

The King of Birds and the Bird of Kings

About the Symbolism of the Eagle in Culture, Beliefs and Art

Slawomir Filipek¹

¹ Association of Art Historians in Poland

Correspondence: Slawomir Filipek, Association of Art Historians in Poland.

Received: May 14, 2023

Accepted: June 15, 2023

Online Published: July 4, 2023

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v8i2.1359

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v8i2.1359>

Abstract

The eagle is a bird widespread in all cultures and beliefs. Throughout history, it has gained a rich symbolic reference. It appears in antiquity as a royal bird and mythological personification of the gods. The Christian world saw in the eagle a symbol of rebirth, as well as Christ himself. The bird was used in Christian art and culture, also in the Greek liturgy as a soteriological, baptismal and eucharistic symbol. Christian writers and theologians pay much attention to it, deriving its symbolism both from the Bible, and medieval bestiaries as well. It appears in the art of painting and sculpture of many epochs, constituting an important ritual, religious and cult element. Up till now, it is an important element of culture - the eagle is the emblem of many modern countries, which often derive their genesis and origin from legends in which this bird appears.

Keywords: eagle, symbol, emblem, art, mythology, coat of arms

"Even if you soar like an eagle, and if you make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord" (Ab 1:4). The fragment of the Old Testament vision of Obadiah, contained in its introduction, outlines the special meaning of the eagle in the sphere of symbolism, associating it with the area of heaven, the inaccessible and supernatural area. In the mythology of different cultures, as well as in the Christian symbolism and the culture of many countries, no bird plays such a crucial role as the eagle. Alongside with the phoenix and the falcon, it was ranked among the animals of light (Szarlej, 2003). It is also the bird most often identified with power, strength, endurance, which have been used over the centuries as the symbols of rulers of almost all countries, nations and cultures. It is worth examining what role this bird played in the beliefs and culture of various epochs in order to make an extraordinary statement that the meaning of the eagle is almost universal wherever it appeared.

In Greek mythology, the eagle is an attribute of Zeus, the king of birds and the bird of kings, carrying thunderbolts to the ruler of the sky (Forstner, 1990) and the only animal residing in the heavens. As the lion was the lord of the earth among animals, so the eagle was the lord of the sky. In the myth of Zeus, who liked the son of King Tros, the beautiful young man Ganymede is kidnapped by him to Olympus in the form of an eagle to make him his lover. In art, Ganymede was also depicted watering the eagle (Bertel Thorvaldsen, *Ganymede and the Eagle*, 1817-1829), which should be associated with mourning ceremonies - it is an allegory of the triumph over death, while the abduction of the boy by Zeus was an allegory of the abduction of the soul by death, and thus taking it to heaven. The motif of the eagle and Ganymede often appears in the sepulchral context and in references to the boy's story in mourning epigrams (Wypustek, 2011).

In one of the versions functioning less frequently in culture, because the vulture is the most common here, the eagle Ethon, born of Echidna and Typhon, the brother of Hydra and Chimera, was eating Prometheus' liver - he had been chained to the mountains of the Caucasus - every morning, which grew back in an extraordinary way every morning. With an eagle symbolizing Zeus and a jug, Hebe is also depicted in art - the goddess of youth and the servant on Olympus, accompanying the young man Ganymede.

He appeared in the endings of the royal scepter in Hellas, Etruria and Rome. The image of the eagle lifting the emperor to heaven or accompanying him on his way to heaven was an apotheosis of the divinity of emperors, what was particularly visible during the funeral of the ruler, when the eagle was released over the burning corpse of the ruler to show the soul of the divine emperor escaping from the flames. The bird was the emblem of the Roman legions and was treated with true religious reverence, giving it the nickname *aquila victrix* - "the victory eagle". Initially, it was one of the five cult signs of the legions - next to the boar, the wolf, the horse and Minotaur, from the

time of the consulship of Marius, a military reformer (107 BCE), only the eagle was placed on the poles of the *signum* with spread wings sitting on a bundle of lightning, and below it the number of the legion provided on a fragment of cloth. The motif of an eagle holding a laurel wreath in its claws or beak was used in classical art (Kryśkiewicz, 2014). It was also considered to be an enemy of serpents, as Homer already mentions in the Iliad: "A bird appeared to them when they were about to enter there: a sky eagle on the left side of the army flying, which in its claws carried a great serpent with a scarlet body. It was still alive and quivering in his defenses, but the backward-bent breast of the eagle bit furiously close to his neck. From its talons the bird released it to the ground, while it itself flew away with a lament, carried by the cloudy wind, in unbearable pain. The serpent from above fell into the midst of the throng" (Homer, 1981).

