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Queen SARKAR *

In the captivating realm where art, archaeology, and anthropology converge, *The Art and Archaeology of Human Engagements with Birds of Prey*, expertly curated and edited by Robert Wallis, unfolds a rich interplay of humanity's intricate relationship with majestic avian predators. The inspiration for this book originated from a session conducted at the Art, Materiality, and Representation conference organized by the Royal Anthropological Institute. The conference, held from June 1 to 3, 2018, was a joint venture between the Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at The British Museum and the Department of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies. This book explores the complex links that exist between raptors and communities throughout history, from prehistory to the present, going beyond the traditional limits of human-animal partnerships. The book takes readers beyond the dichotomous boundaries of culture and environment and transports them to a place where raptors and humans coexist in a captivating interplay of materials, interactions, and imagery. Pioneering in its posthumanist perspective, this collection breaks new ground by challenging conventional viewpoints and recognizing the agency and intentionality of birds of prey. Departing from speciesist approaches, it opens up fresh avenues for delving into the ontologies and epistemologies of human-raptor connections. Rooted in indigenous wisdom, the book acknowledges a web of interdependence among all beings. The presented relational understanding disrupts human exceptionalism, urging a reevaluation of human-raptor relationships that goes beyond mere human choice. Inspired by posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, the contributors encourage readers to contemplate the concept of "becoming-with" significant others, pushing the boundaries of coexistence studies. The book's significance unfolds within the intricate web of contemporary human interactions with raptors—creatures both revered for their power and entangled in complex relationships with humans. From the traditions of ancient falconry to the symbolic importance of Roman eagles, the narratives within the book delve into the nuanced dynamics of cooperation and competition, illuminating the complex threads that bind the human and the raptorial.

Organized into four themes, the book offers a multidimensional exploration. Part one,

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"The Materiality of Human Engagements with Birds of Prey," delves into the archaeology of deep-time relationships. Shumon Hussain unravels the companionship between Neanderthals and large eagles, challenging Eurocentric divisions between wild and domestic. Salima Ikram ventures into ancient Egypt, where mummified raptors and rich visual culture intertwine in a tapestry of symbolism and ritual. Joakim Goldhahn takes us to the Bronze Age of Northern Europe, exploring the idiomatic connections between humans and goshawks. In weaving together these diverse narratives, the contributors offer a fresh perspective on societies of the deep past. *The Art and Archaeology of Human Engagements with Birds of Prey* stands not only as a scholarly masterpiece but also as an eloquent invitation to reflect on the profound tapestry of human existence, entwined with the soaring spirits of raptors. What stories lie untold in the silent gaze of falconry hoods and the ancient echoes of raptor-deities? How do we, as humans, redefine our place within the intricate web of life that encompasses both ourselves and these formidable birds? This book beckons readers to explore the answers, embarking on a journey where the human and the raptorial converge in a narrative as ancient as time itself.

As we venture into Part Two, "Visualizing Human Relations with Raptors," the anthology continues its enthralling exploration with three captivating papers focused on human–raptor encounters in archaeological art. Kenneth Lymer embarks on a journey into Central Asia's early nomads during the first millennium BCE, unraveling the imagery of eagles through gold artifacts and rock art. By shifting the lens from traditional iconographic style to the archaeological contexts of these images, Lymer illuminates the active agency of these depictions in social life, weaving a narrative that transcends chronology and embraces the objects' sensual expressions in the lives and afterlives of those intimately connected to them. Leslie Wallace shifts our gaze to East Asia, delving into the roles of falconry and elite social practices during the Liao and Jin dynasties in tenth to thirteenth-century China. Examining the spring hunt (Chunshui), Wallace uncovers a visual vocabulary embedded in hawks and falcons hunting swans and geese, offering a visual tapestry that articulates social hierarchies and political power. The art of falconry emerges as a unique form of expression, a fusion of historical traditions that visually embodies human admiration for birds of prey and complex ideologies rooted in specific historical contexts. In the final chapter of this section, Kristina Jennbert explores the phenomenon of 'bird brooches' during the Late Iron Age in Scandinavia. Going beyond traditional stylistic analysis, Jennbert interprets these brooches as a pictorial language expressing the distinctive qualities of raptors and their connection to falconry practices. Contextualizing the brooches within female graves, she unravels how the wearing of these artifacts becomes a powerful display of gendered agency and political power, intricately interwoven with a cosmology involving falcon-associated deities. This part also reinvigorates discussions on raptor imagery, shifting from mere discussions of style and dating to emphasize the importance of social context. Raptors emerge as active agents in negotiating human identities and inter-species relations, sparking a reevaluation of the significance of these powerful birds in shaping human narratives.

