

Spellcraft Issue # 9

The Bird Goddess- tracing Her story through history Part 2

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In the last issue, we looked at the earlier evidence of the Bird Goddess. Now we continue our discovery of Her, through the historical period and wonderful examples in the literature, as well as the artistic record.

From early in the first millennium BCE through to the Classical period, the evidence for bird epiphanies and the sacred context of birds is found in the literature and artistic representations. Homer's references to bird epiphanies of goddesses are an example of this, consider *Iliad* 5.778 (Hera and Athena), *Iliad* 18.616 (Thetis), *Iliad* 19.350 (Athena), as well as *Hymn to Demeter* 43 (Demeter) and in *Hymn to Apollo* 114, Iris and Eileithyia are referred to as 'shy wood doves'. It is distinctly possible that the Iron Age references of Homer were inspired by the earlier Bronze Age bird epiphanies in the art.

The relevant artistic representations of the Iron Age appear, however, to change their nature, as does the societal context of the bird symbol. A ninth century depiction of a goddess of regeneration appears on a funerary urn from Knossos and shows birds on her upraised arms and at the top of the sprouting vegetation to each side.¹ In the eighth century BC, figures such as the well known Boeotian goddesses remain clearly stylized.² They show elongated necks and both are embellished with stylized decorations associated with regeneration; spirals, water birds, swastikas and triangles are notable.³ One vase even depicts a goddess with a fish in her womb, swastikas and birds on her upraised hands.⁴ From Boeotia, a statue of Aphrodite on a goose from the Classical period is far more typical of the style of this later date.⁵ Stylized art and embellishment of figurines, that is the deliberate use of symbol, seems to diminish as the Classical period bears down on the remnant religious artistic expression of prehistoric Mediterranean culture.

It is obvious that birds were an important feature in the early ‘religions’ of Europe and East. The next step on this journey of discovery is to ascertain the significance of the bird and the Goddess in Her bird form. The bird has a suite of functions or characteristics both intrinsic to its nature and assigned to it in religious belief. These aspects include its ability to bridge earth, sky and water and its reproductive cycle (including the egg) also echoes many ancient creation myths. In addition, different birds exhibit vastly different behaviours and might be reminiscent of scavenging death, the fierce protector or the gentle and fecund. Also, the flight of the bird may fulfil a culture’s visions of the immortal soul taking flight; certainly the funerary contexts in which birds and epiphanies occur would attest to this

In terms of evidence that relates to specific types of birds, the dove, owl, waterbirds and vulture are of particular interest. The dove, often sacred to goddesses of ‘love’ and fertility like Aphrodite and Demeter, paradoxically is also described as a bird of mourning, and is probably the bird used to represent a person’s soul.⁶ Here then is a perfect accompaniment to the Great Goddess archetype, as the species was quite obviously used to bridge concepts relating to both death and life. The owl, too, has been noted for its association with night, death and Athena. It was abundant in Greece and Athens in particular. The owl was believed to be embodiment of Athena as ‘Goddess of Night’.¹ Athena Aithyia was represented as a woman-headed bird and the possibility has been argued that this representation, in addition to the Siren which so often accompanied her, was a development from a Bronze Age Athena that was purely a bird epiphany, to a humanized deity. Homer (*Iliad*. 1.99-206) called Her *glaukōpis* (‘with the face of an owl’). By way of the owl’s nature, its eerie hunting techniques and preference for darkness, it is no surprise that it is closely associated with death goddesses; the Mesopotamian Lilith was winged, bird-footed and accompanied by owls.⁷

¹ *Glaukōpis* was also used in direct reference to the moon ‘γλαυκοπις τε στρεφεται μήνη’ (ap. Schol. Ap.Rod. i.1280 in Thompson 1936: 80). This not only bolsters the associations with night, but with the cyclic nature of the moon, the associations with water, and the presence of the lunar crescent/wings of the bird like Psi figurine.

Waterbirds, such as swans and cranes held a special significance, as they were at home in the watery element, which holds its own association with regeneration. Aphrodite was associated with the swan, and the crane was known in Greece as a bird of passage, and was revered for its 'vigilant' nature.⁸ It is also likely that the long, sinuous necks of these birds was reminiscent of the serpent, a creature (and artistic motif) that is known for its association with regeneration, and which is very frequently depicted with birds in religious art.

