

The Jayhawk:  
Mascot, Radical Political Symbol for  
Kansas, and a Prehistoric Vulture

Frank Baron

In 1955, the Student George Knotts, a talented art major, responded to a request by Chancellor Franklin D. Murphy to propose a new Jayhawk. What he created became the most successful among all previous mascot images.



Rebecca Ozier Schulte, *The Jayhawk*

(The University Press of Kansas, 2023), p. 140.

It is still popular and destined to be prized beyond its seventy years of sport events. Among the previous Jayhawks there is one, perhaps the very first one, dating back to 1908, celebrating the victory of the Kansas football team over Missouri.



Rebecca Ozier Schulte, *The Jayhawk*

(The University Press of Kansas, 2023), p. 15.

This particular, early Jayhawk demonstrates that the mascots can be quite violent and even mean-spirited, intent on seriously hurting the competing team of players, in contrast to the appearance of today's friendly Jayhawk. The current jayhawk commands respect, admiration and even affection.

Kansas history provides evidence of earlier twists and turns of the Jayhawk image. In late 1857 and early 1858, during the intensive controversy and fighting that preceded the Civil War. Irishman Pat Devlin, provided an occasion for speculation about the Jayhawk.<sup>1</sup> Returning from Missouri with unfamiliar plunder, Devlin was forced to provide an explanation. Being asked what he had been up to, Devlin, without any sign of remorse, contended:

“O’ive been over till Eph. Kepley’s a-jayhawking.”

“Jayhawking? What in thunder do you mean? What kind of hawking is that?” said Doc. [Jennison].

“Well, sor, in ould Oireland we have a birud we call the Jayhawk, that whin it catches

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Baron, “James H. Lane and the Origins of the Kansas Jayhawk,” *Kansas History* 34 (Summer 2011): 114-127. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttEFrjCzXfw> and <https://theclio.com/entry/141168>.

another bird, it takes delight in bullying the loife out ov it, like a cat does a mouse, and, be jasus, Oi bethot me Oi was in about thot same business meself. You call it ‘foraging off the enemy,’ but, begobs, O’ill call it jayhawking.”

“All right,” laughed Jennison. “We’ll call it ‘Jayhawking’ from this on.”

Hence Pat Devlin may be credited for inventing the Jayhawk concept, stealing from the enemy. After all, who could contradict him? He had come from Ireland and when he claimed that such a bird existed there, no one was able to provide a better explanation. But the idea of the aggressive, fictional bird made an impression on the leader of the free-state fighters, to whom the men in Devlin’s circle belonged, the future Senator James H. Lane. The powerful orator and political leader wasted no time in adapting the Jayhawk idea to excite his men for a political cause. If Devlin deserves credit for inventing the image of jayhawking on a local level, Lane must be seen as transforming the humorous anecdote about a small-time criminal activity into a dynamic symbol of national import, part of a wide-ranging political cause for a slave-free Kansas. Lane proved to be a most effective propagator by transforming that image to represent slave-free Kansas. Lane simply rebranded the idea of stealing from the Missouri slave-owners to driving all of them out of Kansas. Lane later took his Jayhawkers to Washington to help to defend the threatened White House from the rebelling South. But the dark side of Lane’s legacy is that his soldiers burned down the Missouri city of Osceola, an event which inspired the much remembered revenge, Quantrill Raid on Lawrence in 1863.

For this transformation an eyewitness account exists: In his autobiography of August Bondi, a veteran of the 1848 revolution and a fighter also for John Brown, explained how this new-born Jayhawk could adapt quickly and radically. Bondi recounted how Lane had enrolled about 150 men as the first members of the Kansas Jayhawker, declaring:

As the Irish Jayhawk with a shrill cry announces his presence to his victims, so must you notify the pro-slavery hell-hounds to clear out or vengeance will overtake them. Jayhawks, remember, “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord, but we are his agents.

Today a plaque in Lawrence’s Watkins Museum displays Lane on his horse at his stable (on campus still preserved as the German Department’s Max Kade Annex), reminding us of the strange background and evolution. This Civil War Jayhawk had a permanent impact, but at that moment in time it lacked a visual dimension. What did that Jayhawk look like? Only after the sport teams began adopting the Jayhawk as a mascot, was it necessary to ask what he actually looked like. Finally, the Jayhawk acquired a recognizable face, shape, and personality.

Being aware of this evolution, is it not strange to learn today that this current Jayhawk may not be unique at all? And yet it is a fact that the original Jayhawk that the art student George Knotts presented to Chancellor Murphy actually had a prehistoric predecessor.

Recently discovered, at first in the 1990s, as a modest part of a sensational archeological discovery in Eastern Turkey, a location referred to as Karahan Tepe, more than 11,000 years ago. The findings represent the oldest monumental architecture anywhere on earth. They include

human and animal statues, ubiquitous snake carvings, huge T-shaped pillars, and interconnecting underground enclosures with stone columns carved directly from the bedrock. There are intricate carvings, chambers, and structures, revealing evidence or astronomical alignments. Traces of a serpent motif suggest antecedents of the biblical serpent of Eden. No historians up to now have suspected that such an advanced civilization could have existed many thousands of years before the Egyptians developed their famous monuments.

And yet among the distinctive objects recently discovered among the remnants was a bird-figure remarkably similar in appearance to George Knott's Jayhawk. One of the discoverers, Andrew Collins, has explained persuasively what function this bird might have had in that distant civilization.



