head is a much simpler way of depicting “lightness” feathers on the forehead than drawing feathers hanging in front of the face.

### **Barton Wright**

This researcher and artist, using the Zuni myths originally recorded by Frank Hamilton Cushing in the 1890s authored the *Mythic World of the Zuni*, in 1988. The story of Kaildo, a hero and god, may have some bearing on the bird-head symbol.

During Creation time the *Ashiwi*, as the forefathers of the Zuni were called, were searching for the Middle, the place where they were to settle. Waters circled the world and the chiefs decided to send scouts to find the best way to avoid them. *Ka'wimasa*, Kachina Maker, so

named because he unwittingly brought about the appearance of the kachinas among the Zunis, selected his eldest son, Kaiklo, “for he was wise with words and understood all sounds” to travel northward to learn the distance to the great encircling waters.

Kaiklo becomes lost in the northland of ice and snow. He is blinded by the light until his heart dies within him and he is transformed “as are the gods.”

As he cried, wandering blindly hither and thither, the water birds flocked about him, cocking their heads and calling to one another.

When Duck heard his cry, it sounded like her own so she drew close answering loudly. When they came together, they seemed to be strangely kin.

Duck led Kaiklo to the land of mists where the Rainbow Worm lived. Hearing Kaildo's cries, the Rainbow Worm said, “Why do you cry out? Give me (prayer) plumes that I may be uplifted to cloud heights. My footsteps will be from country to country and I will bear you upon my shoulders to your people and their country.

Kaiklo took from his pouch the lightest and choicest prayer plumes, and, with two strong pinion feathers that Duck gave to make his prayers far-reaching, tied them together. Rainbow arched and stooped down. Kaiklo breathed on the plumes and fastened them to Rainbow's near side...

"Now mount on my shoulders." Rainbow said. Then he arched himself high amidst the clouds... Duck spread his wings in flight to the south... and Rainbow Worm straightened himself and followed Duck like an arrow until they reached the Lake of the Ancients (near the home of the Ashiwi (Wright 1988:61-3).

Again, the sacred prayer plumes served to raise Rainbow Worm, Kaildo's steed, to the "cloud heights" and with their "lift" carry this mythical hero back to his country.

### **J. Walter Fewkes**

According to Fewkes, kachinas "are spirits of the ancients of the Hopis, and personations of them by men bear the symbols which are supposed to have characterized these ancients." (Fewkes 1903:16).

Thus, it would seem that among the "ancients of the Hopis" there were many spirits who had bird characteristics, including bird heads, wings, tails, and feathers. The eagle, red hawk, kite, duck, humming bird, owl, mocking bird, road runner, snipe, turkey, chickens are among the birds impersonated. Beyond these direct bird impersonations there were feathers featured on most of the remaining kachinas.

In 1899 J. Walter Fewkes in *The Alosaka Cult of the Hopi Indians* describes the "Bird-man, *Kwataka*, in the *Soyaluna* ceremony. *Kwataka* or *Kwatoka*, means eagle-man. This ceremony took place in the chief's kiva at Oraibi on the Hopi mesas, around the Winter Solstice.

Fewkes describes it in these words:

The Birdman enters the kiva down the ladder with a whistle in his mouth, with which he imitates the call of a bird, probably the eagle. He carries feathers in his hands and

moves his arms up and down imitating the motion of wings, as if flapping them like a bird. A woman who holds an ear of corn in one hand dances with him, waving the ear from side to side in front of him and then retiring to a corner of the kiva.

The Birdman takes up a bundle of pointed sticks in his hand and approaches a pile of sand in the center of the kiva. One by one, he throws the sticks into the sand. Then he returns to the woman and passes more sticks from her feet to her head and back; then he returns to the sand and throws these sticks also into the sand.

Finally, he takes up a bow and some arrows, dancing in front of the assembled multitude. As he danced, he raised the bow, fitted an arrow, faced the north and drew the bowstring as if to shoot. This was repeated six times, the performer pointing the arrow to the cardinal directions in prescribed sinistral (going to the left) sequence. (Fewkes 1899:537-530).

Fewkes felt that the Birdman represented an old war god, or possibly a sun god. He interpreted the proceedings as a symbolic dramatization of the fertilization of the earth by the sun, as the sun starts its return at the Winter Solstice.