For the Greeks and Romans, it was a bird of divination, this is also due to the fact that for the ancients, several other species of birds were recognized under the slogan of the eagle, including the vulture. Hecuba says to Priam: "Call Zeus (...) Ask him to give you his messenger as a divination: may the king of mites spread his wings on the right hand of the birds. If you see this sign with your own eyes, you can ride with confidence among the Greek guards" (Homer, 1981). In Mithraism, next to the hawk, it was an attribute of Mithras and appears on its statues, while in Sumerian-Babylonian beliefs, the eagle appears as a storm deity - in the form of a terrifying eagle with a lion's head (Forstner, 1990).

The eagle motif was often used in sepulchral contexts in Syria. Franz Cumont linked these representations with beliefs widespread in Syria, according to which human souls descend to earth from the sun and return there after death. According to Cumont, the eagle - a solar animal - was considered to be a psychopomp, which lifted human souls to the sun after death, and such associations are to be proved by his numerous images on Syrian tombstones (Cumont, 1917).

The biblical and Christian symbolic meaning of the eagle is particularly extensive. In the Old Testament, in which the eagle appears as many as 28 times, inspired authors compare God's care over the Chosen Nation to the eagle that takes care of its chicks and teaches them to fly, pushing them out of the nest, and if necessary, supporting them on its wings: "Like an eagle, which animates its nest, circles over its chicks, spreads its wings and takes them, carries them on itself" (Deuteronomy 32:11) or in the Book of Exodus: "You have seen what I did to Egypt, how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to me" (Exodus 19:4). In the Book of Ezekiel, the eagle with spread wings and long feathers symbolizes the power of the Babylonian king (Ez 17:3). In the Old Testament, the eagle appears interchangeably with the vulture (this is also the case in Greco-Roman beliefs), being the personification of strength and speed. In the form of an eagle, the prophet Ezekiel sees cherubs - angels with the human faces and the lions' faces on one side and the appearance of an eagle and an ox on the opposite side (Ez 1:10). Gregory the Great in *Moralia*, and later Hugh of Folieto in his bestiary *Aviarius*, wrote that the Old Testament prophet saw in the image of four animals of the divine chariot the announcement of the four Evangelists (Saint Gregory, 2016; Hugh of Folieto, 2005). In addition to associations with symbolic beings attributed to the four Evangelists, some Christian authors and symbol researchers saw in these visions a reference to the four constituents or elements of the cosmos: the lion means the fire, the ox - the earth, the man - the humanity, and the eagle - the air (Janeczko, 2020).

Although the Old Testament symbolism of the eagle emphasizes positive associations with this bird, on the other hand, for the Jews, the eagle was an unclean bird, as God Himself said to Moses: "Among the birds you will be disgusted and you will not eat them, because they are an abomination, as follows: an eagle, a black vulture, a sea eagle, all kinds of kites and falcons, all kinds of ravens, ostriches, owls, seagulls, all kinds of hawks" (Leviticus 11:13-15). It also symbolizes negative traits, such as gluttony (Kopaliński, 2007) - in the Book of Hiob: "His chicks lap up blood, he is wherever the slain are" (Job 39:30) and in the Book of Habakkuk, the prophet writing about the people of the Chaldeans: "They draw closer quickly from afar, swooping down like an eagle to eat" (Ha 1:8).

Especially in the Middle Ages, but also in later centuries, the eagle appears on pulpits, where its spread wings symbolize the majesty and power of the word of God (Lurker, 1989). Many examples of medieval and pre-reform lecterns can be found in England, today in the vast majority in cathedrals and Anglican churches, e.g. in Chester, King's Lynn and in Catholic cathedrals in Germany - in Aachen, Hildesheim, churches in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium, less often in other European countries.

