

THE LION IN ANCIENT ART – THE STORY OF A STRIKING SUCCESS

The lion is distinguished as the largest and most impressive predatory cat in history¹. This role is especially reflected in arts, where lions are a common theme. In our everyday life, pictures of lions appear everywhere: in coats of arms, on buildings, monuments, fountains, in gardens or even in Chinese restaurants. This last example is meant to emphasize that we are not dealing with a phenomenon limited to the scope of Europe, but that depictions of lions are as widespread as East Asia.

Tracing back the tradition of all these depictions to their origins we end up in the ancient Near East. There we can find the distinctive scenes and contexts in which lions are depicted again and again, even to this day. As a result, we are dealing with about six millennia of the lion's pictorial history, extending over large regions of the world. The consistency and the narrow range of meanings applied to the lion's representations are remarkable. Notably, it does not seem to matter whether or not lions actually live in the respective environment of a visual culture. Simply the knowledge of the existence of the lion seems to be enough for its extraordinary success as a reoccurring subject in pictorial art across time and cultures.

Hardly anyone can escape the fascination of an actual lion. On the one hand, it evokes fear and terror, and on the other it demands admiration and respect. This is based on the absence of natural enemies, its powerful and elegant appearance, and the charisma of majestic calmness in combination with the explosive violence of a hunt. Appropriately, lion representations contain a well-defined range of meanings, independent of the particular cultural and historical context.

LION ATTACK

The confrontation of one or more lions with prey animals is a common theme in pictorial art. All phases of the attack are shown, from the ambush to the devouring of the victim. Compositionally, all imaginable possibilities to implement the attack are used, as well as a large variety of prey ranging from wild to domesticated animals, and from buffalo to hare. The most popular of prey animals is undoubtedly the bull, as depicted in an early Sumerian limestone jug from Uruk (**fig. 1**). A standing bull, attacked by a



¹ The tiger might be seen as physically impressive, however, due to a more limited geographical distribution, it is less common in art. To look at its depictions more closely would be exciting, however, it will not be explored further in this article.

Fig. 1 Lion attacking a bull. Stone vase with relief decoration from Warka, Iraq. Early 3rd mill. BC. Baghdad, Iraq Museum Inv. 19169 (currently lost). – (Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, photo M. Hirmer; <https://www.bildindex.de/document/obj20961337?medium=fm1881584>).



Fig. 2 Lion attacking a bull. Relief at the staircase of the »Apadana« in Persepolis, about 500 BC. – (Photo N. Zenzen).



Fig. 3 Lioness devouring a calf. Pedimental sculpture from the Athenian acropolis, Poros stone. Early 6th c. BC. Athens, Acropolis Museum Inv. 4. – (Photo © Ad Meskens, Athens Acropolis Museum Hekatompedos Lioness pediment, CC BY-SA 4.0).

lion, is visible in the relief depictions on both sides. The beast has climbed onto the bull's back, striking its front paws into its abdomen. A very similar composition on a relief from Persepolis, depicted on the front of the Achaemenid King of Kings' palace, is over two thousand years younger (**fig. 2**).

Depictions of lion attacks were not only common in the ancient Near East, but also widespread in the Mediterranean region. An example from Greek culture is an adorned gable of a temple on the Acropolis in Athens dating to the early 6th century BC (**fig. 3**). Here a calf lies already lifeless on the ground, while the huge cat of prey, which despite its mane can be recognized as a lioness by the presence of her teats, crouches over it staring at the observer threateningly before feasting on its hind leg. The male counterpart was probably depicted symmetrically to the lioness in the other, not preserved half of the gable.

The theme of the lion attack was depicted with different kinds of prey animals, in a wide range of iconographic compositions, in all thinkable formats and genres, from miniature seal images to monumental free-standing sculpture, as well as paintings. It was common in societies for which the threat of lions is a realistic experience. The lion with all its physical prowess is characterized as a powerful ruler over nature. This predestines the lion – according to its title as »king of animals« – to be used as an analogy for human rulers and powerful deities. Their violence towards enemies is thereby intangibly demonstrated to be impressive. However, at the same time, these images reveal the antagonism between the orderly, beneficial culture of man and the irregular, threatening power of wild nature. From this perspective, the lion – in seeming contradiction to what has just been described – symbolizes the world opposed to man, and in doing so is the antagonist of the representatives of human society, i. e. of gods, heroes and rulers.