### **Pat McCreery & Ekkehart Malotki**

McCreery and Malotki in their book *Tapamveni* show a selection of bird-headed figures in the Little Colorado River & Petrified Forest areas. They display various artifacts: arrows, crooks, wings, flutes, and the so-called atlatl. McCreery comments on these figures:

The bird-heads may have been members of a society or sect which

performed in a ceremony. Our picture shows men carrying crooks and seemingly costumed with one feathered wing. Group participation is suggested by three panels which picture three, four, and as many as seven bird-heads in association. Bird-heads playing flutes have also been found in the (Little Colorado River area, further indicating a ceremonial function (McCreery & Malotki 1994:152).

Pat McCreery may be correct. We may be seeing a cult performing some kind of ceremony, as J. Walter Fewkes recorded in his article on *Kwataka* and the Soyaluna ceremony at Hopi back in 1899 (see Fewkes above).

#### **Garrick Mallory**

Under the title *Insignia or Tokens of Authority*, Mallory in *Picture Writing of the American Indian* cites Lewis & Clarke 1814:66

Among the Teton Sioux the interior police of a village is confided to (certain) officers... Their distinguishing mark is a collection of two or three raven skins fixed to the girdle behind the back... On the head too is a raven skin split into two parts and tied so as to let the beak project from the forehead.

Mallory also quotes from the writings of Major Stephen Long 1829: 207:

Among the Omaha on all occasions of public rejoicing... a certain number of resolute warriors are appointed to preserve order... In token of their office they paint themselves entirely black; usually wear the crow... and arm themselves with a whip or war club to punish on the

spot all those who misbehave... (Mallory 1893:412-13).

From Mallory we find the "interpretation" of the scene (see also illustrations):

First is a votive offering or 'shaman stick; erected to the memory of one departed. The bird carvings are considered typical of 'good spirits,' and the above was erected by the remorse-stricken individual who has killed the individual shown. The headless body represents the man who was killed. In this respect the Ojibwa manner of drawing a person 'killed' is similar.

The right-hand Indian represents the (murderer) who erected the 'grave-post'. The arm is thrown earthward, resembling the Blackfeet and Dakota gesture to kill (Mallory 1893: 519).

#### **Opinions as to Bird Head Meaning Mesoamerican Area**

A bird-head figure from Teotihuacan, Valley of Mexico, is shown in two forms in the illustrations. Once thought to represent the male rain god Tlaloc, this mural, according to Peter Furst (1976) and Richard Schultes (1992), both noted students of Mesoamerican culture and hallucinogenic plants, depicts a great Mother Goddess. She is surmounted by a highly stylized and elaborated morning glory, *Rivea corymbosa*, the sacred hallucinogenic *Oloihqui* of the Aztecs.

Furst explains:

The deity of Tepantitla (Teotihuacan) appears now to be an All-Mother or Mother Goddess, perhaps akin to the great Aztec fertility deity Xochiquetzal, Precious Flower, or another of her manifestations, Chachitlicue, Skirt of Jade, the Mother

of Terrestrial Water... We (see) a direct association between (this) Mother Goddess, (and) water... and the divine morning glory... a plant that (prefers) the banks of streams... and is considered the messenger of the rainy season... (the time) when it blooms (Furst 1976:72).

While Furst does not explain the bird on the Goddess's head, he discusses the avian motif in relation to snuffing, another Mexican practice:

Birds are often regarded as guardian spirits or even manifestations of specific psychoactive plants, especially tobacco. Where the bird motif is un-specific, it seems to stand for the power of flight... (Furst 1976:154).

### **Opinions as to Bird Head Meaning World Area**

#### **Marija Gimbutas**

Gimbutas her work *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) has proposed that the leading divinity in Europe from the earliest Neolithic villages ca. 7,000 B.C. was the Bird Goddess, i.e., the Goddess/Mother Creator. This Goddess "arose in reflection and veneration of the laws of Nature" and lasted in peace and harmony until ca. 3,500 B.C. The arrival from the east of the male-dominated horse-riding warrior culture from the Volga basin ended her reign, changing matrilineal into patrilineal descent as one of many changes. The Bird Goddess was replaced with "horse-riding warrior gods of the thundering and shining sky", and male rule took over, prevailing ever since.

This Bird Goddess appears with a beak or pinched nose, long neck, hairdo or crown, female breasts, either wings or wing like projections, and protruding female buttocks outlined in the shape of a bird's

body. Besides this image she exhibits Vs, meanders and chevrons among her many symbols (see illustrations). "Her basic functions as Giver of Life, Wielder of Death, and not less importantly, as Regeneratrix" (Gimbutasi 1989: xix).

