

Griffon – what’s in a name?

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/vulnew.v71i1.6>

Some years ago (Mundy 2002) I listed the physical characteristics of a group of five vultures which I called “true griffons”, and which Amadon & Bull (1988) had termed a superspecies of five, all named “griffons” by them. Our terminology has been criticised (e.g. Clark 2002), and in the most recent compendium (del Hoyo & Collar 2014) four of the five are named as vultures. It is not clear in the last reference why the Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis* uniquely remains as a griffon.

Savigny (1810) had coined the genus name of *Gyps* for *Gyps vulgaris* [= *G. fulvus*], which he called Le Griffon, noting that it had 14 retrices, among other characters. This common name, however, did not catch on as a substantive noun, but rather as an adjective, i.e. Griffon Vulture, for one species, even through to the present day (del Hoyo & Collar 2014: 526). The late Leslie

Brown repeatedly referred to the *Gyps* group as griffons, e.g. as “true Griffons” (Brown 1970: 60). Eventually, Amadon & Bull (1988: 310) called them all griffons, and were the first to do so. I and my friends supported that designation (Mundy *et al.* 1992: 410), thinking of this group also as ‘super’-vultures.

Be all that as it may, the word griffon has a history, of course. In his *Ornithologie*, Mathurin-Jacques Brisson (1760: 462) uses “Grifon” as a synonym only for his seventh of nine European vultures, Le Vautour fauve [present-day *Gyps fulvus* or Eurasian Griffon in my terminology]. Here, he is quoting from an article in the French Royal Academy of Sciences by Mr Perrault (1734), though not naming him as such. I have attached as an Appendix to this note my translation of Perrault’s article; curiously he uses Grifon in the text but Griffon underneath the two figures or

drawings. Here too, incidentally, in the second figure is an accurate drawing of the tongue with its 'barbs' along the edges. In his plate 30 Perrault gives a large but rather poor drawing of the "Griffon" which Brisson has labelled as "passable" (fair) which it barely is.

So the word grifon/griffon was published in 1734, and is perhaps the source for the opinion by Georges-Louis Leclerc (comte de Buffon) (1770: 158) that the name was given [invented?] by the Academy of Sciences. However, Perrault (1734: 209) intimated that it is an ancient Hebrew name. (The modern Israeli name for the Eurasian Griffon is *neshet*, and there is not today a special Hebrew word for griffon, Y. Leshem, pers. comm.).

In the Holy Bible, the authorised King James' version, first printed in 1611 (my edition is dated 1957), the third book of Moses, or Leviticus, gives some dietary instructions to the children of Israel. Various animals are listed as clean ("ye shall eat") or "unclean", and indeed the book goes further in calling certain "fowls" an "abomination". Among these, in Leviticus ch.11, are the "ossifrage" [Bearded Vulture] (v.13), the "vulture" (v.14), and the "gier eagle" (v.18). The Revised Standard Version (1952) interprets the first and third as "vulture" (v.13) and

"carrion vulture" (v.18). So, again, there seems not to be a recognition and naming of griffon in these scriptures and their translations.

In English, griffon (with synonyms of griffin and gryphon) has several meanings, including a dog. Macdonald (1972) states that the word is derived from the French "griffon", itself from the Latin *gryphus* and Greek *gryps*. In French, however, it has no meaning outside a dog and the griffon vulture (Back 2006). Clearly the word has been applied to a particular species and not to a type or group.

On a recent visit to France I came across a little book titled "the vulture" (Vadrot 2002). It states on p.22 that the ancient name of "griffon", which has nothing to do with "griffes" (= claws), is perhaps derived from the Greek *griffos* or "hooked" (= bent). Again, on p.23, the author states that the first mention of "griffon", as referred to by Buffon, is found in the *Chanson de Roland*. This is a famous epic poem from around 1090, describing the battle of Roncevaux in 778 during Charlemagne's time, when Roland's army was annihilated. There are 4000 lines in 291 stanzas, and there in line 2544: "Grifuns i ad, plus de trente millers"; in translation this becomes "Griffins were there,

thirty thousand, no less” (La Chanson de Roland n.d.).

In summary, then, and since a thousand years ago, the word “griffon” (in different spellings) has been used in French to denote the “vautour fauve” only, and not the group as a whole. It is a useful word, and should be re-instated for the group of five (six?) species.

Appendix. My translation of Mr Perrault’s article.

ANATOMICAL DESCRIPTION OF TWO GRIFONS

The description that previous Authors made of the Grifon does not fit any known animal: besides the monstrous drawing that they give it, making it have the head & wings of an Eagle, & put it onto a Lion’s body, they attribute to it still a strength altogether incredible. That determines that one has sometimes given the name of Grifon to unknown Birds when they had a size & strength or some other particularity which had similarity with what one said of the Grifon. There are some connections since one hundred years of an African bird which has the name of Grifon because of its strength & size which is prodigious: because it’s said that one of its feathers has been found

having a length of twenty four feet, & that it lifts Oxen and Horses and carries them to its nest for its young. Preserved in the treasures of the St. Chapelle in Paris is the foot of a bird which is five feet from the tip of the claw on the large digit in front to the claw of the small digit behind. There is the appearance that the particular figure of the Grifon which portrays a four footed bird has given rise also to the interpretation that the septuagint (“septante”) [Greek translation of the Old Testament in the 3rd century B.C.] has made of the Hebrew name of a bird, which was not permitted to be eaten according to the law of Moses, & they have named it Grifon, because at the place where it is mentioned is spoken the bats, locusts, & generally four footed animals which fly.

It’s possible that the bird that we are describing which is the large Aristotle’s Vulture, is commonly called Grifon, because it is a very strong bird, & that Cardan has noted as very rare. Aristotle makes two species of Vultures, of which the one he calls small has almost all its plumage white, the other which is large has its plumage mixed with a lot of grey. Gesner who described a Vulture of which he had seen only the skin, makes it much larger than the Eagle, having the plumage reddish on almost all the body, &

being only marked a little with white at the top of the wings whose long feathers are black the same as those of the tail. He described its beak accurately enough in comparing it to that of the Eagle which has it longer and more hooked than his Vulture. [There then follows a long and detailed description, in which the name Griffon is no longer used].

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