LION HUNT

Following the interpretation of the lion as an opponent of rulers, the meaning of the lion hunt as a pictorial theme is apparent. Rulers appear as hunters, for example as early as the Chalcolithic stela from Uruk, in which a bearded man attacks a lion with a spear in the upper register and fires arrows at several of the predatory cats in the lower register (**fig. 4**).

Particularly impressive implementations of that theme are found in the series of reliefs from the Neo-Assyrian palaces, for example of King Assurnasirpal II. (883-859 BC) at Nimrud (**fig. 5**). The ruler in his chariot is shooting arrows at a lion, which, although already wounded several times, jumps aggressively towards the

chariot. Another lion, apparently mortally wounded, lies below the hooves of the chariot horses. Two men who beat on their shield with sticks in order to drive the lion towards the king underline the realistic character of the representation.

By presenting himself as a fearless and superior lion hunter, the ruler demonstrates how he fulfils one of his central tasks, namely to protect his subjects from threats and to secure man's dominant position in the world. Particularly in autocratic systems, this was an excellent opportunity for the monarchs to put themselves in the spotlight. However, the depiction as a lion hunter was only credible proof of power if the hunt actually took place. As a result, the corresponding iconography is only found with rulers who were able to hunt lions in reality.

In this context it is interesting to take a look at the societies of the Aegean. During the Bronze Age these societies were already less autocratic, and were led by warlike elites with egalitarian principles. The theme of the lion hunt is also present in Aegean art, however not one single individual appears as an opponent of the lion, but rather a group of hunters. A wonderful example is the bronze dagger with a metal inlay depiction from one of the Mycenae shaft

tombs (fig. 6). Five hunters equipped with large shields, spears, bows and arrows, attack three lions, two of whom flee. Yet, the largest of the three lions turns against the attackers and throws the foremost of them to the ground. Thus, the danger of the hunt and the vulnerability of the hunters are dramatically portrayed. The message is obvious: only within a community people are able to persist amidst the world's dangers.



Fig. 4 Lion hunt. Basalt stele from Warka, Iraq. Late 4th mill. BC. Baghdad, Iraq Museum Inv. 23477. – (alamy.de, ID: WH98P1).



Fig. 5 The Assyrian king hunting lions. Relief from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II. Gypsum, 865-860 BC. London, British Museum Inv. 124534. – (akg-images, AKG1095720).



Fig. 6 Lion hunt, bronze dagger with inlaid work from shaft grave 5 in Mycenae, 17th c. BC, Athen, National Archaeological Museum Inv. 394. – (Photo Zdeněk Kratochvíl, CC BY-SA 3.0).



Fig. 7 Lion hunt. Section of the «Alexander sarcophagus» from the royal necropolis near Sidon, Lebanon. Marble. Late 4th c. BC. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum Inv. 370. – (Photo N. Zenzen).



Fig. 8 Heracles fighting against the Nemean lion. Vase painting on an Attic amphora from Vulci, Italy. about 530 BC. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen Inv. 1395. – (© Landeshauptstadt Hannover, Museum August Kestner, photo Ch. Tepper).

In the relief of the so-called Alexander sarcophagus from Phoenician Sidon, Greeks and Orientals, recognized by their respective clothing styles, together prey on a large lion (fig. 7). They fight on horseback and on foot, wielding an array of weapons against the cat of prey, which has already struck the chest of one of the horses. Within its particular historical context the successful effort of the lion hunt demonstrates the strength of the elites in Alexander's empire, created by the unification of East and West. In fact the Macedon king presented himself as a fearless lion hunter. Thus, he followed the tradition of the oriental rulers on the one hand, and is personifying the new Heracles from a Greek perspective on the other.

LION'S SUBJUGATION

In the Greek world, before Alexander the Great, only mythical heroes – specifically Heracles – had the right to defeat a lion on their own. The fight of Heracles against the lion of Nemea is one of the most popular subjects of Athenian vase painters, as in the example on an amphora of the 6th century BC found in Etruscan Vulci (fig. 8).

However, the theme is much older, exemplified by a cylinder seal from Mesopotamia, which was made about 1800 years earlier (fig. 9). The characteristic pose of the erect lion, pressing its rear paw against the

Fig. 9 Heroes fighting against lions. Akkadian cylinder seal. Serpentine. 24th-23rd c. BC. London, British Museum Inv. 104489. – (akg-images, AKG429560).