The oldest bird-head found is one from the Upper Paleolithic, say 16,000 B.C., from a cave near Lascaux, France (see illustration page 137). This human figure has a bird-head and a bird-headed staff. It has been interpreted as a shaman in an ecstatic trance. "Birds are the most common and the most obvious symbols of shamanic transformation and magical flight." (Hedges:1985: 87)

The god Horus as a falcon with the sun disc on his head is being greeted by the Pharaoh Seti I in this Egyptian tomb painting, dated c. 1310 BC (see illustration page 137) Both the sky and the sun and the reigning ruler of Egypt were seen as falcons, according to Lurker 1974: 65. The falcon is rated the fastest flyer among birds, reaching 240 miles an hour in its dive onto its prey. (Ennenga 1998: personal comm)

A bird-head from the royal palace in Nimrud, Syria and dated to 883 BC is shown in illustration page 137. The figure is said to represent an ancient sage in bird disguise who came to teach the people. (Black & Green 1992:100)

### **Summary of Speculations**

There seem to be several possibilities as to the intended meaning of the bird-headed figures seen in southwestern rock art:

1. The bird-head may have connoted the abilities attributed to shaman in their curing and prophesizing work—essentially magical flight.
2. The bird-head may have designated gods, spirits or ancestors who fly

- from sky to earth at the call of human beings to teach or bring some benefit to mankind.
3. The bird-head may have depicted the soul of a human being which needs the "lift" of bird feathers to "fly" to or from the human being.
  4. The bird-head may depict feather on the forehead of a chief or on forehead of deceased.

The appearance, in many ages and cultures, of the bird-head symbol suggests that it may arise from the mind of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* spontaneously, like the *archetypes* of the subconscious proposed by Carl Jung (Jung et al, 1953). While transmission of this symbol by contact is possible, it seems unlikely due to the great span of space and time. The possibility of a connection between southwestern rock art symbols and Jung's *archetypes* needs more study

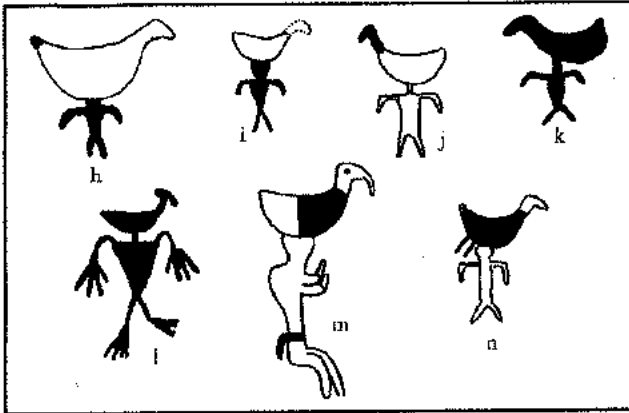
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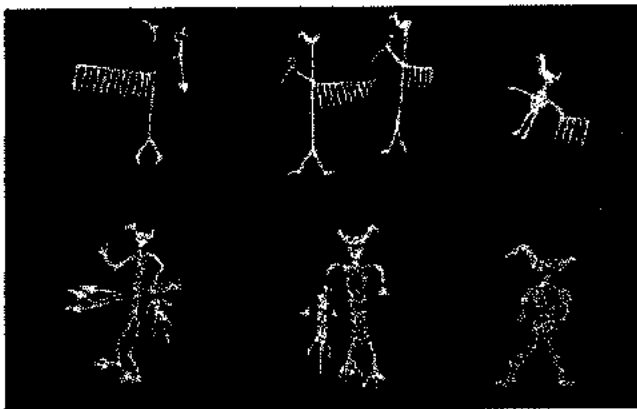
ILLUSTRATIONS



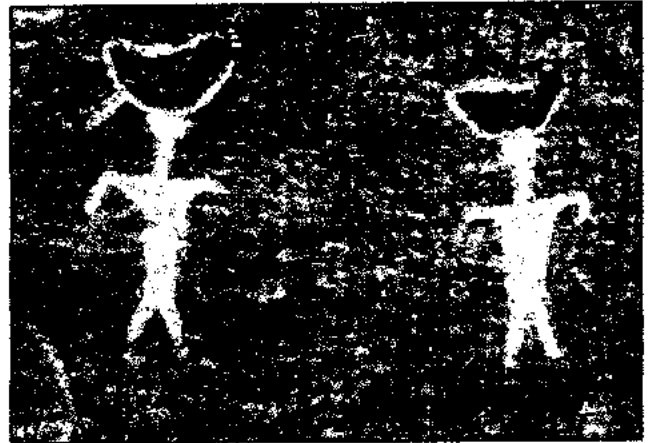
Above: Fig. 4.22 Varieties of bird-headed human figures. All are paintings. Canyons de Chelly & del Muerto, NE Arizona (Grant 1978:173)



