

The Mesopotamian Origins of Byzantine Symbolism and Early Christian Iconography

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The eagle-god is a prominent iconographic symbol of ancient Mesopotamian religion which wielded tremendous power in the Mesopotamian imagination. The eagle-like gods of Mesopotamia eventually evolved into double-headed gods whose depictions became widespread in imperial and religious symbolism and iconography in Sumer and Akkad.¹ These symbols now have common misapprehension as in the common public as being tied to Byzantine Empire of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Rather, the Byzantines most likely inherited these Mesopotamian symbols and employed them in a similar manner as the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Hittites did. Likewise, the iconographic symbols of the moon god Nanna-Sin, who had the power to render the fate of humans,² re-appeared in early Christian iconography depicting Christ in the Last Judgment. To best understand the iconographic practices and symbols used by the Byzantine Empire and emerging early Christian Church is to understand the foundational contexts by which these symbols first arose and the common religious practice of transferring and re-dedicating prior religious shrines to new deities.

“Today the Byzantine eagle flutters proudly from the flags of nations from Albania to Montenegro, and though each state has its local version of the church, the heritage they all bear

¹ C.N. Deedes, “The Double-Headed God,” *Folklore* 46, no. 3 (1935): 197-200.

² See Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 132; Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 88.

is Byzantine.”³ This is how Lars Brownworth concludes his work *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire that Rescued Western Civilization*.⁴ One of the most visible symbols of the Byzantine Empire is the double-headed eagle, which is believed to have represented authority over the west and east—the two halves of the eagle with one head facing west and the other east—as well as authority over secular and spiritual matters with the eagle gripping a scepter (secular authority) and orb (spiritual authority) with its claws. The only problem is the double-headed eagle is neither a Byzantine symbol, nor is it Roman. The double-headed eagle itself was never an official emblem of the empire, even upon the restoration under the Palaiologoi Dynasty; rather, it was just a familial emblem of the last Byzantine dynasty.

The origins of the double-headed eagle can be traced back to the ancient civilizations and kingdoms of Mesopotamia, and had similar role of being a symbol of imperial power for those who wielded it, as well as playing an important part of ancient religion.⁵ It is within Hittite civilization, which ruled over territories in modern day Turkey, long the breadbasket of the Byzantine Empire, by which the symbol was probably found in old Hittite pottery that often contained images of double-headed birds and passed into Byzantine use.⁶ Indeed, the double-headed eagle (or other variations of the eagle) was used as the official seal of the Hittite Empire in imperial imagery, and often employed on Hittite pottery and other artwork.⁷

³ Lars Brownworth, *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire that Rescued Western Civilization* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 303.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁵ Jesse D. Chariton, “The Mesopotamian Origins of the Hittite Double-Headed Eagle,” *UW-L: Journal of Undergraduate Research* XIV (2011): 2.

⁶ J.G. Macqueen, *The Hittites and their Contemporaries in Asia Minor* (New York: Thomas Hudson & Inc., 1986 reprint), 103-105. It is not the assertion of Mr. Macqueen that the Byzantines incorporated the double-headed eagle from Hittite pottery depicting double-headed animals. It is the assertion of this author that they most likely did, and

The use of iconography and seals to mark power and authority has a long practice dating back to the Mesopotamians before its more widespread application in the worlds of Antiquity and Late Antiquity. Therefore, it makes a certain sense that the Byzantine would employ a similar practice of iconography depicting political power and symbolism during their time.⁸ Today, there are various stone reliefs and carvings scattered throughout Turkey with the depiction of the double-headed eagle dating to, or even farther back than, the Hittite civilization long before the Byzantines (or Romans) ever set foot in Asia Minor or adopted the infamous icon as an imperial symbol that is now often associated with the Byzantine legacy rather than the original progenitors—the Mesopotamians and Hittites.