In the account of the Physiologist, we find an extremely rich symbolism of the bird, which was later used by the Fathers of the Church and explains a fragment of the psalm: "Your youth is renewed like an eagle" (Ps 103:5). The eagle, which grows old and its wings become weak, seeks the source. Then it rises high into the sky so that the sun burns its wings and burns out its eyes, and then it falls to the spring, immersing in it three times and regains its

youth in this way (Physiologist, 2003). The fathers see in the eagle of this story a man who should ascend to Christ, the Sun of Justice, and rejuvenate in the source of the Holy Trinity. This was reflected in the threefold immersion of the catechumen in water during the baptismal ceremony, hence the eagle often appears on baptismal fonts as a symbol of rebirth. The physiologist and Pliny agree that the eagle and the vulture do not lay eggs, but give birth to alive chicks (Cooper, 1998). The Physiologist, writing about the eagle, referred to the authority of Moses, who praised the eagle for guarding its nest and protecting its chicks. Hence, the motif of the battle of eagles with dragons or serpents became popular in ancient literature, and the bestiary tradition testified that these birds: "drive away all reptiles, and keep us in the right faith, that we beware, obey [divine] commandments and stay in the Church as in the nest" (Zagożdżon-Lyszczyk, 2018). The eagle was also the natural opposite of darkness and evil. It is the enemy of the fish and snake personifying the water world, which in turn are attributes of the earthiness and the underworld. The eagle carrying a serpent in its claws therefore symbolizes, also in the Christian spirit, spiritual rebirth, the victory of heavenly power over the evil, the triumph of light over darkness, freedom over enslavement (Janeczko, 2020).

Another medieval story tells of the curve of the eagle's beak, which becomes larger with age, making it very difficult for the old eagle to take food. Then it hits the rock with its beak and breaks its end, being able to eat again and regain its strength. St. Augustine sees Christ in the rock, which the man-eagle must strike so that He, Christ, will remove obstacles on our way to eternal life (Augustyn, 1986). This fragment was interpreted allegorically as an announcement of the rebirth of the "spiritual inner man", made on the rock of God's word (Zagożdżon-Lyszczyk, 2018). Aristotle writes in a similar tone about the curvature, believing that the eagle dies of starvation without breaking the end of its beak (Aristotle, 1992), the Polish author Adam Mickiewicz also refers to it in the national epic "Pan Tadeusz" (Mickiewicz, 1995):

"A raven when it turns grey, a falcon when it goes blind,

The eagle, when its old beak twists so into a bow,

That closed forever no longer nourishes the throat,

They're going to the Sematary."

Horapollon, a Greek sage, in the 5th century wrote that artists wanting to show an old man starved to death, paint an eagle with a curved beak. The eagle was identified with the sun as a solar deity in many mythologies of the world, which is confirmed by e.g. Aristotle - the eagle can look straight into the sun without hurting its eyes, symbolizing spiritual awareness and cognition. Due to its association with solar deities, the eagle was associated with fire, light, enlightenment and height (Kobielski 2002). He often performed both the function of a heavenly messenger and a guide of souls - psychophoros (Iwaszkiewicz, 1974). What distinguished the eagle from other birds - as Isidore of Seville wrote - was its extremely sharp eyesight (in Latin: *acumen oculorum*) (Etymologies, 2006). Similarly, Albert the Great, in *De animalibus*, claimed that the *aquila* eagle was so named for its sharp and penetrating eyesight (in Latin: *acumen*). He had three features that testified the unusual sharpness of his senses such as vision, angry temperament and hunting accessories, i.e. claws and beak (Albertus Magnus, 1999).

In the liturgical reference, an unusual commentary over the fragments of the Gospel about the carrion and the vultures was presented by St. Ambrose (commentary on the texts Mt 24:28; Lk 17:37): "You have become a noble eagle since you began to aspire to heaven and despise the earth. Noble eagles circle around the altar, because "where there is a body, there are also the eagles." The altar is a symbol of the body, on the altar the Body of Christ rests. You are eagles renewed by the washing of sins" (Ambrose, 1970). St. Maximus of Turin, the bishop, quoting Psalm 102 in one of his Easter homilies, explains that the eagle renews its youth by replacing its old feathers (Maximus Tauriniensis, 2019). The author encouraged the faithful to "take off the old man with his deeds and put on the new one [...]" (Col 3:9-10). Maxim compares a neophyte who puts on a new robe of holiness to an eagle that shed its old feathers.

In addition to positive references and symbolism, in Christianity the eagles, like most animals, also had negative interpretations. For Clement of Alexandria and Gregory the Great, they were considered to be a symbol of evil spirits kidnapping souls and representatives of earthly power, the anger and the pride. The eagle in the Apocalypse of St. John announces the destruction of the mankind: "And I saw and heard an eagle flying in the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth...'" (Rev 8:13).