Moving forward to Part Three, the anthology delves into "Posthumanist Ontologies of Human–Raptor Relations" with four thought-provoking chapters. Robert Wallis leads the exploration by re-examining the rare inclusion of a hawk's head in a Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age 'beaker' inhumation burial in the Yorkshire Wolds of England. Departing from traditional interpretations, Wallis adopts a material, multispecies, and relational approach, unraveling a charged 'bundle' of themes related to predation and transformation. This distinctive funerary rite becomes a lens through which new localized identities are constructed and negotiated during a period of societal reconfiguration. Continuing the journey across continents, Max Carocci delves into the Mississippian period of North America, exploring artworks incorporating raptors. Carocci's approach, influenced by recent theorizing on animisms and personhood, probes the material properties of these artworks and their intertwined human–raptor relations. In parallel, Barreto and Alves draw upon Indigenous ethnography to analyze images of harpy eagles, king vultures, and owls in Marajoara and Santarem ceramic traditions in lower Amazonia. These societies recognized these raptors as active modifiers of life and death in ritual contexts, encapsulating perspectives where sociability revolves around principles of predation within perspectival ontologies. This part propels readers into the realm of posthumanist ontologies, challenging preconceived notions and unraveling the intricate threads of human–raptor relations. The contributors prompt contemplation on the profound impact of these avian beings in shaping human identities and cultural landscapes.

Neil Price's exploration continues in Part Four, where the theme of predation takes center stage in the Viking Age among the Rus', the eastern Scandinavian diaspora. Focusing on visual expressions of martiality, Price's posthumanist perspective dissects images of diving raptors and human–falcon hybrids on weaponry. He challenges conventional art historical and mythological readings, revealing the fluidity of somatic/genomic/cognitive boundaries, and how these 'more-than-human truths' might have been weaponized by the Rus'. The section eloquently ties together common threads of transformation and predation, offering fresh insights into the Rus' culture during the Viking Age. Part Four unfolds with three chapters dedicated to exploring "Indigenous Knowledges of Birds of Prey". Henry John Drewal shares his extensive ethnographic fieldwork with Yorùbá-speakers of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, focusing on the E·ye·Ò·rò·/Orù mask—shaped like a raptor's head—worn during secretive ceremonies. Drewal contextualizes the mask within Yorùbá concepts of gender and ontology, emphasizing women's superior ability to manifest vital force or performative power. The mask becomes a tool for men to negotiate the mystical powers of women, celebrating the transformative prowess of awon ìyá wa, 'our mothers. Gerard O'Regan, Emma Burns, and Te Maire Tau shift our focus to Aotearoa New Zealand, exploring rock art imagery of raptors. Interpreting the imagery as Haast's eagle, pouākai, 'birdmen', and Pou, the authors critically analyze previous scholarship, exposing the naturalization of imagery in terms of species taxonomies. Their approach, rooted in traditional Māori knowledge, challenges previous interpretations, offering exciting questions for future generations and enriching our understanding of these ancient depictions.

The anthology concludes with a chapter that investigates the portrayal of raptors in rock art in the northeast Kimberley of Northwest Australia. In this chapter, Ana Paula Motta and Martin Porr challenge anthropocentric interpretations that primarily focus on identification and quantification. Unlike traditional rock art scholarship, which often emphasizes the chronological and stylistic placement of raptor imagery, Motta and Porr delve into the Indigenous understanding of these birds and images. According to Traditional Owners, the significance of raptor images, such as eagles and owls, goes beyond specific stylistic periods and is intricately connected to Ancestors, creation, and the concept of 'good country,' where all beings and things in the world are interconnected through kinship in the Dreamtime. Embracing the relational ontologies embedded in Indigenous Law, Motta and Porr go on to 'expand what it means to be human and bird in the Kimberley'. The three chapters in this final section of the book illustrate how Indigenous Knowledge disrupts Western ways of knowing and being, unveiling intricate human–raptor interactions that redefine our understanding of 'human' and 'bird of prey'.

All the authors in this book share a common interest in how visual and material sources reveal the diverse ways in which humans and raptors intersect. They acknowledge that human–raptor relationships are not solely driven by human intentionality; instead, when these species encounter each other, they engage in mutual relations. This approach, focused on the interaction between humans and raptors, reframes our inquiries into human-raptor connections, encourages fresh perspectives on existing evidence, provides inspiration for our present and future interactions with birds of prey, raises thought-provoking questions, and sparks debate. As we navigate new pathways and creative ways of relating to other species in the challenging Anthropocene era, this raptor-with-human perspective offers valuable insights.

A tribute to the transforming potential of multidisciplinary investigation, The Art and Archaeology of Human Engagements with Birds of Prey showcases the vast possibilities that occur when disparate academic domains collide. The anthology is a powerful tool that illuminates the possibilities that arise when disparate domains merge, in addition to exploring the extensive chronicle of human–raptor connections. Rather than simply challenging preconceived notions, the book extends a compelling invitation for readers to reflect on the subtle ties binding humanity and birds of prey. It encourages a reevaluation of our place within the broader canvas of the natural world, urging a reconsideration of our role with newfound depth and understanding. In an age where our relationship with the environment holds unparalleled significance, the anthology prompts contemplation on our position within the intricate fabric of existence. The collection imparts historical insights while projecting a visionary perspective that envisages a more harmonious future. It illustrates a compelling vision where the intricate threads of human-raptor connections are interwoven with a renewed understanding and profound reverence. By exploring the dynamics of human–raptor interactions, the anthology inspires us to welcome a future characterized by understanding, respect, and a rekindled appreciation for the intricate web of life that binds us to these magnificent avian beings.