The bird of prey, the vulture being the most obvious example, has obvious connections with death, and has been cited in sacred contexts to at least the Neolithic. Of particular interest is the strongly female element concerned with vultures. In ancient Greece, there was a mythical generation of Vultures, who were all female, and in Egypt also the vulture had strong association with the female.⁹ It has also been noted that when a goddess appears with a bird of prey, or is imaged as one herself, the intention is not only to note the dangerous, death aspect, but also the fiercely protective nature of these types of bird.¹⁰ An ivory plaque from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta is an example of this type of bird epiphany.¹¹

In the Bronze Age and Iron Age, the plenitude of evidence linking birds and bird epiphanies of goddesses in funerary contexts is remarkable. In Egypt, the soul was depicted as a human headed bird above the body of the deceased. Thus the bird form enabled the eternal nature of the human to continue on.¹² Mesopotamia also counts the bird as an underworld figure. An ancient description of Ishtar's descent, finds the house of death she journeys to as a place where 'they see no light but dwell in darkness, they are clothed like birds in wings for garments...'.¹³ A Greek funerary urn has depicted a scene where the deceased is surrounded by bird-faced figures and sun motifs.¹⁴ The very large figures at the feet and head of the deceased are most interesting. Their size lends them some status, but it is the likeness to Egyptian scenes of the dead, with winged Isis and her sister Nephthys accompanying the bier at either end, that is astounding. The two main figures also have net-like decoration illustrated, which may also enhance the theme of regeneration.

Another seventh century funerary urn from Crete shows a goddess attended by water birds and holding arms of vegetation.¹⁵ This compelling funerary evidence most aptly describes the role of the bird, the divine feminine and particular aspects of these goddesses in bird form. These interrelated symbols and themes suggest a strong belief in an afterlife, and the importance of evoking the sacred powers of regeneration through representations of a goddess who scavenges and protects, and who blights even as she ensures new life.

This wonderful discussion has made clear the importance of bird symbolism in the iconography of cultures from the Neolithic to the Classical period, and possibly beyond. Evidence is abundant in Egypt, Europe, Greece, Crete and the East. It is clear that certain birds were considered sacred, or occupied sacred functions, and also that the Goddesses of these cultures were believed to have embodied the form of a particular bird. Whilst the species of bird that is shown is often uncertain, this is perhaps less important than the attempt to indicate the character of the bird generally, and its subsequent regenerative function. So, when next you sit in honour of the Sacred Feminine, of yourself, or of Nature, give thought to the ways in which the Bird Goddess has entered your life...the ways in which She has challenged you, frightened you, or lifted you up from despair, so that you may see the beauty of Her creation with clear eyes, and step upon Her sacred ground with a feather-light touch.

We will explore further the animal epiphanies of the Goddess in future issues. In the meantime, allow your heart and spirit to be lifted on Her wings, into the fair heavens!

The Goddess Association in Australia (G.A.I.A.) is a not for profit, member- driven organization which is committed to bringing women together, united in the timeless wisdom and lore of Goddess. For more information go to www.goddessassociation.com.au

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¹ Marinatos, N. *The Goddess and the Warrior. The Naked Goddess and Mistress of Animals in Early Greek Religion* (2000: 123).

² Goodison, L. *Death, Women and the Sun. Symbolism of Regeneration in Early Aegean Religion* (1989: Fig. 284, 292).

³ Baring, A. & Cashford, J. *The Myth of the Goddess- Evolution of an Image* (1991: 67).

⁴ Goodison (1989: 258).

⁵ Whitmont E. *The Return of the Goddess* (1985: 16).

⁶ Pollard J. *Birds in Greek Life & Myth* (1977: 146).

⁷ Rowland B. *Birds with Human Souls* (1978: 117).

⁸ Thompson D.W. *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (1936: 68, 72).

⁹ See Ael. *NA* 2.46; Arist. *Mirab.* 835 a3. See also Thompson 1936: 83.

¹⁰ Marinatos (2000: 37).

¹¹ Marinatos (2000: 37).

¹² David A.R. *The Ancient Egyptians. Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1982: 79).

¹³ See *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld* Line 3 (Dalley 1989: 155). See also Bottero (2001: 108).

¹⁴ Goodison (1989: 142).

¹⁵ Marinatos (2000: 125).