The eagle appears in Christian art only in late antiquity, which is related to the special cult of this Bird, in mythology and imperial symbolism, however the remained meaning symbolizes the victory, the triumph, the power. Only the person to whom these features and attributes were referred, changes. In the Anastasis (resurrection) scenes there is a cross with a large laurel wreath on the crossbeam and the monogram of Christ inside, and in some

versions the wreath is held by an eagle filling the arc of the representation (Forstner, 1990). It also appears on Coptic steles, Christian tombstones, in which a centrally placed eagle with its head turned to the side and a medallion around its neck supports a wreath surrounding the monogram of Christ or the cross. It sometimes appears with a cross and a handle held in its beak, denoting the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph of "the next life" - the key of life ANKH, in Egyptian art often shown by passing it to the pharaoh from the gods (Tobin, 1989).

In the art of the first Christians and the early Middle Ages, a new motif was created - an eagle fighting with a snake, however, it was already known from mythology and ancient literature. The most famous images come from the palace of Emperor Constantine the Great in Constantinople in the form of a mosaic made in the 5th century and the ruins of the church in St. Peter im Holz, in Carinthia (Forstner, 1990). The motif of an eagle with a fish in its claws is presented in the floor mosaics of the baptistry of the Church of Our Lady in Capua. In Christianity, it symbolizes three important saints: St. John the Apostle, considering the Logos-Light at the beginning of his Gospel - in reference to the Apocalypse written by him, in which there are four figures sitting around the throne of God; St. Paul the Apostle, raised in visions to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2) and St. Augustine, meditating on the highest mysteries of God in his writings. It is an attribute of the great Christian writers, Pope Gregory the Great and St. John of the Cross - here he is depicted with a feather in his beak.

Basing on tradition of St. Ambrose, who wrote about the apostles and women gathering around the Lord's grave like eagles. In the Middle Ages eagles were shown as guardians of the saints' bodies - in the Polish tradition St. Adalbert and above all St. Stanislaw's bodies were guarded by four eagles against other flying birds: "But Almighty God, who is always praiseworthy in his works and glorified in his saints, immediately sent earthly and heavenly creatures to point out the remains of his glorious martyr and guard them. Nearby four eagles appeared, sent by God, flying from the four corners of the world, circling high above the place of torment, preventing vultures and other bloodthirsty birds from approaching the holy body. During this reverent guarding they were present night after day and day after night" (Żywot, 1987).

Up till now the Greek liturgy, in the rite of consecration of a bishop, has preserved a small, round carpet with an eagle in a halo flying over the city, the so-called eagle, which is a continuation of the medieval custom of drawing an eagle on the floor for the time of consecration (Forstner, 1990). The eagle here symbolizes sublimity and purity, and its lifting over the city is to express the bishop's supreme supervision over the diocese and the people entrusted to him. At the same time, the figure of an eagle that flies up to the sky reminds the bishop of the duty entrusted to him to constantly improve in faith and strive for salvation. The bird placed on the carpet also symbolizes angels, which further emphasizes the divine origin of the episcopal dignity.

In folk symbolism, even the magical one, there was also a sea eagle, mentioned by e.g. Hildegard of Bingen and Albert the Great, from which an appropriate mixture is prepared to free men and women from excessive sexual excitability (Kobieliński, 2002).

Modern art uses the figure of an eagle in the context of mythological representations, as in Peter Paul Rubens' painting *Prometheus in Captivity*, where the eagle tears Prometheus' torso, revealing bloody guts, or Antonio Allegri da Correggio's *The Abduction of Ganymede* painted around 1530 - where the god Jupiter in the form of black eagle kidnaps a Trojan boy and takes him to Olympus. Christian art, seeing in the eagle a symbol (attribute) of St. John the Evangelist, often places the bird in the company of the saint in miniatures, stained glass, sculptures and wall paintings. In the following centuries, it appears in many countries in national, patriotic, independence and insurgent paintings, especially in the United States and in Poland. The picture painted by the French painter Horace Vernet in 1831 *Polish Prometheus (Allégorie de la Pologne vaincue)* is an allegory of the fall of Poland after the November Uprising - a hostile black eagle, symbol of Russia, sits on the body of a dead Polish soldier.