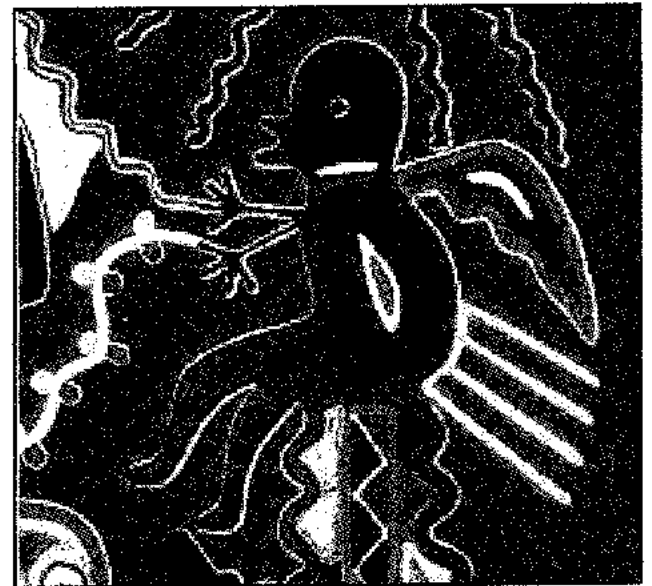
Above: Left-Fig. 7.56 Bird-head near San Juan River (only front facing bird found) and Right-Fig. 7.35 San Juan River, site #3, both Utah. (Castleton 1987 V-2: 227)



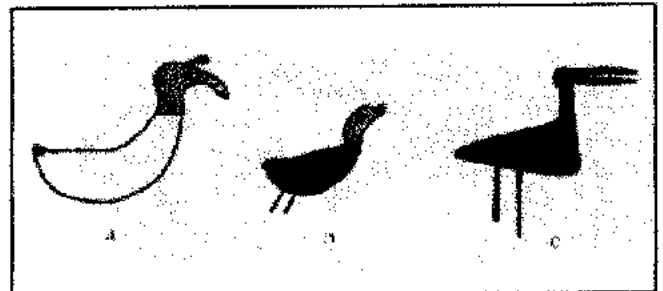
Above: Fig. 9.6 Varieties of bird-headed figures found in Petrified Forest/ Little Colorado River areas of northern Arizona. (McCreery & Malotki 1994:146)



Above: Fig. 86 Paintings in red and white of small human figures with birds on their heads...Pictograph Cave, Canyon de Chelly (Schaafsma 1980:126)



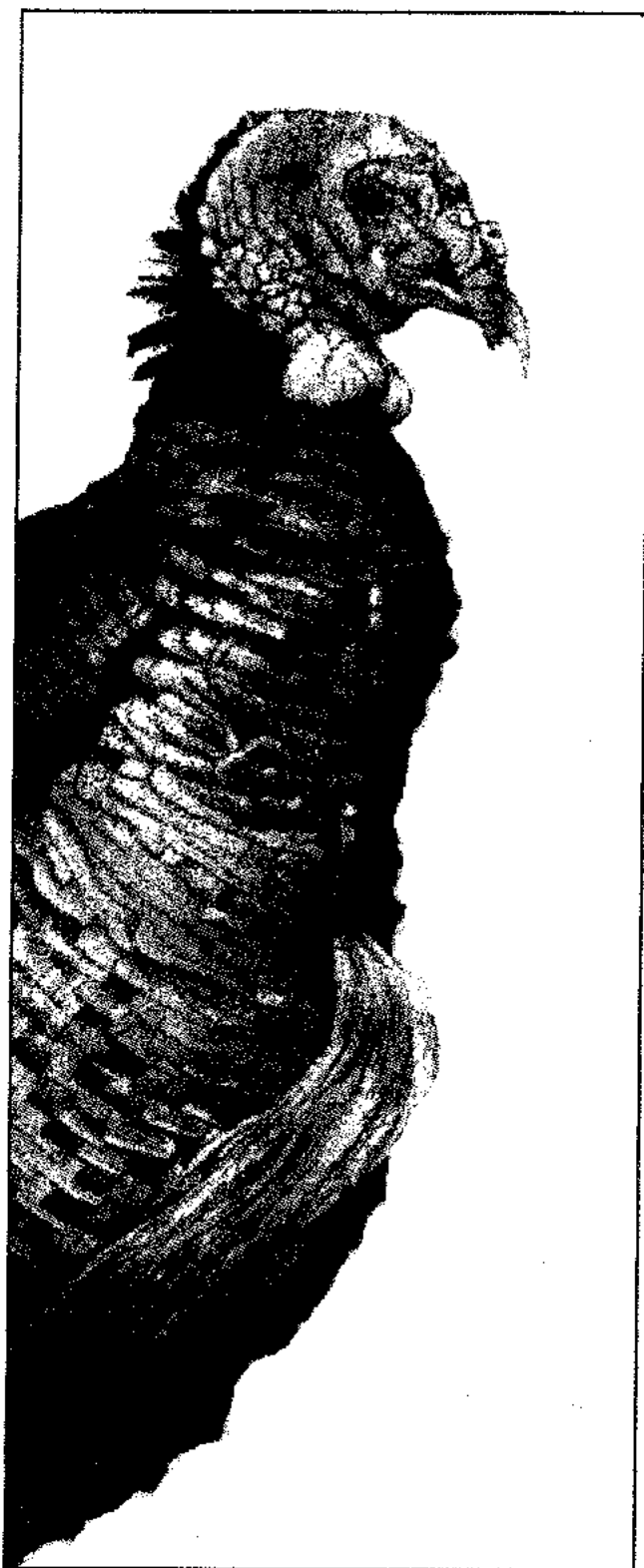
Above: From contemporary yarn painting by Huichol indian artist Negrin. Bird figure is Kauyumari, "Our Elder Brother Deer," at the creation of the world. (Schultes and Hofmann 1992:63)



