

***Bird epiphany of gods
in pre-Homeric Greece***
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Introduction

With the intent of analyzing the divine epiphany in Homer, in many instances one may note how the distinction between the narrative and the metaphorical dimension is unclear: for example, when the deity appears to the human being and is likened to a bird, describing its attitudes, the boundary between a real metamorphosis and a similitude to animal behaviour seems to vanish.

This element of uncertainty with regards to the deity's description generated a strong debate in the second half of twentieth century. On one hand, the possibility of an intention to represent the gods' metamorphosis was excluded, on the other hand, the "numinous" dimension of the poems was defended by underscoring the relation between metamorphosis' descriptions and Homeric characters' reactions.

The aim is to compare the role of birds in Homeric divine epiphanies with the presence of the same animals in the Aegean Bronze Age iconography and texts, to understand whether the same relation can be established between birds and deities in pre-Homeric cult contexts. When comparing iconography and texts, however, clarifying the methodological question is of utmost importance.

When M. P. Nilsson published the first edition of his monumental work *The Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival in Greek religion* (1927), he defined the subject as "a picture book without text"¹. In 1967, during the "I Congresso Internazionale di Micenologia", A. Brelich affirmed that, after the decipherment of Linear B, "we have a picture book which still remains without text, and we have texts without illustrations"².

This words summarize the methodological problem regarding the approach to this subject.

¹ Nilsson 1950: 7.

² Brelich 1968: 919 ("abbiamo un libro di figure che continua a rimanere senza testo e abbiamo testi senza illustrazioni").

In fact, before Mycenaean writing was deciphered, archaeological and iconographic documents were the only available sources; after 1952, however, thanks to the work of M. Ventris, Linear B tablets revealed some of the gods' names, therefore confirming that Greek religion had Mycenaean origins.

Great enthusiasm followed this discovery, in the deciphered tablets, of names of offerings recipients, such as *po-se-da-o-ne*, *a-ta-na*, *a-re*, *e-ra*, corresponding to the names of the Greek deities: Poseidon, Athena, Ares and Hera³. Furthermore, even in the case of the expression *di-ka-ta-jo di-we*⁴, a theonym already associated with its historical epithet ("Dictaeon Zeus") was recognized. However, no Greek god is clearly identified in Aegean Bronze Age iconography, although their names are recognizable in Linear B names. This fact renders any allegedly obvious link between images and texts arbitrary.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze textual and iconographic data separately, and only subsequently the possibility of a correspondence regarding a religious aspect may be considered.

Epiphanies in Homer

Firstly we have to consider the passages in which the Homeric gods manifest themselves to human beings and are compared to birds.

I

In *Iliad* V, 778, Hera and Athena reach the Greek army "moving like doves".

II

In *Iliad* VII, 59, Athena and Apollo attend the duel between Hector and Ajax seated on an oak "like vultures".

³ Stella 1958; Palmer 1961; Gérard-Rousseau 1968; Adrados 1972.

⁴ Knossos tablet Fp 1.

III

In *Iliad* XIII, 62, Poseidon appears to the two Ajaxes in the guise of Calchas, and, after speaking, “like a swift falcon he rose up in the air”. The son of Oileus recognizes his divine nature and says: “I easily recognized from behind the footsteps of the feet and legs when he went away: in fact it is possible to recognize the gods”⁵.

IV

In *Iliad* XV, 237, Zeus sends Apollo to help Hector: “he descended from the mountains of Ida like a falcon”. Hector recognizes his divine nature and asks him: “who are you bravest among the gods?”⁶.

V

In *Iliad* XVIII, 616, Thetis moves away from Olympus to deliver to Achilles his new weapons: “like a falcon she rushed from Olympus”.

VI

In *Iliad* XIX, 350, when Athena comes down from heaven to give to Achilles nectar and ambrosia, she is described “like a shearwater with outstretched wings and high-pitched voice”.