The eagle motif is known especially in heraldry and vexillology, with one head (as in the case of the Polish coat of arms) or with two heads (Holy Roman Empire, Russia). The double-headed eagle is derived from the mentioned Sumerian-Babylonian beliefs about the storm god as a lion-headed eagle. It appears on the stele of vultures found in Girsu, presenting the victories of Eanatum, the ruler of Lagash, over the state of Umma. The god Ningirsu holding a net with enemies and the image of the same eagle are visible (Winter, 1985). This image, but in the form of a two-headed eagle, was later transferred to the country of the Hittites, then taken over by Seljuk Turkey, from which the Crusaders brought this motif to Europe (Forstner, 1990). During Napoleonic times, an eagle was introduced to heraldry, modeled on the eagle from Roman legionary symbols and referring to Carolingian times. The imperial coat of arms depicts a golden eagle in a blue field with its wings down, looking at the left, holding bundles of lightning in its talons. A characteristic feature of the Napoleonic army is described by Adam Mickiewicz: "Horses, men, cannons, eagles sail day and night" (Mickiewicz, 1995).

The eagle is associated with the beginnings of Polish statehood, although a visible reference can be seen in the case of the founding of Rome. An eagle (sometimes a vulture) shows Romulus and Remus the place where the city was founded, similarly in the case of the legend of Lech, and the oldest description in the Chronicle of Wielkopolska of the 13th century, which does not mention the eagle itself: „While wandering with its offspring through the vast forests, where the kingdom of Poland now exists, having finally arrived at a certain charming place where there were very fertile fields, a great abundance of fish and wild animals, there he pitched his tents. And desiring to build the first dwelling there, to provide shelter for himself and his people, he said, "Let's build a nest"! Hence, this place is still called Gniezno, that is *„building a nest”* (Kronika, 1965). The story of an eagle's nest and an eagle with spread wings against the background of the setting sun and red sky appears a little later, explaining the beginnings of the state emblem. The legend of Lech and the nesting eagle was also mentioned in 1555 in his work *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum* (About the origin and deeds of Poles) by the Polish historian Marcin Kromer, and earlier also by Jan Długosz. Thus, the white eagle first became the emblem of the Piast dynasty, and later became the symbol of the entire Polish state. The oldest image of an eagle can be seen on Bolesław Chrobry's denarius, one of the most famous coins in Polish history. There is an image of a bird associated with an eagle on the obverse, although there are still disputes between the supporters of the thesis that the drawing depicts an eagle, and its opponents, who are in favor of a peacock, pigeon, rooster or another species of bird. The version that the bird on the coin is a peacock - the symbol of St. Wojciech, has been offered more often in recent years, thank to Polish numismatists Ryszard Kiersnowski and Stanisław Suchowolski. As far as the theory of an eagle is concerned, scientists say that the distinctive dots - on the coin - on the bird's body mirror the white flight feathers seen in nature on its folded wings. In the Middle Ages, it first appears on seals, coins and coats of arms of the Silesian Piasts. It appears for the first time as a ducal emblem on the horse seal of Casimir of Opole and Racibórz in 1222. In the coats of arms of the Lower Silesian Piasts there is a black eagle in a golden field of a shield with a silver sickle band running through the eagle's wings and breast, which was topped with a cross (Znamierowski, 2003).

It becomes the official coat of arms of the state in the times of Przemysł II in 1295, who used it on the reverse of the majestic seal. In the course of history, its composition, stylization of plumage, presence or absence of a crown on the head, position of the head and occurrence with other coats of arms change. During the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the eagle appears in the quadrant shield together with Pogoń - the coat of arms of Lithuania is the state coat of arms, and in the coats of arms of the elected kings with the addition of the ruler's family coat of arms in the heart shield. In a different composition, in the coat of arms from the times of the November Uprising, there is a crowned eagle, in the coat of arms from the times of the January Uprising, with an additional image of the archangel Michael - the patron of Ruthenia (Berg, 1899), while the eagle itself does not have a crown, but holds a sword and a cross in its claws. After regaining independence, the eagle becomes the state emblem (after the times of partitions) under the Sejm Act of 1919. It was replaced with an image of the eagle designed by Zygmunt Kamiński in 1927, the version used up till now, with a break from 1944 to 1990, when the eagle was uncrowned.