Andrew Collins, *Karhahan Tepe* (Bear & Company, 2024), p. 10.

To be sure, this Jayhawk-like figure must have been seen in a totally different way by its creators and worshipers in that distant past. The figure that now looks like the University of Kansas Jayhawk, was in reality thought to be a vulture. But one must keep in mind, as Professor Klaus Schmidt, the German Archeologist, the discoverer of these sites, explains that these vultures were the enablers of so-called sky burials. These vultures carried the dead off into another world. There is evidence that for these early human builders and religious leaders figures such as vultures in their artistic form played a sacred role. They were also evidently linked also to the astronomical knowledge of that time. Hence the vulture, which may look much like today's Jayhawk, could be recognized in the constellations, towards which the ancient structures were directed. There is an evident correspondence, as the research findings of Andrew Collins ascertained, between the vultures displayed on artistic columns and what could then be seen in the constellations of Cygnus and Scorpius.

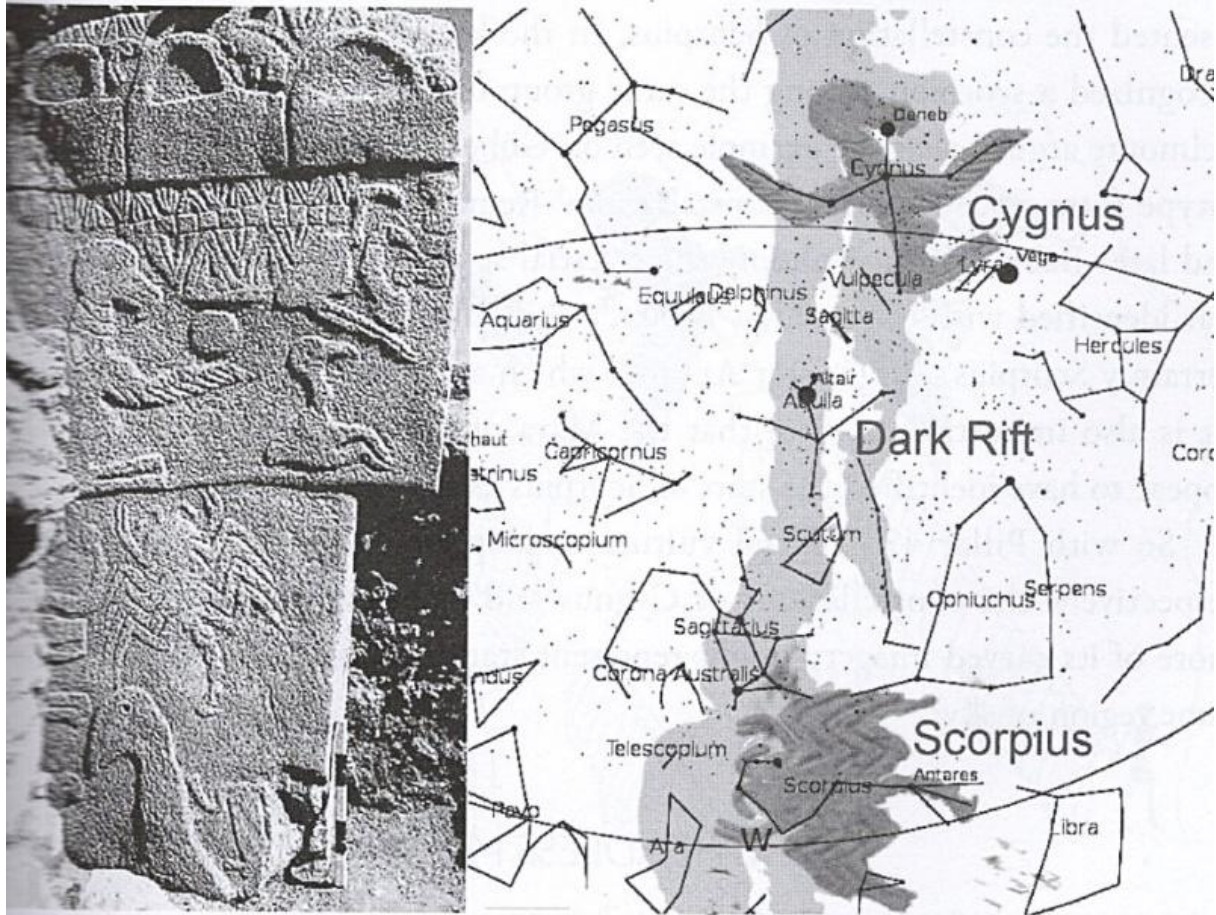


Fig. 17.1. Pillar 43 in Göbekli Tepe's Enclosure D (left) with the constellations of Cygnus and Scorpion as they appeared in the night sky circa 9500 BCE.

Image by Rodney Hale.

Andrew Collins, *Karhahan Tepe* (Bear & Company, 2024), p. 137.

Because that stone vulture subsequently remained buried for many thousands of years, there is evidently no way to make a direct connection to the present Jayhawks. The vulture of those early times did not evolve into today's Jayhawk. The ancient artist's prehistoric vulture evidently achieved relevance and reverence in his community, an achievement that was undoubtedly the result of lengthy struggles, learning, and a long process of adaptation. That is not unlike the uneven history, from the Civil War to the present, which the University of Kansas mascot also experienced.