Fig. 10 »Mistress of animals«. Lentoid seal, carnelian, and impression. From a chamber tomb near Mycenae. 16th c. BC, Athens, National Archaeological Museum Inv. 6442 ε. – (Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel am Institut für Klassische Archäologie der Universität Heidelberg I 144).



leg of his human opponent, is hardly based on observation in real life, but rather an artistic invention, suggesting a continuous iconographic tradition over the centuries.

In contrast to the hunting scenes, these representations only refer to a fictitious reality. Though, the subjugation of a lion by a human in the form of hand-to-hand combat is still the version closest to common experience.

Even more imaginary, though impressive, is the scene of the so-called »Master of Animals«, who holds a full-grown lion in each hand. The figures depicted doing this are extremely strong and powerful. Therefore, they should be considered as superhuman beings.

Even more popular than the male master, was the theme of the »Mistress of Animals«. The female figures in this position usually do not have to use any physical force to keep the lions in check. Depicted on a carnelian seal from a grave near Mycenae, the central female figure with her oversized crown is flanked by cats of prey standing on their hind legs as if they were trained (fig. 10). It is obviously a goddess, under whose power even the wild animals are subordinate.

However, Greek and Ancient Near Eastern goddesses can definitely be ruthless and violent, when acting against enemies. The lions subordinated to their divine power may demonstrate this quality. This becomes particularly clear in the widespread theme of the goddess riding a lion. The Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar usually stands upright on a lion's back, as seen in an Assyrian relief stele from Til Barsip in present-day Iraq (fig. 11). The armament exemplifies the fighting nature of the goddess, and, as she keeps the lion on a lead, the subordination of the animal is emphasized. Greek goddesses are more likely to go to battle sitting on a lion. An example of this can be seen from the mother goddess Cybele (or Rhea) at the Pergamon Altar in the battle against the giants (fig. 12). The lion aids the deity not only as a means of transport, but also as a combatant. It fights together with the gods against the giants that threaten to overthrow the existing world order. Thus the lion's strength is used in the service of the gods and human civilization.



Fig. 11 Ishtar on the lion. Stele from Tii Barsip, Iraq. Red breccia. 7th c. BC. Paris, Musée de Louvre Inv. AO 11503. – (akg-images, AKG329897).



Fig. 12 The goddess Kybele or Rhea riding on a lion in the battle against the giants. From the great frieze (south side) of the Pergamon Altar. Marble. 1st half of the 2nd c. BC. Berlin State Museums. – (akg-images, AKG1914652).

Fig. 13 Grave lion from the lion tomb at Miletus, Turkey. Marble. Mid-6th c. BC. Berlin State Museums Inv. SK 1790. – (BPK Bildagentur, 000188887).



GUARDIAN LIONS

A similar idea of lions as serving humans can be observed in the depiction of lions as guardian figures. Such sculptures often flank entrances to shrines, palaces, or cities in pairs, a practice that can be traced back to the end of the 4th millennium BC in Mesopotamia. In most cases these lions open their mouths aggressively and look awe-inspiringly at those entering the gate.

An example from Bronze Age Anatolia are the colossal lions at one of the gates to the Hittite capital Hattusa. The famous Lion Gate of Mycenae, the main entrance into the citadel is from the same period. There, the two cats of prey are perched in the tympanum field above the entrance. By supporting their forelegs on a podium carrying a column, they stand symmetrically upright in a majestic pose. The heads of the lions were fitted separately and therefore did not survive, however it is undoubted that they looked frontally at the person entering and thus demonstrated their vigilance.

Regardless of what the figures at the gate look like, their function remains clear: The lions are in the service of the human sphere and protect the central institutions of a society. Although real lions hardly behave in this way, the image is thoroughly convincing. In iconographic terms, the function as guardian is often underscored by staring eyes that directly fix the entering person, and by their mouths that are threateningly wide open.

Guardian figures at entrances are not very common in classical antiquity, whereas lion statues are often found at graves. There they can have a wide variety of poses. One example is a marble lion from an archaic grave in Miletus (**fig. 13**). Adequate to the solemn atmosphere of a tomb, he lies calmly, yet vigilantly.