Above: Fig. 4.20. Identifiable birds in Canyon de Chelly, i.e., a. turkey, b. duck and c. crane. (Grant 1978:171)



Hopi Kachinas (from Top to Bottom):  
 (Left) Canyon Wren: (Right) Turkey  
 (Left) Eagle (Right) Hummingbirds  
 (Left) Kite (Right) Chicken  
 (Left) Snipe (Right) Road Runner  
 (from Fewkes 1903- - various)



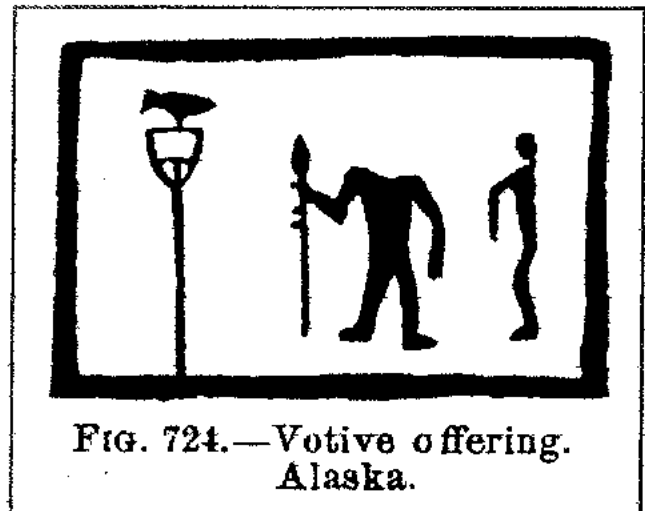
Above: Mountain Turkeys are a subspecies of the Wild Turkey, the race *merriami*, which is confined to the Southwest. (It is trim and muscular (with a) habitat (at) 6,000-10,000 feet. (Tyler 1979:71-2)



Above: Kaiklo, lost in the northland of ice and snow, is led by Duck to the Rainbow Worm who says "Give me (prayer) plumes that I might be uplifted to cloud heights. I will bear you upon my shoulders to your people and their country." Kaiklo gives his "choicest prayer plumes" and Duck gave "two strong pinion feathers to make his prayers far-reaching." Thus Kaiklo is delivered to his people. (Wright 1988)