While the Hittites may have been a more visible force in the use of the double-headed eagle motif, the evolution of the double-headed eagle is first found as a symbol that was commonplace in ancient Mesopotamian cultures and played an important role in Mesopotamian religion. The origins of the eagle in ancient Mesopotamian religion can be found in the Sumerian mythological god Anzû, who is depicted as a type of eagle or very similar to an eagle.⁹ The importance of the eagle in Mesopotamian religious myth is even more pronounced when read from the *Etana Legend*, in which the Sumerian king Etana saves an eagle—who, in reciprocity, takes him up to the heavens whereby the eagle provided the king with a fertility

Mr. Macqueen highlights the importance of Hittite iconography depicting double-headed birds in their pottery and icons in this section of his work. The double-headed duck was also a popular icon in Hittite pottery.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸ The use of the double-headed eagle, eagle, or griffin (all variants) is also found in ancient Indian civilizations as well as Mesopotamian concurrently. There is still some debate where the symbol arose first, or if the symbol did, in fact, arise simultaneously.

⁹ Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998), 5.

plant that would lead to the birth of his son and ensure the continuation of his dynasty.¹⁰ In the case of the *Etana Legend*, the eagle is clearly depicted as bird of reverence and power and through association with Anzû, Etana and his descendants now had a direct link with the divines to legitimize political authority. The importance of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople claiming to the “King of Kings” (a title that is also not Byzantine origins but Persian) and their strong relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church (of the time), continues this strong tradition of connecting temporal power with religion. It is likely that the Palaiologoi family’s decision to adopt the double-headed eagle as their own familial emblem harkens back to this ancient Mesopotamian tradition of associating political power with divine authority.

Additionally, eagles and other double-headed deities are commonly found in Mesopotamian religious icons. There is widespread evidence that shows that the double-headed being as a deity, that, while initially limited to Mesopotamia, eventually spread throughout the Mediterranean world where it became incorporated into the cultures and empires of Antiquity.¹¹ While there is speculation as to the meanings that the double-headed eagle represented in ancient civilizations,¹² the double-headed eagle, by their inclusion in various religious and ceremonial settings, were certainly symbols of power in the Mesopotamian imagination. While images do not exist of the Sumerian god Anshar, there is strong evidence to suggest that he was depicted as some form of a double-headed god, with four ears and four eyes, which would later become the genesis of the double-headed eagle gods

¹⁰ Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 150.

¹¹ Deedes, 194-243.

¹² Chariton, 8-9.

of later Mesopotamian and Hittite traditions.¹³ The official seals of the Sumerians, Akkadians, the Hittites, and Assyrians all depict double-headed gods, and in many cases, double-headed birds—likely symbolizing, or manifesting, the power that the double-headed bird held in Mesopotamian imagination.¹⁴ Furthermore, the importance of this religious iconography will later come to influence developments within iconographic projects within Eastern Christianity under the Byzantine Empire.

Thus, there is a possible connection in the inclusion of the double-headed eagle as a symbol of the Greek Orthodox Church stemming from this religious history that dates back to the Mesopotamians. Lars Brownworth points out in the final pages of his work that the Orthodox Church was a great factor in awakening the Orthodox Christian population within the Balkans to the “glorious epochs of their past.”¹⁵ Unlike the implications of Mr. Brownworth’s statement that the double-headed eagle being on the nation flags of Albania and Montenegro, and that the eagle itself is a national symbol of Egypt and Iraq, serves as evidence of the extent of the influence of the Byzantines upon the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean world during its height of power,¹⁶ the reverse is true when fully examined. To the extent of the Byzantine Empire’s height of geographical space, in which the Byzantines had come to inherit the lands where iconography of the double-headed eagle was widely used in the past, it is more probable that the Byzantines inherited the eagle as a symbol from cultural discoveries from the Mesopotamians and not that modern day Iraq or Egypt, or even Albania

¹³ Deedes, 194.

¹⁴ Ibid., 197-207.

¹⁵ Brownworth, 303.