As a heraldic animal, it has been the second (after the lion) most common animal motif in heraldry since the Middle Ages. It was used by the Castilian kings, the Piast and Přemyslid families, Napoleon Bonaparte, and many principalities in Europe, to become a permanent part of episcopal, municipal and patriotic heraldry in the 20th century.

In Scandinavian mythology, an unnamed eagle appears among the boughs of the Yggdrasil tree (the hawk Veðrfölnir sits between its eyes) as the incarnation of light fighting with a serpent (Bellows, 1936). It is an attribute of the god Odin, who obtained honey by transforming into this bird. In many representations of Norse and Old Norse manuscripts, the eagle-Odin produces mead. In the Finnish tradition, the supreme deity can take the shape of an eagle, the bird also appears in the Finnish creation myth in the epic Kalevala, where it saves one of the heroes Joukahainen (Honko, 2002).

The eagle is also found in other non-European cultures - Garuda, the solar bird of the Aryans (Frédéric, 1998), appears in the form of a man with eagle wings or in a zoomorphic form as an eagle (Williams, 2008), in Hinduism it is the mount of the god Vishnu. The Garuda bird can be seen in the emblems of Thailand, where it is also a symbol of the royal family, and Indonesia, where it is called Garuda Pancasila, referring to the Indonesian ideology of the state foundation, contained in the "five principles" (pancasila). In Buddhism, Buddha traveled on an eagle and it is an attribute of Amoghasiddhi - the fifth of the meditation buddhas - Dhyani-buddhas (Mahakala, 2005). In China, it was also seen as a solar bird, and together with the raven it is dedicated to the deities of war. The thunder god Leigong was depicted as a demon with the eagle claws and its beak (Künstler, 2006). Among the North American Indians, the Algonquian peoples and the Iroquois, the plume of eagle feathers means the Thunderbird, the Great Spirit, the divine messenger (Lenik, 2012). A ritual eagle dance is performed in the Creek tribe (Leach,

1984). Feather handling is considered to be crucial during the eagle dance. Feathers should not touch the ground, and if a feather falls, only the elder of the tribe can pick it up. The dancer should then thank the elder by giving him a gift. The eagle dance varied from tribe to tribe, but usually showed the eagle's life cycle from its birth to its death. In the dance you can see how the eagle learns to walk and how it hunts to feed its family. Eagles were worshiped in a special way by the Indian peoples, because they flew high into the sky, flying close to the Great Spirit. Eagle feathers were used as decorations of ceremonial costumes and were used in healing rituals by shamans, they were also given to boys entering adulthood. In the Maya culture, the troops of warriors were called Eagles, Jaguars and Coyotes, and the Aztec eagle personified heavenly power and the rising sun. The Aztecs also used the eagle motif in art. One type of carving characteristic for the ritual sacrifices of the tribe was the *cuauhxicalli*, meaning "eagle vessel" in the form of large stone bowls in the shape of eagles or jaguars, used as vessels for extracted human hearts which were supposed to be sacrificed to the deities (Boone, 1989).

Currently existing countries that use the eagle motif in their symbolism include: Albania - a two-headed black eagle on a red background, referring to the Byzantine Empire, as well as the seal of the national hero in the 15th century, Skanderbeg (Pfaffenbichler, 2015), appearing as an emblem in the coat of arms and on the state flag, Egypt - with the eagle of Saladin, the Ayyubid sultan from the times of the Crusades, with a shield on the eagle's chest in the colors of the Egyptian flag - vertical red-white-black stripes; an eagle stands on a pedestal on which there is an inscription in Arabic: Arab Republic of Egypt. Similar emblems were used in North Yemen, South Yemen, the Libyan Arab Republic and now Iraq and Palestine (Elgenius, 2018).

The bald eagle appears on the obverse of the Great Seal of the United States of 1782, used unofficially, as the United States does not have a state emblem. The number 13 plays an unusual role here - each wing of the bald eagle is decorated with 13 feathers, the left claw holds 13 arrows, the right - an olive branch with 13 leaves. The inscription "*E Pluribus Unum*" ("One made of many") is composed of 13 letters, above the head there is a nimbus with 13 stars placed on a blue background (Patterson, 1978). An eagle fighting with a serpent - a rattlesnake appears in the emblem of Mexico, indirectly referring to ancient mythological and early Christian images, although here it's got a slightly different origin (Wrona, 2006). The eagle, appearing in the emblem and flag of this country, sits on a cactus (blooming prickly pear) and devours a rattlesnake, which refers to the Aztec legend in which the Aztecs

saw an eagle holding a rattlesnake in its claws and founded the capital of Mexico in this place (Minahan, 2009).