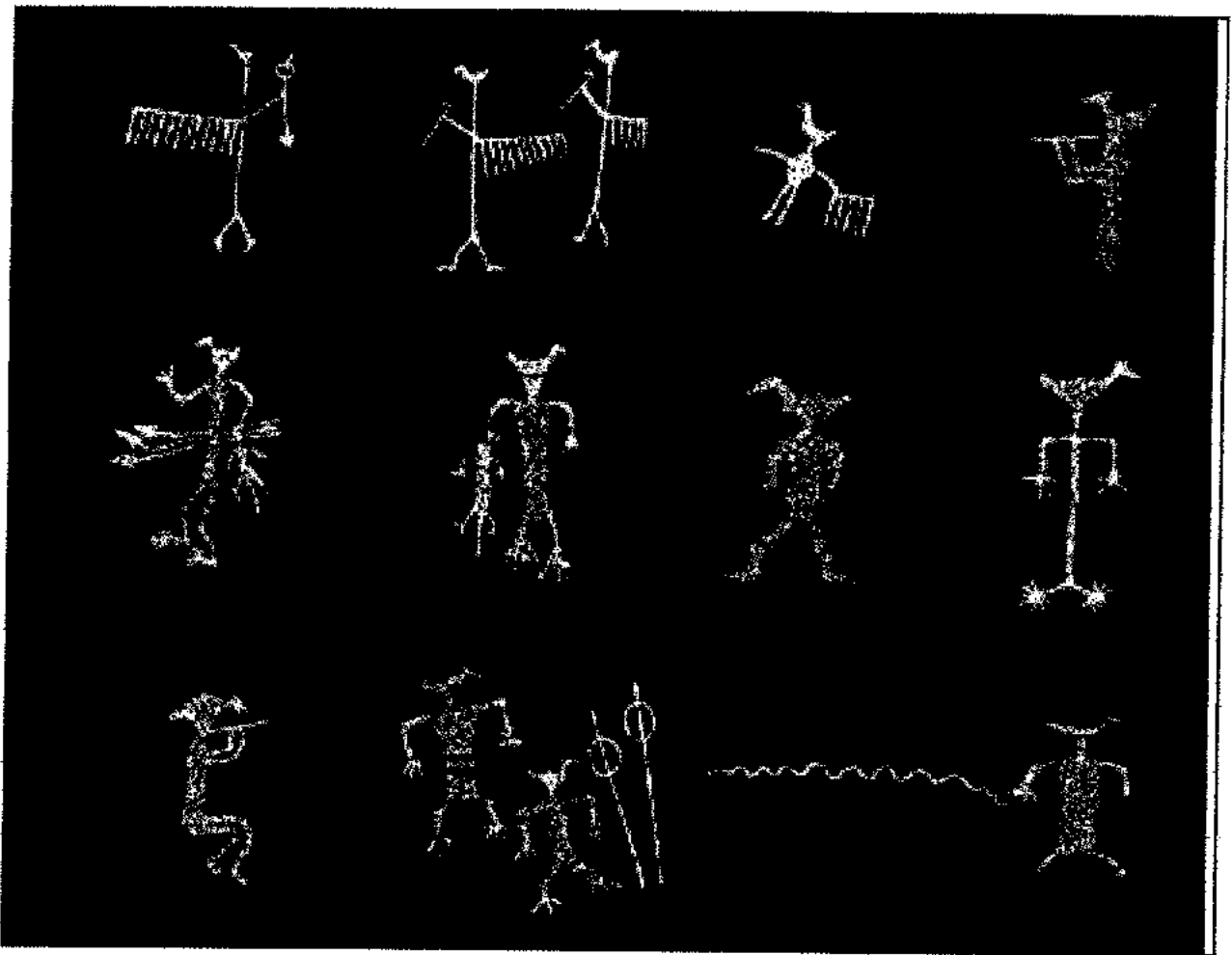
Above: Drawing by George Catlin of village chief, probably Mandan, circa 1830, from Misc. Sketches in the Catlin Collection, New York Public Library.



**FIG. 724.—Votive offering.  
Alaska.**

Above; "Fig. 724 is copied from a piece of ivory in the museum of the Alaska Commercial company, San Francisco, CA, and was interpreted by an Alaskan native in San Francisco in 1882."

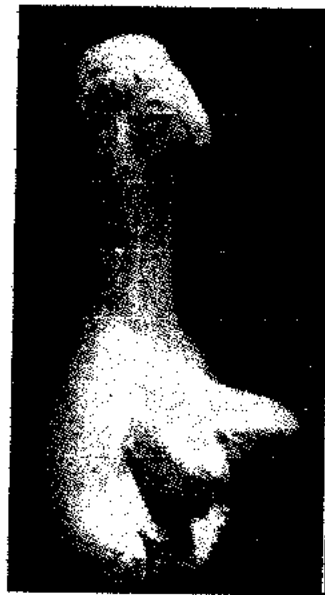
(Mallery 1893:519)