The figures of guardian lions, however, demand much more than awe from the viewer. They also make a statement about the person they are guarding. Only people strong enough to subjugate the predator are worthy of being guarded by a lion. Therefore, the guardian lion is used to signify an outstanding personality in those who they are watching over, regardless of whether that person is deceased, living, a ruler, or a deity.

LIONS AS SYMBOLS OF POWER

The connection between power and lions run through all of the demonstrated themes. The relentless predator serves as a metaphor for the fighting qualities of the powerful. On the other side rulers demonstrate that they are capable of protecting their subjects from danger through images of hunting and fighting against lions. In the same way lions emphasize the greatness of men's power by being depicted as guardians

of human institutions. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the image of the lion as a symbol of power and dominion takes on a life of its own. In royal contexts, for example, there are consistently images of lions. Their meaning becomes clear only by the presence of the real person of the ruler. They underline his majesty and can even represent his power in his absence.

The fact that the lion can be both the opponent and the parable of the ruler only seems like a paradox, because actually one is the consequence of the other. The example of Heracles illustrates this connection: After he has defeated the lion, Heracles skins the cat and wears its fur from then on as a trophy. Through this act, Heracles slips into the role of the predator and ingests its strength. Thus, the inherent ambivalence, which hero and lion have in common, becomes clear: the admired vigor inevitably goes hand in hand with unscrupulous violence. This also applies to rulers or deities in general, because they solve the threat posed to culture (embodied in the form of a lion) by slaying it, but in the face of other adversaries they themselves become raging predators. This ambiguity, which is inherent in the image of the lion, has certainly played a large part in its continuing popularity on the basis of ancient tradition. This is not limited to European pictorial art, but also spreads from the Near East throughout the entire Asian continent and beyond. Numerous examples of the characteristic themes mentioned here can be found, even as far as Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Japan.

Particularly in cultural contexts in which there are no real lions, the significance of the lion as a symbol of domination tends to be superimposed onto other aspects. Positive connotations, such as courage, pride, and majesty prevail against the more negative ones, such as cruelty, unpredictability, and destructiveness. Nevertheless, it seems crucial that there is an awareness about the inherent danger in the lion as a predator, so that the positive connotations can have their effect. It is this multi-layered, yet complex system of meaning, combined with the impressive and artistically graceful figure that has made the lion into such a popular and enduring subject of human pictorial art.

SUMMARY / ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

The Lion in Ancient Art – The Story of a Striking Success

The lion is the most frequently depicted animal in global art. The phenomenon can be traced back to about 5,000 years ago to the art of the Ancient Near East. Here, a system of meanings around the image of the lion was developed. This became the base for lion depictions all over the world. There is a well-defined range of sceneries, in which the lion is depicted, and they all follow a coherent range of meanings. The most common themes are treated here: the lion attack, the lion hunt, the lion's subjugation, the guardian lion, and the lion as symbol of power. On the one hand, the lion represents the wild nature and its threatening aspects, and is thus an opponent to human culture. On the other hand, the lion acts as an analogy for human strength and power, becoming a defender of culture. This change between two seemingly contradictory meanings makes the lion such an attractive subject of pictorial art.

Der Löwe in der antiken Kunst – die Geschichte eines bemerkenswerten Erfolgs

Der Löwe ist in der globalen Kunstgeschichte das am häufigsten dargestellte Tier. Das Phänomen lässt sich bis in die Kunst des Alten Orients vor etwa 5000 Jahren zurückverfolgen. Hier wurde ein System von Bedeutungen rund um das Bild des Löwen entwickelt. Dieses bildet die Grundlage für Löwendarstellungen in aller Welt. Sie folgen einem klar umrissenen Repertoire an Bildtypen und umfassen ein schlüssiges Spektrum an Bedeutungen. Die wichtigsten Motive sind: der Löwenüberfall, die Löwenjagd, die Unterwerfung des Löwen, der Wächterlöwe und der Löwe als Machtsymbol. Einerseits steht der Löwe für die wilde Natur und deren bedrohliche Wirkung, wodurch er zum Gegenbild der menschlichen Kultur wird. Andererseits tritt er als Gleichnis für menschliche Stärke und Macht und somit als Verteidiger der Kultur in Erscheinung. Dieses Wechseln zwischen zwei scheinbar widersprüchlichen Bedeutungen macht den Reiz des Löwen als Motiv der Kunst aus.