A black eagle on a gold background with a red beak, red tongue and red feet is used by Germany in its coat of arms, referring to the Imperial Roman times and the Holy Roman Empire (Laitenberger, 2000). The coat of arms of Russia refers to the coat of arms of the Eastern Roman Empire from the times of the Palaeologan dynasty with the Ruthenian Chase on the breast of an eagle in a red field (Hellberg-Hirn, 2020). The double-headed golden eagle holding a scepter and an apple in its claws has been in use since the 17th century.

The rich symbolism and multiple meanings of the eagle makes it the most unusual bird, the bird of kings and the king of birds, worshiped and used in art and beliefs by the ancient Greeks, Romans, peoples of the East and the Far East, a symbol used by Christianity and drawing from the Old Testament meaning of this bird. Through the image of an eagle, positive features such as strength, youth, masculinity, heroism, victory, protectiveness, generosity, justice were presented, but also negative ones - gluttony, pride, destruction, severity. In the religious sphere, it represents rebirth, renewal, immortality, baptism, and above all, the omnipotence of God, the soul and God's justice - the day of the last judgment. References to this symbolism can be found throughout the history of the mankind, having the greatest resonance in today's world in the heraldic signs and emblems of many countries around the world, drawing from legends, myths and antique, ancient traditions.

References

- Albertus Magnus. (1999). *On Animals. A Medieval Summa Zoologica*, vol. II, transl. And annotated by K. F. Kitchell Jr. & I. M. Resnick, London. p. 1547.
- Ambroży. (1970). *Wybór pism dogmatycznych*. transl. and annotated by L. Gładyszewski, S. Pieszczocho. Poznań. s. 72 and the following ones.
- Arystoteles. (1992). *Zoologia. Dzieła wszystkie*. vol. III. transl. P. Siwek. Warszawa. p. 578.
- Augustyn. (1986). *Objaśnienia Psalmów*. PSP, vol. XXXVII-XLII, transl. J. Sulowski. Warszawa. pp. 383-384.
- Bellows, H. A. (Trans.) (1936). *The Poetic Edda*. Princeton University Press. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation. p. 97.

- Berg, M. (1899). *Zapiski o powstaniu polskiem 1863 i 1864 roku i poprzedzającej powstanie epoce demonstracji od 1856*. Vol. II. p. 65.
- Boone, E. H. (1989). Incarnations of the Aztec Supernatural: The Image of Huitzilopochtli in Mexico and Europe. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79(2), 1-107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1006524>
- Cooper, J. C. (1998). *Zwierzęta symboliczne i mityczne*. Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy REBIS.
- Cumont, F. (1917). L'aigle funéraire d'Hiérapolis et l'apothéose des empereurs, w: F. Cumont, *Études syriennes*, Paris, pp. 35-118.
- Elgenius, G. (2018). *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited.
- Etymologies of Isidore of Seville. (2006). transl. S. A. Barney, W J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, O. Berghof. New York, p. 264.
- Fizjolog. (2003). transl., introduction and footnote K. Jażdżewska. Warszawa, p. 28.
- Forstner, D. (1990). *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Frédéric L. (1998). *Słownik cywilizacji indyjskiej*. Przemysław Piekarski (red. nauk.). Wyd. 1. T. 1. Katowice. Wydawnictwo "Książnica", p. 293, series: Słowniki Encyklopedyczne "Książnicy".
- Hellberg-Hirn, E. (2020). *Soil and Soul: The Symbolic World of Russianness*. Routledge, pp. 16-35.
- Homer. (1981). Iliada. Wrocław. Vol. 199-206; verse. 313-316.
- Honko, L. (Ed.) (2002). *The Kalevala and the World's Traditional Epics*.
- Hugon z Foliето. (2005). Aviarium. *Fizjologi i Aviarium. Średniowieczne traktaty o symbolice zwierząt*. Edit. E Przybył; transl. and desription: S. Kobielus. Kraków, p. 157.
- Iwaszkiewicz, B. (1974). *Problematyka symboliki motywu orła w sztuce wczesnochrześcijańskiej*. Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne, ol. XXI, z. 4, p. 207.
- Janeczko, K. (2020). Wcieniu orlich skrzydeł. Złożona symbolika orła na przykładzie wybranych godeł krakowskich kamienic. *Perspektywy Kultury*, 2(29), pp. 315-326. <https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2020.2902.20>
- Kobielus, S. (2002). *Bestiarium chrześcijańskie. Zwierzęta w symbolice i interpretacji. Starożytność i średniowiecze*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.
- Kopaliński, W. (2007). *Słownik symboli*. Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm.
- Kronika Wielkopolska. (1965). Introduction, transl.. K. Abgarowicz. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Kryśkiewicz, H. L. (2014). To serve the Empire: Roman eagle as a divine messenger and guardian of majesty of the first Roman Emperor, Octavianus Augustus (63BC-42AD). Politics — culture — belief. *Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk*, 4, pp. 532-551.
- Künstler, M. J. (2006). *Mitologia chińska*. Warszawa. Oficyna Wydawnicza Auriga. pp. 102-110.
- Laitenberger, B., & Bassier, M. (2000). *Wappen und Flaggen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und ihrer Länder*. Heymanns.
- Leach, M. (Ed.) (1984). *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology & Legend*. San Francisco. Harper & Row, p. 333.
- Lenik, E. J. (2012). The Thunderbird Motif in Northeastern Indian Art. *Archaeology of Eastern North America*, 40, 163-185.
- Lurker, M. (1989). *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*. Poznań: Pallotinum.
- Mahakala, J. G. (2005). *Sześcioreki strażnik w buddyzmie tybetańskim*. Kraków. Universitas. p. 169.
- Maximus Tauriniensis. (2019). Sermo 55, 2, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, CCL 23, Turnhout 1962, transl. J. Januszewski. Św. Maksym z Turynu. Homilie na rok liturgiczny. Kraków. p. 172.
- Mickiewicz, A. (1995). Pan Tadeusz, Warszawa. Vol. IV. verse. 535-538; Vol. XI. verse 46-47.
- Minahan, J. B. (2009). *The Complete Guide to National Symbols and Emblem*. ABC-CLIO. p. 718.

