

THE GODDESS MUT AND THE VULTURE

HERMAN TE VELDE

University of Groningen

Years ago, Richard Fazzini and I both rejected the old view that the goddess Mut was simply a vulture goddess.¹ There is no evidence that Mut was originally depicted as a vulture, unlike the archetypal vulture goddess Nekhbet, “she of Elkab (Nekheb).” Until the end of the New Kingdom, Mut was always represented anthropomorphically or as a woman with a lion’s head. She usually wears the so-called vulture headdress, but many goddesses and queens wear this. Although the vulture headdress attribute is significant, it does not characterize Mut as a vulture goddess. Only after the New Kingdom was Mut sometimes depicted as a vulture.² This does not prove that Mut was originally a vulture goddess, or that she was originally depicted as a vulture, only that the depiction of Mut as a vulture was a later and secondary development caused by the way the name of the goddess was written.

Originally, and up to the end of the New Kingdom, Mut was only depicted as a woman or as a lioness, or as a woman with the head of a lioness. Even the vignette from BD 164, showing Mut as an ithyphallic goddess with a human head, a lion’s head, a vulture’s head, and the

double crown, is of late date. With a very few exceptions, the name Mut in hieroglyphs is always written with the vulture sign (G15, *gyps fulvus*).³ However, the name Mut does not mean vulture, as Bonnet suggested.⁴ The ordinary Egyptian word for the Griffon Vulture is not *mut*, but *nit* (Copt. **NOYPE**), from the time of the Pyramid Texts down into the Coptic Period. Only the feminine form of this word is known. Just like many names of animals and birds known from ancient Egyptian, it appears to be a nickname that can be translated. *Nit* can be translated as “the terrifying one” but also as “the protecting one.” In the eyes of the Egyptians, a vulture seems to have been an ambivalent symbol. It is interesting to note that the Egyptian verb *ni* has a dual, opposing meaning. It would not seem to be necessary to differentiate two different words, however, as the Berlin Dictionary does.⁵ In ancient Egyptian art, the vulture is depicted both as a carrion eater on the battlefield and as a protective being hovering above the pharaoh.⁶ This dual, ambivalent aspect of the vulture, which can be both protective and terrifying, is comparable to the destructive and protective aspect of the uraeus snake on

¹ Richard A. Fazzini, “Statuette of the Goddess Mut,” in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Anne K. Capell and Glenn E. Markoe (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), no. 61; Herman te Velde, “Towards a Minimal Definition of the Goddess Mut,” *JEOL* 26 (1979–1980): 3–9.

² Christian Leitz, ed., *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 251.

³ Ludwig Keimer, “A Note on the Hieroglyphs G1 and G15,” *AJSL* 43 (1926–1927): 226–231; Patrick F. Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1986), 41: “The common hieroglyphic sign G15, which appears at an early date, has generally been taken to represent the Griffon Vulture. This vulture sign is always rendered in a highly conventionalized manner and a good deal of variation appears in its markings, making identification of it impossible to determine accurately. In some cases the plumage pattern and other features of the bird are suggestive of a large thick-billed vulture other than the Griffon Vulture ... Hence it is best not to try to label firmly

from what species of vulture the sign is derived as it was probably not influenced by any one bird, but by several species of large vulture.”

⁴ Hans Bonnet, *Reallexikon der Ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1952), 491; cf. Adolf Erman, *Die Religion der Ägypter* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1934), 443 n. 2: “Auch das Wort Mut, die Mutter, schreibt man mit einem Geier und ebenso den Namen der Göttin; es wäre wohl möglich das diese Schreibungen von dem Geierbilde der Göttin ihren Ausgang genommen hätten.” However, no images of Mut as a vulture have so far been found that predate the end of the New Kingdom.

⁵ *Wb.* 2, 277–278.