¹⁶ Ibid.

and Montenegro, inherited these symbols from the Byzantines as if the Byzantines had invented the double-headed eagle as their own. To stop with the Byzantines and claim that the eagle as a national symbol of these nations that were formerly part of the empire is to cease tracing the evolution and development of the eagle in iconographic and imperial symbolism, which clearly begins with the Mesopotamians and the Hittites and not the Byzantines.¹⁷

To the extent that the Byzantines would have used the symbol to assert their political power seems much more unclear. As mentioned, the double-headed eagle did not become associated with the empire until the Palaiologoi Dynasty (1261-1453). Even after the restoration of the empire by re-capturing Constantinople in 1261, the Byzantines would not have been more than a small regional power on the crossroads of Europe and Asia Minor—now overshadowed by the Ottomans in Turkey and the Bulgarians and Serbians in the Balkans.¹⁸ While it is understandable that the Hittites, at the height of their power, would use the double-headed eagle as an official seal of their kingdom,¹⁹ the Byzantine claim to power and political hegemony over the Balkans and Turkey is without much merit by the time of their adoption of the double-headed eagle as a royal and political emblem. What is clear is that the double-headed eagle is not a Byzantine symbol, but a Mesopotamian symbol prevalently used by the Mesopotamian cultures and kingdoms, passed on to the Hittites that served as a symbol of political power and

¹⁷ It would be, however, wrong to assert that the Byzantines had possession of the famous myths (stories) of the ancient Mesopotamians. The discovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and other ancient Mesopotamian myths does not begin until the middle of the nineteenth century. However, there is evidence to suggest that the Byzantines had unearthed or come into possession of ancient Mesopotamian and Hittite pottery, and through their wars and interactions with the Sasanians (the Persians), that they were also exposed to these symbols and icons through this means. Concerning the famous Sumerian story, see *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), xiii-xxx.

¹⁸ Charles C.W. Oman, *The Byzantine Empire* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2008) 308-320. Oman's work was originally published in 1892.

¹⁹ Refer back to supra notes 6 and 7.

religious importance that eventually emerged again during the Byzantine Empire and is now associated with the Greek Orthodox Church. Indeed, this transference and evolution is important in understanding the emergence of Christian iconographic projects from Late Antiquity through the early Middle Ages, in which Mesopotamian iconography is equally prevalent and widespread in the artwork of the first 1,000 years of Christianity.

The second most famous, but often forgotten, symbol of the Byzantine Empire was the official symbol of the city of Constantinople—the crescent moon.²⁰ As Lars Brownworth correctly points out, the crescent moon enters into Islamic symbolism only after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, in which Mehmet the Conqueror stylized himself “Caesar of Rome” and used all the necessary propaganda (including the inheritance of iconography) to legitimize his new claim.²¹ The origins of the crescent moon in the city of Byzantium is generally traced back to the Greek goddess Hecate, a goddess of the crossroads who is often depicted as holding torches and keys as she guides travelers to a new destination and provides them with safe passage into the region.²² As Byzantium transformed into the city of Constantinople with its location on the Bosphorus as a prime nexus by which trade, travel, and pilgrimage intersected Europe, Africa, and North Africa—it does seem appropriate that the crescent moon, which had come to symbolize the goddess Hecate, would become the official emblem of the city at the crossroads of the world.

²⁰ Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Making of Christian Constantinople* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14-20. It should be noted that before the city of Constantinople was ‘built’ by the Roman Emperor Constantine I, the city was built over an already established small Greek colony called Byzantium—the namesake of the “Byzantine” Empire as denoted by Enlightenment historians. More properly, the crescent moon was a symbol of the city of Byzantium, which then became a symbol of the city of Constantinople after its dedication by Constantine.

²¹ Brownworth, 302.

²² Limberis, 15.