- Patterson, R. S., & Dougall, R. (1978) [1976 i.e. 1978]. *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States*. Department and Foreign Service series; 161 Department of State publication; 8900. Washington: Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, pp. 80-81.
- Pfaffenbichler, M. (2015). *L'elmo e la spada di Giorgio Castriota detto Scanderbeg*. Universita di Salerno. pp. 40-50.
- Św. Grzegorz. (2016). *Moralia. Komentarz do Księgi Hioba*. Vol. 6: Vol. XXVIII-XXXII, scientific editor: L Nieścior, transl. A. Wilczyński; elaboration and correction: E Buszewicz. Kraków. p. 330 and the following ones.
- Szarlej, J. (2003). Biblijne epifanie zwierzęce na tle opozycji homo – animal. *Język a Kultura*. vol.15, *Opozycja homo – animal w języku i kulturze*. edit. A. Dąbrowska. Wrocław. p. 42.
- Tobin, V. A. (1989). *Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion*. P. Lang.
- Williams, G. M. (2008). *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*. Oxford University Press. pp. 21-24.
- Winter, I. J. (1985). After the Battle is Over: The 'Stele of the Vultures' and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East. In Kessler, H. L., & Simpson, M. S. (Eds.), *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Series IV. Vol. 16. Washington DC: National Gallery of Art. pp. 11–32.
- Wrona, J. (2006). Gady, płazy, ryby, mięczaki. Zwierzęta na flagach i w herbach państw. "Aura" (nr 6). pp. 31-33.
- Wypustek, A. (2011). Bogowie, herosi i wybrańcy. Wizerunek zmarłych w greckich epigramatach nagrobnych epoki hellenistycznej i grecko-rzymskiej, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, pp. 291-303
- Zagożdżon-Łyszczarz, J. (2018). Encyklopedyczna wykładnia symboliki orła w twórczości Mikołaja Reja i Marcina Bielskiego. *Bibliotekarz Podlaski. Ogólnopolskie naukowe pismo bibliotekoznawcze i bibliologiczne*, (4), 113-145.
- Znamierowski, A. (2003). *Insygnia, symbole i herby polskie: kompendium*. Warszawa: Świat Książki. p. 87.
- Żywot mniejszy św. Stanisława. (1987). [w:] *Średniowieczne żywoty i cuda patronów Polski*, przeł. J. Pleziowa, Warszawa. p. 137.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).