VĀRōGNA, THE FALCON

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The bird vārōgna is mentioned in three different places in the Avesta. A description of its habits is given in Yašt, XIV 19-21: It seizes from below and tears to pieces from above. It is the swiftest of all birds, the only one that can overtake an arrow in flight. It flies at dawn with its feathers bristling and seeks its food early in the morning and late at night. It skims over the hills and valleys, rivers and trees, listening to the sound of the birds. Both the other passages deal with the symbolism of the animal. According to Yašt, XIV 35-38, the feather of the vārōgna, the bird with the broad wingspan, endows whoever wears it or rubs his body with it with transcendent powers, and above all, invulnerability in battle. A bone of the bird does the same thing in like circumstances. The passage in Yašt, XIX 30-39, takes us back to the time of blessedness when king Yima still reigned on earth. The world was a paradise until the moment when Yima told a lie and fell into sin. Then the hvarānah, transcendence or royal glory, left him in the form of the bird vārōgna.

Identification of this bird is possible on the grounds of the first of the details given above: urvatō agara.naēmāt, pišatō upara.naēmāt, “seizing from below, tearing to pieces from above”. This means more than merely that the bird seizes its prey with its claws and tears it to pieces with its beak; all birds of prey do that. What we are told here is that the vārōgna attacks its prey in the air from below, takes it to the ground, stands on it and then tears it to pieces. This method of attack is mentioned twice in ancient literature besides in the Avesta. Both references are of Egyptian origin, although written in Greek, and concern the behaviour of the falcon. Aelianus says in his book on the nature of animals: “Observers report that the falcon flies upside down, like a man swimming

1 The genitive occurs once as vārōginahē, Yašt, XIV 35, from which Ch. Bartholomae reconstructs a nominative vārōgan. This would mean “vār-killer”, but up to now it has not been possible to identify the element vār.
on his back”. In this statement there is a trace of dogmatism; the falcon, which is the incarnation of the Sun-god, flies on its back so that it can look directly at the sun. Horapollo, in his book on the hieroglyphs, explains why the Egyptians use the sign of the falcon to denote the word “victory”: “This animal apparently overcomes all other birds. For, when it is hunted down by a stronger bird at that same moment it turns over in the air, so that its claws are turned upwards and its wings and tail downwards, and fights. For in this way the attacking animal that cannot do the same is beaten.”

The remaining details about the varagna are inadequate to identify it but do not at least prove its identification as the falcon to be false. The varagna is āsiṣṭa, the swiftest of all the birds. This can also be applied to the swallow but it is not a bird of prey. While the classical writers are noticeably silent about the considerable speed of the swallow, they cannot say enough about the speed of the falcon. Homer calls it ὥκις, ὀκύπτερος, ὀκτιστος πετεινών, ἔλαφρότατος πετεινών, Hesiod ὄκυπτης. The Egyptians use the term ḫḥ, the Indians in the Rg-veda the terms āsu, āsupatvan, manoajas, raghu. The varagna is also pādoparēna, has broad wings. This does not seem to be very applicable to the falcon, with its wing-span of little more than a metre and unusually narrow wings, but parallel passages show that what is meant here is that the bird spreads its wings wide. Thus Hesiod calls the falcon ταυνοσπίτερος, and the Egyptians call it pg'-dm.tj, pd'-dn.h.wj, dwn-*.wj,

2 Aelian., De Nat. Anim., X, 14.
3 This doctrine is expressed in the Avesta by the epithet hvars.daras., “looking at the sun”, Sanskrit svardrṣ. Cf. my forthcoming study on “De Geboorte van Horus” (Leiden, 1963), § 7.
4 Horapoll., Hierogl., I, 6.
5 Hom., Il., XVI, 582-583. Of the eagle: Alcaeus, fr. 52 (Diehl); Pindar., Nem., III, 80.
6 Hom., Il., XIII, 62. As a type of falcon: Aelian., De Nat. Anim., XII, 4.
8 Hom., Il., XXII, 139, Od., XIII, 87.
9 Hesiod, Op., 212.
11 Rgv., I, 118, 4, VIII, 5, 7.
12 Rgv., IV, 26, 4.
13 “Quick as thought”, Rgv., IV, 26, 5.
14 Rgv., V, 45, 9.