⁶ Gerhard Rühlmann, “Der Geier auf dem Schlachtfeld,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg* 14 (1965): 455–463; Silvia Schroer, “Die Göttin und der Geier,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 111 (1995): 60–80; Geert Jan van Gelder, “Bird of Battle: Old English and Arabic,” *File—A Literary Journal* 6 (1993): 9–16; Wolfgang Speyer, “Geier,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Chris-*

the forehead of figures in authority, such as royal gods and humans. The Two Ladies (*nbtj*), vulture and snake, Nekhbet and Wadjet, together also form another contradictory duality. This positive and negative evaluation of the vulture can be found as early as the Early Dynastic Period in Egypt, and be traced down to modern times. Investigators should also not forget that nowadays we are far less fond of vultures than the ancient Egyptians. The English word “vulture” and the French word “vautour” are reminiscent of a giant hovering-spiraling bird that can barely be distinguished from the admirable eagle. The German and Dutch words “Geier” and “gier,” on the other hand, evoke an image of a greedy carrion-eater.⁷

Yoyotte wrote: “Le mot vautour évoque la hideur, la pourriture, la puanteur, la mort dans toute son horreur et, de tous les oiseaux prédateurs les vautours son censément les plus sordides rapaces. Un vautour est un personnage cruel dans son avidité, un créancier sans merci.”⁸ It is striking, however, that the Egyptian word for death (*mw*t), as far as I have been able to check, is never written with the “vulture” hieroglyph, which we read as *mw*t, even if we can agree with Yoyotte that the vulture represents “la mort dans toute son horreur.” A strong suspicion arises that this cannot be coincidence, but the use and avoidance of certain hieroglyphs in the script is as yet a relatively untouched field of research. It is almost impossible to imagine that the Egyptians were not aware of the ambivalence of the vulture symbol. In the Egyptian world of the mind, the vulture usually has a positive meaning. This was taken so far that the vulture as a carrion-eater on the battlefield vanished from the language and the visual arts, whereas the word for mother (*mw*t) continued to be written with the vulture and the protective wings of the vulture are often found in the art. Any frightening aspect of a so-called “bad

mother” remained concealed under the motherly protective aspects of the vulture. In a similar way as with the vulture, that lugubrious scavenger and carrion-eater, the jackal, was given an extremely positive and protective role in Egyptian funerary religion as the god Anubis, the embalmer who lovingly attends the body.⁹ In the ancient Near East, and in the Egyptian world in particular, the vulture was respected as a disposer of refuse. In the Greek world, on the other hand, disgust for the vulture as a carrion-eater gained the upper hand. The admirable, kingly and protective role of the vulture was taken over by the eagle. This had far-reaching consequences: in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, the Hebrew word *nešer*, which means “vulture,” was translated by “eagle” (ἄετός).¹⁰

In Egypt, however, the greatest care was taken not to link the vulture (*mw*t) with death, or allocate to her a role as consumer of the dead (*m* *mtw*). You have to look hard before you find the vulture in a less favorable role, for example as a hostile messenger of the underworld who needs to be chased away: “You two vultures who are on the booth of the Potter. I have come to you that I may break your waterpots and smash your ink wells, for a path is prepared for me to the place where the great god is.”¹¹

As early as in the Pyramid Texts, the vulture hieroglyph (G15) was used to write the Egyptian word for mother, *mw*t. Thus the vulture hieroglyph not only had the value *nrt* but also the value *mw*t, and the name of the goddess Mut could if necessary be written with the vulture. Undoubtedly, Egyptians heard the word for “mother” in the name of the goddess, and it is tempting to assume that the name of the goddess actually meant “mother.” The word for mother is ΜΑΑΥ in Coptic, with the Upper Egyptian (Sahidic) dialect variants ΜΩ and ΜΟΥ. The *t* at the end of feminine words became obsolete quite early on

tentum 9 (1976): 430–468; Erich and Ute Winter, “The Vulture in Ancient Egypt: Classical tradition and modern behaviourist research,” *Bearded Vulture Annual Report 1995*, Foundation for the Conservation of the Bearded Vulture (Fuchsenbigl, Austria), 61–67. Theodor Hopfner, *Der Tierkult der alten Ägypter* (Vienna: A. Hölder, 1913), 104–107.

