BOOK REVIEW

Birds in the Ancient World: Winged Words

Reviewed by Shepard Krech III

Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, Brown University; and Research Associate, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution
krech@brown.edu

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Many are familiar with prominent literary works of classical Greece and Rome, such as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey (8th century BCE), Herodotus’s Histories (5th century BCE), Virgil’s Aeneid (1st century BCE), and Pliny the Elder’s Naturalis Historia (1st century CE), to mention just a few that range widely in genres from poetry and drama to encyclopedic treatments of the natural world. If these readers are similar to Jeremy Mynott, they cannot but share his curiosity and wonder about the varied and numerous significant references to birds in these works.

One such reference will make the point. In Homer’s Odyssey, Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, having participated in the siege of Troy, set out to return to his island kingdom. The voyage, marked by constant danger and temptation, was oft-distracted and delayed, and Odysseus was unaware until near its end that if he returned, he would face a house in chaos from a horde of suitors incessantly wooing his wife, Penelope, because they believed Odysseus dead. Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, was living this turmoil and sought to convince the citizens of Ithaca to outfit a ship and send him in search of Odysseus. The discussion was heated until, at a critical moment, 2 eagles appeared and hovered overhead. A diviner regarded as without equal in augury explained that the eagles had been sent by Zeus, that their specific behavior and appearance meant that Odysseus was near, and that Ithaca should support Telemachus.

Examples such as this likely occur countless times in the texts of ancient Greece and Rome. Birds are seemingly ubiquitous. The contexts in which they appear and roles they assume beg for explanation—a task for which Jeremy Mynott serves as our guide over a 1,000-yr period (700 BCE to 300 CE) in ancient Greece and Rome—the so-called classical era of antiquity. The task is daunting, not least because neither that world nor the contexts remained unchanging; nor can it be assumed that people speaking different languages shared cultural knowledge or social conventions equally. Nonetheless, Mynott is quite unsurpassed in his suitability. An emeritus fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, Mynott is an eminent scholar of this classical world, translator of the work of the 5th century BCE Athenian historian Thucydides, and author of many works on birds, including the acclaimed Birdscapes: Birds in Our Imagination and Experience (Mynott 2009).

Mynott takes us through classical antiquity in 20 chapters organized in 6 parts. For evidence he draws largely on the texts of 120 authors and supplements his analysis with biographies, translations, indexes, endnotes, a timeline, ancient bird lists, and maps and other illustrations. In Part 1 he discusses birds in the natural world—in particular their connection with the coming and going of seasons; their roles as omens of changing weather; their links with time, such as the domestic cockerel at dawn or owls at calling or hooting at night; and, in creative reflections, their aural density in soundscapes of the time obliterated today by a modern world whose din never seems to abate. In Part 2 Mynott turns to birds as resources; to the hunting and trapping and liming of birds, their consumption, their