VII

In *Odyssey* I, 320, Athena, after appearing to Telemachus in the guise of Mentos, “disappeared flying like a bird”. Telemachus recognized her divine nature: “he thought she was a god”⁷.

VIII

In *Odyssey* III, 372, Athena goes away “like a vulture”, and Nestor recognizes her: “of those who inhabit Olympus, she is none other than the daughter of Zeus, the rapacious Tritogeneia”⁸.

IX

In *Odyssey* V, 51, Hermes reaches Calypso's island “like a seagull”.

⁵ *Iliad* XIII, 71-72.

⁶ *Iliad* XV, 247.

⁷ *Odyssey* I, 323.

⁸ *Odyssey* III, 377-378.

X

In *Odyssey* V, 337, Ino, who leaves to Odysseus the veil with which he is able to swim to Scheria, emerges from the water “like a shearwater”, and in this aspect she comes back to the sea (vv. 352-353).

XI

In *Odyssey* XXII, 240, during the fight against the suitors, Athena reaches the roof of the hall “like a swallow”.

Following on from this textual elucidation of gods and their transformations, it is of import to notice that, in 1967, while analyzing Homeric verses in which deities are compared to animals or to natural phenomena, F. Dirlmeier interpreted such descriptions as strictly metaphorical, and excluded the possibility of an intention to represent a true metamorphosis⁹. However, this interpretation was critiqued by W. Fauth, who saw it as an attempt to destroy the “numinous” dimension in epic poems¹⁰, and by H. Bannert, who thought it an excessive rationalization, highlighting textual instances where characters recognize Homeric gods as they undergo a metamorphosis¹¹. H. Erbse insists on the need to consider such naturalistic comparisons, rather than as descriptions of a metamorphosis, as expressions of different perceptive modalities through which the divine affords itself to human beings¹². In this connection, according to B. C. Dietrich, if the dominant motif of Homeric poems is the divine inspiration, the gods do not need to appear to mortals as physical entities: their appearances are “redundant to the process of comprehending divine presence”¹³; therefore, Dietrich transforms divine epiphanies into a poetic convention, which serves to situate a divine presence that just intervenes as merely inspiration in the human sphere.

⁹ Dirlmeier 1967.

¹⁰ Fauth 1975.

¹¹ Bannert 1978.

¹² Erbse 1980.

¹³ Dietrich 1983.

In any case, as will be noted in the course of subsequent studies, the fact that Homeric gods are able to occur to the human mind does not exclude that the same gods may appear and intervene by taking a physical form¹⁴.

It is significant what William Scott highlights in an interesting monograph about the similes in Homer (*The oral nature of the Homeric simile*, 1974): “Gods and goddesses may appear to men or remain invisible. When gods assume a visible disguise, they have seemingly unlimited choice”. “Such appearances occur often as similes, but in many cases the line between simile and narrative is quite thin”. “There is a remembrance of the bird as an epiphany of the god, a religious tradition which is as old as Middle Minoan art objects”. “There is no one bird representing one god, which also accords with the early divine epiphany. It was only necessary to represent the presence of the god with the general shape of a bird. Specific birds were not attached to individual gods until later. The connection of bird to god in the similes is, therefore, very old; it was a part of the oral poet's inheritance from the Mycenaean-Minoan world. When he sang of gods, similes of birds were at hand and easily adaptable to the actions of divine figures”¹⁵.

Putative epiphanies in Aegean Bronze Age iconography

Birds really occupy a prominent place in pre-Hellenic religious iconography, which allowed M. P. Nilsson to consider these animals as symbolizing a divine presence in the Aegean Bronze Age¹⁶.

In Mycenae, in the Circle A tombs III and IV, Schliemann discovered small gold leaves representing a tripartite structure, with a central part higher than the two other sides: each part shows, inside and at the top, the “horns of consecration” symbol; two disproportionately sized birds with outstretched wings, perching on the symbol of worship, seem to predominate. These elements’ combination yielded an appraisal of the structure as a temple, and the birds as symbol of the divine entity revered inside.