⁷ For the etymology of the words “vulture” / “vautour,” see Jean-Marie Lamblard, *Le vautour: Mythes et réalités* (Paris: Imago, 2001), passim, and Klaas J. Eigenhuis, *Verklarend etymologisch Woordenboek van de Nederlandse Vogelnamen* (Amsterdam: Dutch Birding Association, 2004), 175.

⁸ Jean Yoyotte, in his preface to Lamblard, *Le vautour*, 7.

⁹ Alfred Hermann, “Zergliedern und Zusammenfügen: Religionsgeschichtliches zur Mumifizierung,” *Namen* 3

(1956): 81–96.

¹⁰ Deut. 32:11 (RV: “As an eagle that stirreth up her nest, / That fluttereth over her young, / He spread abroad his wings, he took them, / He bare them on his pinions”). Cf. Othmar Keel and Thomas Staubli, eds., *Im Schatten deiner Flügel* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2001); Schroer, “Die Göttin und der Geier,” 60–80.

¹¹ CT VI 295–296; cf. Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, SAOC 54 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 149. Elsewhere (CT VI 313a–c) this vulture pair, as mothers of the sun and the deceased who has to be reborn, are called upon in a more friendly and less threatening way to receive the deceased in the night and to give birth to him in the morning as Re.

in the Egyptian language. As is well known from Greek texts, the *t* was kept in the pronunciation of the name of the goddess *Mout* or *Mouθ*. Thus far, no satisfactory explanation for the retention of the *t* has been given.¹² The suspicion is that the *t* was deliberately preserved in the pronunciation, whereas when it was used to indicate a human mother the *t* was dropped. It was of course essential to preserve a precise and old-fashioned pronunciation of the name of the goddess in the cult. Gods and demons listen to those who know their names.¹³

Sporadically, and then mainly and deliberately in the Amarna Period, the word for mother could be written with the *m* and the *t*, i.e. not with the vulture. This was a way to avoid evoking the symbol of femininity and motherhood in the script. As we know, Akhenaten caused the hieroglyphs that wrote the names of Amun and Mut to be erased. At places where "his mother Mut" (*mw.t.f Mw.t*) was written, the vulture was not only erased in the name of Mut, but also in the word for "mother."¹⁴

In short, the vulture hieroglyph in the script seldom means something terrifying or, as noted above, death, but consistently femininity and motherhood. The belief that the vulture represented femininity and motherhood, and the related ideas that there were only female vultures and that they were virgin born, without a male begetter, thus appears to come from Egypt. In an Egyptian Demotic papyrus from the second century CE, we can read the following words of the goddess Mut: "I am the noble vulture (*mw.t*) of the male brother; the lord of Thebes, i.e. the noble vulture of which no male exists."¹⁵ This Egyptian statement that there were only female vultures is confirmed by various Graeco-Roman writers. Thus Horapollo, in his *Hieroglyphica* (fourth century CE), writes as follows:

When they want to write 'mother', or 'sight', or 'boundary', or 'foreknowledge,' or 'year', or 'heavens', or 'compassionate', or 'Athena' or 'Hera' (= Mut), or 'two drachmas', they draw a vulture. (It means) 'mother' because there is no male in this species of animal. And they are born in this way: when the vulture hungers for conception, she opens her sexual organ to the north wind and is covered by it for five days. During this period she takes neither food nor drink, yearning for child-bearing. There are also other species of birds which conceive by the wind, the eggs of which serve only for food and are not fit for hatching. But when the vultures are impregnated by the wind, their eggs are fertile ... And the race of vultures, as we said above, is female only. Because of this the Egyptians place the vulture as a crown on all female figures, consequently the Egyptians use this sign for all goddesses.¹⁶

It is possible that this passage from Horapollo refers back to Chaeremon (first century CE). Plutarch (46–120 CE) also records this belief: "But if, as the Egyptians fable, the whole species [of vultures] is female, and they conceive by receiving the breath of the East Wind even as the trees do by receiving the West Wind..."¹⁷ Aelianus (170–240 CE) describes the conception in even more detail:

It is said that no male vulture is ever born: all vultures are female. And the birds knowing this and fearing to be left childless, take measures to produce them as follows. They fly against the south wind. If however the wind is not from the south, they open their beaks to the east wind and the inrush of air impregnates them and their period of gestation lasts for three years.¹⁸

¹² Wolfgang Brunsch, "Untersuchungen zu den griechischen Wiedergaben ägyptischer Personennamen," *Enchoria* 8 (1978): 123–128.

¹³ Hendrik Willem Obbink, *De magische beteekenis van de naam, inzonderheid in het oude Egypte*, diss. Groningen (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1925), 26.

¹⁴ Gerardus van der Leeuw, "Ecnige opmerkingen betreffende den huidige stand van onze kennis en ons inzicht aangaande Achnaton," *JEOL* 5 (1937–1938): 301–304; cf. Heinrich Schäfer, *Amarna in Religion und Kunst* (Berlin: Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, 1931), 22.

¹⁵ Pap. Leiden I 384 ro IX, 7–8. Cf. Erich and Ute Winter, "Von der Ununterscheidbarkeit der Geschlechter:

Der Geier im Flug durch die Jahrtausende," in *Viribus Unitis: Festschrift Bernhard Stillefried*, ed. Iona Slawinski and Joseph P. Stelka (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), 523–537, esp. p. 528 with reference to Mark J. Smith, *BiOr* 49 (1992), 9.

¹⁶ *Hieroglyphica* 1.11; text and translation in Pieter W. van der Horst, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 38–42.

¹⁷ *Plutarch's Moralia* 4, trans. Frank C. Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 139–141 = *Quaestiones Romanae*.

¹⁸ *De Natura Animalium* 2.46; trans. A.F. Scholfield, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958, 2nd ed., 1971), 145.

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the Egyptians “by a vulture ... represent the word for the female sexual organ, because natural history records that no males can be found among these birds.”¹⁹ The Egyptians indeed do use the vulture hieroglyph in the script to write the word for “womb” (*mwł-rmt*).²⁰ Thus there is a tradition to be found in Graeco-Roman writers that there were only female vultures and no male ones that perhaps goes back to Egypt via Chaeremon. What is interesting is Horapollo’s statement that “the Egyptians place the vulture as a crown on all female figures.” This vulture headdress is a close-fitting cap formed from the body of a vulture with the two protective wings of the bird spread against the sides of the wearer’s head, while the head of the vulture juts forward from the wearer’s forehead. This vulture headdress²¹ is known from the Old Kingdom on. It was worn by many goddesses, not only by Nekhbet or Mut. From the 5th Dynasty on, it was also depicted as one of the

insignia of a queen. Goddesses and queens are exemplary and ideal women. Deceased women were in the course of time represented as wearing this divine and royal headdress. The vulture headdress was absent in the Amarna Period, comparable with the absence of the vulture hieroglyph in the same time, but from Rameside through Graeco-Roman times was one of the most distinguished insignia worn by Egyptian women. A silver vulture headdress of a Nubian woman was found in the tomb of Hapidjefa of the First Intermediate Period. The vulture headdress represented not divinity or royalty as such, but the highest royal, and later nonroyal, motherhood and femininity.

Mut was linked with the vulture because the vulture was the symbol of motherhood and femininity. Just as the Horus-falcon hieroglyph could represent every male god, eventually the vulture hieroglyph came to mean not only mother or *mwł* but also goddess or *nłrt*.²²

¹⁹ *Res Gestae* 17. 4. 11; Van der Horst, *Chaeremon*, 44–45.

²⁰ *Wb.* 2, 54.

²¹ Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1993), 23.

²² François Daumas et al., *Valeurs phonétiques des signes hiéroglyphiques d'époque gréco-romaine 2* (Montpellier: Université de Montpellier, 1988), 293.