

THE BIRDS IN THE *ILIAD*

Identities, interactions and functions

av

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Abstract

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As the topic of this study embraces and entwines what is routinely divided into two separate categories, “nature” and “culture”, the birds in the *Iliad* challenge modern scientific division and in some ways, our thinking. They are simultaneously birds, signs and symbols.

The investigation aims at determining the various species of the birds in the *Iliad* as far as this is possible with the help of ornithological methods and tries through semiotics and hermeneutics to ascertain the symbolic functions and presence of the birds as transmitters of messages, information, and emotions.

The material consists of thirty-five bird scenes where different kinds of birds and bird names occur, such as *αἰετός*, eagle, *γύψ*, vulture, and *πέλεια*, dove. As a method for carrying out the analysis of each bird and bird scene four aspects are focused upon (1) ornithology, (2) form, (3) interactions, and (4) functions. Concerning the last aspect the emphasis is on the birds’ communicative, informative and conceptual functions and the impact they have on the humans in the *Iliad*

The analyses of the scenes demonstrate that particular species of birds occur frequently in the *Iliad* and that they have been carefully chosen to fit perfectly into the scenes and the war events that take place there. The results show that the birds are fundamental parts of the structure of the *Iliad* as well as in the human characters lives, consciousness and conditions. They operate in a shared sphere of interactions between animals, humans and gods. Within this sphere birds have specific roles and are used by the humans and gods in different ways. The gods use birds as disguises and as messengers in order to communicate and interact with the humans, and the humans use them as signs and symbols that they interpret to acquire knowledge about the gods’ presences, identities, will and intentions for the future. Birds thus have incredibly important roles as intermediaries between the human and divine spheres. Bird signs usually occur in situations of danger such as war or before risky journeys. To receive a positive bird sign from the gods at such an important moment was thus a powerful experience that raised the warriors’ fighting spirits and evoked emotions of relief. Having these functions the birds satisfy basic human needs of self-esteem and security.

Keywords: ancient ornithology, birds, bird symbolism, divination, double motivation, divine intervention, Homer’s *Iliad*, identity, messenger, metaphorical utterances, oral tradition, parallelism, semiotics, species interactions, transformation, transmitter, Trojan War