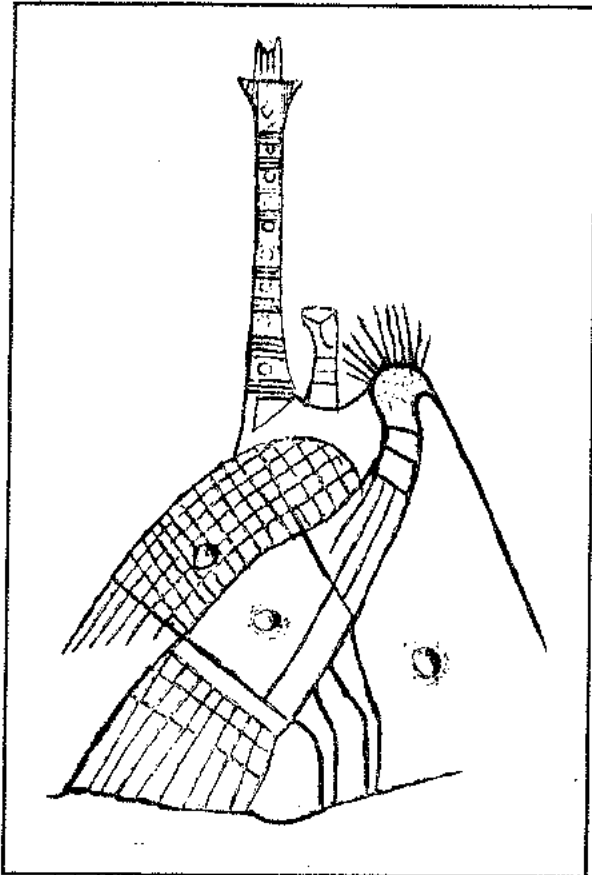
Above: Bird-heads from the Little Colorado River & Petrified Forest areas, northern Arizona, drawn by Pat McCreery & Ekkehart Malotki in *Tap-am-veni* 1994:146.



Above: So-called Jade Goddess mural from Tetitla, Teotihuacan, Mexico, dated to A.D. 650-750. Note bird image above the head of the Goddess.  
(Pasztory in Berrin 1988:64)

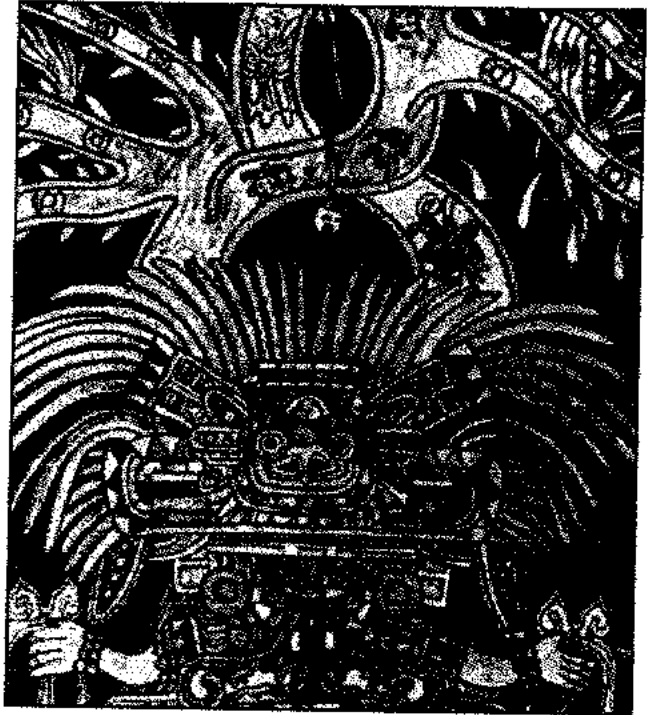


Above left: Neolithic bird goddess, with beaked face and prominent breasts. Starcevo, W. Macedonia, early 6th mill. B.C. (Gimbutas 1989:35) Above right: Enthroned bird-headed goddess, holding child. Boeotia, Greece, 8th cent. B.C. (A.R.A.S. 3Fb.012)

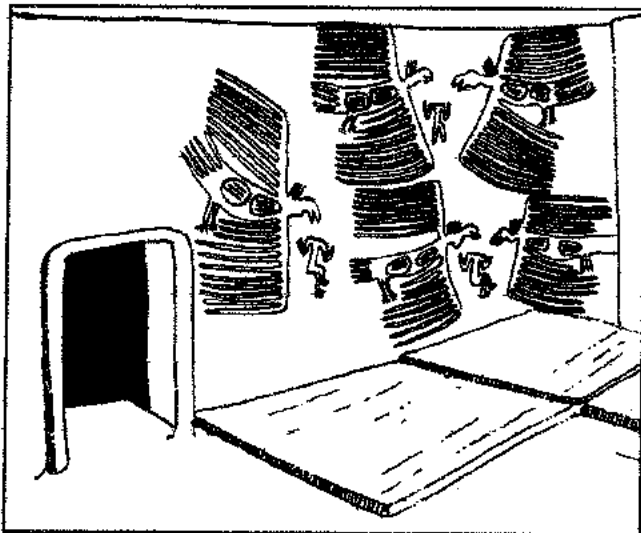


Above: Petroglyph, Hopi Mesas, AZ, showing *Kwataka*, the monster eagle, who used to devour children when the Hopi people lived at the San Francisco Mountains.