¹⁴ Carter 1995.

¹⁵ Scott 1974: 77-78.

¹⁶ Nilsson 1950: 330.

Nilsson again pointed out the incredible similarity between this structure and the temple represented in a fresco of the Knossos palace, thus further confirming a formal extant identity between Minoan and Mycenaean religion¹⁷:

Gold leaf from Mycenae (Circle A).

Fresco from Knossos (restored).

On a *rhyton* of the second palace of Zakros a similar structure is represented, surrounded by natural elements that let to think about a peak sanctuary; in addition to the “horns of consecration” redundancy, again two birds are found at the top perching on this symbol of worship¹⁸:

Rhyton from Zakros. (Rutkowski 1986: 83).

¹⁷ Nilsson 1950: 173-176.

¹⁸ Rutkowski 1986: 81.

In the Psychro cave (Crete) a bronze tablet was found, on which the symbol of the “horns of consecration” is represented three times with a bough in the middle; a bird is perching on one of the boughs, and it appears disproportionate compared to the human figure represented in the same scene¹⁹:

Bronze tablet from Psychro. (Nilsson 1950: 171).

Also, in several places on the island of Crete female idols are found as associated with birds. In the “sanctuary of the double axes” (palace of Knossos), in addition to double axes and “horns of consecration”, various human figures were discovered, including one presenting raised arms and a bird on the head²⁰; in the “sanctuaries” of Gazi and Karphi idols with the same iconographic scheme (raised arms and birds on the head) came to light, and these two sites, belonging to the Subminoan period, represent an important evidence for continuity between pre-Hellenic and Greek religions²¹:

Knossos

Karphi

Gazi

¹⁹ Nilsson 1950: 171.

²⁰ Nilsson 1950: 78-80.

²¹ Nilsson 1950: 100-102.

In some cases, as in the “sanctuary” of Mount Jouktas, in addition to double axes and “horns of consecration”, numerous figures of animals have been identified, including small reproductions of birds in clay²²:

Clay bird from Mount Jouktas.

On the Haghia Triada sarcophagus birds are represented on the two long sides perching on double axes, in places where an offer is made; on the short side where a chariot drawn by griffins is painted, one more time a bird attracts the represented figures’ attention²³:

Haghia Triada sarcophagus.

In a seal from the second palace of Zakros, we see the clearest example of an intention to represent a deity appearing as a bird through a metamorphosis:

Seal from Zakros. (CMS, II, 7-127).

Of course it would be a methodological error to create an automatic association between these iconographic data, belonging to the Aegean Bronze Age, and the Homeric text; but considering the possibility of a real metamorphosis of the Homeric gods into birds, it is important to emphasize the cases in which the heroes recognize their divinities immediately after their transformation (4 cases of 11): this consideration could mean that, in Homer's world too, there was a clear association between birds and divine presence.

²² Rutkowski 1986: 87.

²³ Nilsson 1950: 426; La Rosa 1999.

The evidence of Linear B

Regarding the Aegean Bronze Age, not only iconographic data allow us to conjecture a role of birds in the sphere of worship. In fact, the new Linear B texts from Thebes have forced the opening of a new chapter in the studies about Mycenaean religion: the editors of the new tablets, V. Aravantinos, L. Godart and A. Sacconi, reconstructed in Mycenaean Thebes a religious picture that prefigures elements which will be part of the Eleusinian ritual, mainly insisting on the interpretation of the three forms *ma-ka*, *ko-wa* and *o-po-re-i* as theonyms indicating the names of Demeter, Kore and Zeus “protector of the fruits”²⁴.

The interpretation of the editors received praises²⁵, but also severe criticism by those who preferred a “laic” interpretation²⁶; however, there is a line of interpretation that, even if not accepting the “Eleusinian” model, recognizes in the textual data elements which could refer to a religious context²⁷.