As it was common in the world of Antiquity and Late Antiquity to associate gods and goddesses with icons, and as religion performed the role of social stability within the realm, when Constantine I had come to tolerate Christianity and when Theodosius I established Christianity as the official state religion of the empire—efforts to Christianize Constantinople without causing unrest to the city’s inhabitants was a paramount concern for both emperors.²³ As new religions came into place, and old religions faded, it was common for new converts to associate important figures in the new religion (in this case, Christianity) with old gods and goddesses as this was seen in the ancient world as the highest form of devotion or reverence in customary religious practices of Late Antiquity. Therefore, with the prevailing spirit and devotion to Hecate, the city of Constantinople was transformed into a center of Mariology for the new Christian empire.²⁴ Rather than devotions to Hecate and icons of the pagan goddess, the temples and devotions to Hecate were replaced with the Virgin Mary. The famous cathedral built by Justinian as the crown-jewel of the city, the Hagia Sophia, “Church of Holy Wisdom,” fits the style of honoring past traditions with the inclusion of new traditions as the final consummation of the Christianization of the city as it harkened back to the city’s ancient heritage but also spoke to its importance as a new center of Christianity.

Even though the crescent moon was a symbol of the city of Byzantium and later Constantinople, it is also inaccurate to assert that the symbol begins with the goddess Hecate and the city of Byzantium itself. Therefore, it is necessary to look where this tradition begins as well, just as was the case of the double-headed eagle. Like with the case of the double-headed

²³ Ibid., 21-29.

²⁴ Ibid., 101-106.

eagle, the iconography of the crescent moon has Mesopotamian origins with the moon god Nanna-Sin, and it is likely that Greek contact with the east prompted the symbol to become associated with Byzantium sometime in the middle fourth century when the city was besieged by Philip of Macedon.²⁵ Thus, the moon enters into the pantheon of future Byzantine symbols through war, and the moon-god of the Sumerians—Nanna-Sin—was closely related to war and conquest in Sumerian religion, as well as other aspects of Sumerian religion.²⁶

Nanna-Sin was part of the elite pantheon of seven gods and goddesses of Sumerian religion,²⁷ the head of the astral deities,²⁸ and was even believed to have the power to “decree the fate” of the dead as an act of final judgment.²⁹ The use of crescent moon therefore, dates to over 6,000 years ago during the early days of the Mesopotamian civilizations,³⁰ long before the symbol had become affiliated with Byzantium and Constantinople. The symbol also seemed to have been used most prominently by the Babylonians as a sort of icon with superstitious power to ward off evil spirits and bad omens, keeping with its importance religious usage.³¹ It was during the Babylonian Empire that the crescent moon became officially used as a symbol for the god Nanna-Sin.³² Like with the double-headed eagle, the moon was a powerful symbol of ancient deities.³³

²⁵ Edgar J Banks, “The Origins of the Crescent Moon and the Star,” 1907, 387.

²⁶ Kramer, 64.

²⁷ Ibid., 122.

²⁸ Roux, 87.

²⁹ Kramer, 132; Roux, 88.

³⁰ Banks, 387-388.

³¹ Ibid., 388.

³² Roux, 250.

³³ Banks, 389.

The moon was quickly adopted and used by nearly every Mesopotamian civilization as an important image of Mesopotamian religion and iconography,³⁴ by which it slowly spread westward and became associated with the Greeks and Romans. As it was common that many Mesopotamian cities “belonged” to a certain god or goddess, of which Nanna-Sin was prevalent among many Mesopotamian cities and his image of the moon became associated with these cities,³⁵ the continuing practice of associating ancient religious symbols to a city is altogether nothing new, or, as claimed, evidence of apostasy. When Constantinople adopted the crescent moon as its own symbol the city was declaring itself as belonging to an ancient deity (in this case Hecate) and when Christianized, the moon was incorporated to assert Christ’s power to render the fates of others, and now proclaimed that the city belonged to the Christian god—Christ. Furthermore, due to the religious importance of Constantinople as being “First among Equals” with Rome in the theoretical Christian Pentarchy, it is not surprising that the symbol has such a prominent connection with the city that billed itself as the “New Rome” and challenged the religious claims of the Pontifical head of the Roman (Latin) Church.

The influence of the widespread use of the crescent moon, and the famous accompanying star, was then incorporated into Christian iconography found in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria in the early centuries of Christianity.³⁶ Before the cross became the common Christian iconographic symbol (only after the Middle Ages and with the onset of the Protestant Reformation), the most common symbols found in Christian iconography are the moon and

³⁴ Ibid., 390.

³⁵ Roux, 131.