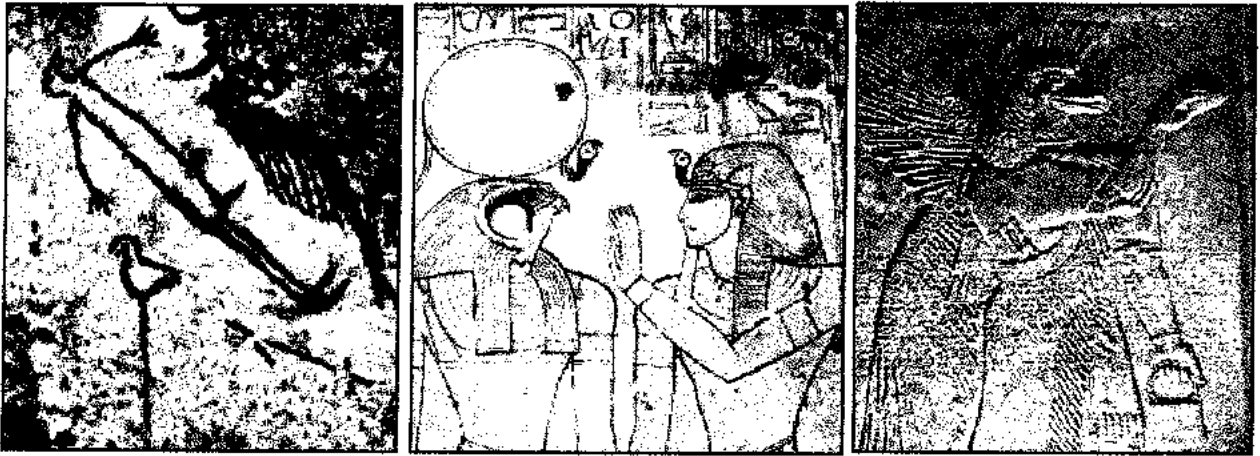
(Stephen 1936: 394 & Fig. 499)



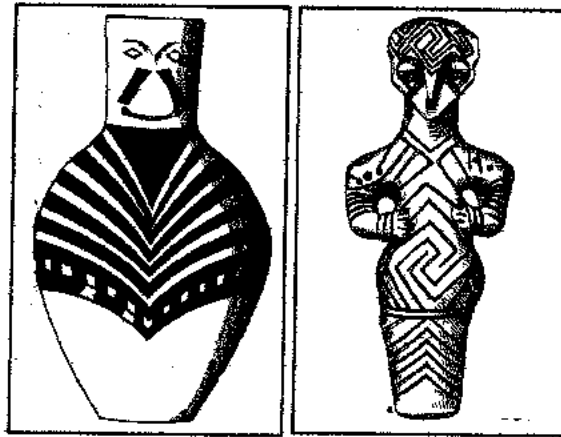
Above: Goddess mural from Tepantitla, a sacred compound within the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico, dated to ca. A.D. 500. Bird image tops the head and outstretched hands of Goddess. Plant above Goddess identified by Furst & Schultes as hallucinogenic morning glory of Aztecs. (Furst 1976:71)



Vultures with wings like brooms swoop down on headless corpses. They are the Goddess in the guise of vultures; She is Death--She Who Takes Away Life. Catal Huyuk, Anatolia (Turkey) early 7th mill. B.C. (Gimbutas 1989: 187-8)



Above Left: Panel from cave at Lascaux, France, c. 16,000 B.C. showing "bird-head" shaman & staff.  
 Center: Pharaoh Seti I (right) greets falcon-headed god Horus, Valley of the Kings, Egypt, c. 1310 B.C.  
 Above Right: Bird-head from Royal Palace, Nimrud, Syria, c.883 B.C., said to be a sage in bird disguise.



Near Right: Chevrons on Vinca vase. Anza, Macedonia, Yugoslavia. 5200-5000 B.C. Far Right: Vinca figurine with meander. Potporanj near Vrsac, N. Yugoslavia c. 4500 B.C. (Gimbutas 1989: 7 & 12)