In this context, we have to underline the presence of the Mycenaean form *o-ni-si* (Greek ὄρνισι, indicating an offering “for the birds”), in the tablets Fq 123, 169, 342. This form, with other zoonyms in the new corpus, made it possible to assume a presence of animals in Mycenaean sphere of worship²⁸: on the one hand there are researchers who, in agreement with the editors of the corpus, interpreted the evidence as indicating a presence of real animals in sanctuaries²⁹; others interpreted as a reference to masked individuals, participating in religious rites³⁰.

Κόρη

Γραῖα

(MY Fu 711 *ka-ra-u-ja*)

ἀγνεύω

	169 (Fq)		(305)
.1]deest[
.2	o-po-re-]i	V 2 ko-wa[
.3	ko-]ru-we	Z 2 ke-re-qa[-i	
.4	re-]wa-ko	V 1 ka-ra-wi-ja[
.5]o-ni-si	V 1 a-ke-ne-u[-si	
.6]do-re-ja	Z 1 we-ro-te[
.7]i Z 2 i-qa-qa[
		inf. mut.	

²⁴ Aravantinos, Godart, Sacconi 2001.

²⁵ Ruijgh 2004.

²⁶ Duhoux 2005; Palaima 2006.

²⁷ Bernabé, Serrano Laguna 2011.

²⁸ Rousioti 2001.

²⁹ Del Frio 1999.

³⁰ Ricciardelli 2006.

There is extant knowledge of different representations of masked individuals walking in procession, in both Minoan and Mycenaean contexts; on a tablet from Phaistos there appear four figures, looking like human but with heads of different animals, and the fourth figure undoubtedly has got a bird head³¹:

Shell tablet from Phaistos.

Similar data show a possibility of insertion of the animal element in a ritual, probably through a symbolic representation; in a ring found at Tiryns, four masked figures walk in procession, carrying liquid offerings to a seated female figure, behind which easily we can see a bird³²:

Gold ring from Tiryns. (CMS, I, 179).

Of course, Linear B tablets, because of their strictly administrative function, do not allow a full reconstruction of ritual acts: textual data show an association between deities and animals, but do not clarify whether the animal element is to be interpreted as an object of worship, an attribute of a deity or as symbolising a concept. However, the confirmation of an animal presence in the pre-Hellenic religious sphere renders the presence of birds in several scenes of worship more significant, imposing a reflection about the reason related to the choice of these animals.

³¹ Nilsson 1950: 372.

³² Nilsson 1950: 147.

Conclusions

Evidently, the presence of birds wandering between heaven and earth allows them to be used in a metaphorical manner, symbolizing, in artistic and religious thought, a divine epiphany.

In several iconographic data, belonging to the Aegean Bronze Age, a descent of gods (represented in human shape and small dimensions) in the sensitive sphere has been recognized, in some cases evoked by a dance or a ritual offering³³:

Gold ring from Isopata. (CMS, II, 3-051).

Gold ring from Mycenae. (CMS, I, 017).

Gold ring from Poros. (CMS, VI, 281).

Needless to say, one cannot compile a glossary-guide through which to recognize a divine epiphany: there is no way of knowing that, because they symbolize a divine descent, the little figures are represented in smaller dimensions and at higher levels; for example, we may consider them as being in the far distance, as a sort of ancient law of perspective. But the downward pointing feet, which may be observed on these figures, lead to the consideration that they are really hovering in the air. Therefore, a Bronze Age speculative thought needed to express the concept of divine epiphany by using wandering figures to represent it. In fact, bird flight was probably used as a symbol of this concept, because of the easy association with the representation of a divine descent.

The manifestations of the Homeric gods in bird shape can be considered a narrative element, indicating a real metamorphosis (in 4 of 11 cases the heroes recognize their divinities immediately after their transformation), and these may very well represent the clearest memory of a pre-Hellenic symbolism.

³³ Cain 2001; Kyriakidis 2005.

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