³⁶ Angeliki E. Laiou and Roy P. Mottahedeh eds., *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, (Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), 278-279; Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography, or, the History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* vol. 1 (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1851), 87, 115.

star, which were often used in depictions of Christ's death and ascension into heaven.³⁷ The inclusion of the moon and star in Christian iconography still retains connotations to the more ancient use of the moon and star as symbols of guiding pilgrims and travelers. Here, it makes sense that the symbol was used for Christ, as he is the good shepherd that guides the righteous on their pilgrimage. In addition, the inclusion of these symbols as a means of reverence to the new god—Christ, would have been seen in the highest form of respect and divine worship as the peoples of Antiquity, Late Antiquity, and into the Middle Ages.

There also remains Byzantine icons of Christ depicted under the moon flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Baptist and other important figures in Christianity.³⁸ The use of the moon in Christian iconography is directly influenced from Constantinople's past religious lineage and inheritance, and before the iconoclasm of the eighth century, the city was a center for Christian iconography in the eastern half of the Mediterranean. The images of the moon also factored prominently in Byzantine icons depicting the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment.³⁹ Thereby, it is likely that the inclusion of the moon to reflect Christ's power to render the eternal salvation or damnation of one's soul is still attached with one of the original powers of the Sumerian moon-god Nanna-Sin.⁴⁰ For, as mentioned, the prevailing religious theology that accompanied Nanna-Sin was that he remained allusive and mysterious to his devotees, yet still "knew the destinies of all."⁴¹ Thus, with the strong iconographic lineage with the moon-god of Sumer and its successor cultures that retained this lineage of moon gods with

³⁷ Didron, vol.1, 86-87.

³⁸ Didron, *Christian Iconography, or, the History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* vol. 2 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891), 230.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁴⁰ Refer back to supra note 29.

⁴¹ Roux, 87-88. See also supra note 29.

the power to “decree the fates” of humans, it should not be surprising that early Christian icons from Byzantine Churches depicted the Second Coming of Christ with a moon flanking him and serves as an ever present reminder of the Sumerian influence upon this aspect of religious iconography and theology.

The most commonly used symbols and icons within the Byzantine Empire all have their roots in Mesopotamian and other Near Eastern cultures and civilizations that long flourished before the ascendancy of the Greeks or Romans during Antiquity. It is likely that the use of these symbols in Byzantine political and religious iconography was nothing more than the continuation of the common practice of Antiquity and Late Antiquity in which symbols and other icons (and their associate variations) passed from one culture to the next, and retain a strong similarity to their original usage in Sumerian religious myth and belief. The Byzantines were not a Greco-Latin culture, but truly a Greco-Eastern culture. By the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, and the official Hellenization of the eastern half of empire in 620, the Byzantines were already employing and using symbols and icons commonly found in the Near East.⁴²

As the proliferation of eastern symbols and icons began to influence and become incorporated into the Greek world, and after the Greek world had adopted Christianity, the symbolism and iconography of the Byzantine Empire incorporated ancient Mesopotamian customs to their newfound, and sincere, beliefs. While it was common practice to do this in the

⁴² In 620 C.E., Emperor Heraclius made Greek the official language of the Byzantine Empire, ending the last major cultural attachment of the Byzantine Empire with its Latin (Roman) history. See also, Robert Byron, *The Byzantine Achievement* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57.

world of Antiquity and Late Antiquity, this common feature had a profound impact on the evolution of religious iconography and symbolism in Eastern Christianity for over 1,000 years as enumerated hitherto. The inclusion of icons depicting Christ as the sun-god, war-god, or moon-god, was the simple practice of transferring iconographic and religious practices from already established temples and religious practices of contemporary society, now only re-configured to reflect the new beliefs adopted by many. The city of Constantinople, when dedicated by Constantine, simply kept the eastern moon as its official symbol and it quickly became (re)identified with the new city (Constantinople), the Byzantine Empire, and Christian art and iconography. The major symbols and icons used by the Byzantine Empire and the emerging Christian Church in Late Antiquity have Mesopotamian origins.