CHAPTER SIX

ANIMALS IN SYRO-PALESTINIAN ART

ANNE CAUBET

Animals in the art of Syria-Palestine are only one of the main categories of representations in Near Eastern art as a whole. The same constants can be observed: The image of the animal is on a par, at least, with that of the human being; animal images occupy a pre-eminent place in the evocation of the divine, itself in the forefront of artistic representations; and as a result, animals in art have an essentially symbolic role. The elites of society were the main sponsors of artistic creation and imagery was at the service of their ideology. However, as in the entire Near East, relations between the real world and the world of images vary according to time and place.

ANIMALS AND SYMBOLS

The figurative representations of animals in Syro-Palestinian art did not make clear distinctions between real and invented creatures. Animals were very much present in the imagination as well as in everyday life. The boundary we draw between the two was unknown or blurred in the minds of the people of antiquity whose everyday life indissolubly combined subsistence activities, social rites and appearances of the divine. The bestiary of works of art drew either on normal life and husbandry or on disquieting creatures from the wild, often seen as manifestations of the divine.

When attempting to “read” images of animals, we have to be aware that they are the product of the minds of the artists who endeavored to convey their visions. This vision has been shaped in their minds by many different factors, including morality, religion, and psychology, as well as by traditional techniques and training.
ANIMALS AND SOCIETY

Figurative works of art are relatively scarce, reserved for the elites of society. Even so-called “popular” artifacts, such as terracotta figurines, are rarely encountered in village contexts and come from specialized workshops attached to sanctuaries and large urban centers. Works of art therefore illuminate only a limited part of the society and culture of Syro-Palestine. As in the rest of the Near East, information from images must be verified by comparing them with bone remains, reflecting the actual presence of animals in the food chain, in the domestic or wild environment, or in religious life through the remains of sacrifices and ritual meals.

TIME AND SPACE

The bestiary varied according to time and place. The human relationship with animals was not the same on the coast as in the Syrian hinterland, in the north or the south, or in the Neolithic, Bronze Age or first millennium B.C. Great changes can be seen especially at the end of the second millennium B.C. in the south, when the Philistines introduced closer contacts with the Aegean world and Cyprus. This study will select its examples from periods that saw the development of an international palatial civilization whose elites shared the same ideologies. From the Middle Bronze Age to the Assyrian and Persian periods, in spite of many historical upheavals, a certain continuity in the configuration of a society made up of many small kingdoms favored a cultural and iconographic continuity that is particularly noticeable in the imagery of animals.

MEDIUM OF REPRESENTATION

The types of objects or monuments that served as the medium for figurative representations of animals instantly show the link that attached the latter to the higher levels of the social hierarchy or the divine world.