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ANCIENT GREEK PERCEPTIONS OF DOVES*

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the Greek perception of doves underwent a significant evolution from Homeric times, when they were not yet considered sacred birds. The comparison of Homeric goddesses to doves does not necessarily imply that these birds held a sacred status. Only from the fifth century B.C.E. onwards do Greek authors explicitly associate doves with three deities: Aphrodite, Apollo and Zeus. The article offers a critical analysis and interpretation of the systematic frameworks addressed only briefly in previous scholarship and argues that there was a shift in perspective from Homeric times down to the Roman era.

Keywords: dove; Dodona; Aphrodite; Apollo; Homer

1 INTRODUCTION

This article offers the first comprehensive chronological analysis of the appearances of doves in Greek literature. Drawing on data from the online *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (*TLG*), with which Thompson's glossary (1936) largely coincides, it interprets chronologically the systematic frameworks addressed only briefly in previous scholarship. The objective is to elucidate how human perception of these birds evolved from Homeric times to the Roman era. The analysis of various Greek texts spanning the period may also help to understand the contemporary significance of doves.

Although several nouns are used to refer to the *Columbidae*,[1] the relevant lemmata for our purpose are the oldest attested forms, πέλεια and πελειάς.[2] The idea that πέλεια is

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[1] The names are: φάσσα or φὰψ τρυγών, πυραλλίς, περιστερά/περιστερός or περιστέριον οἰνάς and πέλεια or πελειάς. P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris, 1999), s.v. defends the probability that φάσσα and φάψ are the same bird. R. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden, 2010), s.v. does not disagree, adding that the word φάψ was probably Pre-Greek. D'A.W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (London, 1936), 226 briefly indicates a controversy in his time in aligning these names with various species. While there is unanimity in identifying the turtledove (*Columba turtur*) as τρυγών, the same cannot be confidently asserted for the stock dove (*Columba oenas*), the wood pigeon (*Columba palumbus*) and the rock-dove (*Columba liuia*). Thompson explains that πέλεια is not a specific term; and it may be used for all kinds of pigeons, whereas οἰνάς is 'probably a sailors' name for the rock-dove'. Thompson (this note) identifies *Columba palumbus* with φάσσα, φάττα or φάψ, the ringdove. He suggests (at 241) that περιστερά is usually a generic word and that, when it is used specifically, it refers to the domestic pigeon (*Columba liuia*, var. *domestica*). W.G. Arnott, *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London and New York, 2007), 170 distinguishes οἰνάς from πέλεια by comparing Oppian, *Cynegetica* 1.316 and 1.351–6 with Hom. *Il.* 15.778. LSJ presents Thompson's taxonomy.

[2] In Homer this bird is always called πέλεια or πελειάς. The term φάσσα appears only once in Homer in the epithet φασσοφόνος, 'dove-killer', to characterize the hawk (*Il.* 15.238).

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the epic word for περιστερά[3] indicates that they are interchangeable, as the recent *CGL* specifies (s.v. πέλεια and περιστερά).[4] Hence this term is included in the analysis, together with περιστερός and περιστέριον.

To explore how the ancient Greeks perceived doves, I begin by analysing the passages in Homer where doves appear. I suggest that Homeric doves carry certain negative associations. Already connected with lust, they are portrayed as contemptible and expendable creatures; even the comparisons of goddesses to doves do not elevate their status in Homeric literature, except in the context of the Pleiades constellation. The following section examines the epithet τρήρων, which Homer exclusively assigns to them, and traces its semantic evolution in Attic theatre, where the sacred associations that the Greeks began to attribute to them are already discernible. The next section is divided into three subsections, corresponding to the deities associated with these birds: Aphrodite, Apollo and Zeus. I argue that this represents a significant shift from the Homeric perspective. In the final section, I discuss how doves were regarded as useful in everyday life among the Greeks.

2 THE HOMERIC DOVE

In Homer the image of the dove is used in comparisons to describe goddesses (*Il*. 5.778, 21.493), heroes (*Il.* 22.140) and women (*Od*. 22.468). As objects, doves decorate Nestor's cup (*Il.* 11.634). As a real bird, a dove is the target in the archery competition (*Il.* 23.853, 23.855, 23.874) and emphasizes the danger of such places as the Wandering Rocks (*Od*. 12.62); when doves are unexpectedly seen twice in the sky, they serve as divine omens, consistently depicted as the prey of a larger and more powerful bird (*Od.* 15.527, 20.243). Their frailty and fearful nature, their weightlessness and unimportance seem to be the focus, although their decorative beauty is sometimes implied.

2.1. Prophetic doves

The imagery of a dove gripped by a bird of prey can be founded in two prophetic passages. First, Theoclymenus, after arriving in Ithaca with Telemachus, interprets the displuming of a dove by a hawk as an auspice of the mighty power of Telemachus' lineage in Ithaca (*Od.* 15.527). The hawk is Apollo's messenger sent by the god, and the dove's feathers dropped upon Telemachus signal the royal dominance of Telemachus' house. In this scene the dove's feathers are more important than the dove itself.

In the other prophetic passage, the unexpected arrival of an eagle seizing a dove is interpreted by the suitors as a sign that they should not murder Telemachus (*Od*. 20.243). They take the dove to symbolize their own capture, since the eagle is the king of the birds

[3] Cf. Thompson (n. 1), 129. F. Buè, 'The voices of doves', *RCCM* 50 (2018), 26–7 distinguishes the terms used for doves in the Archaic period based on linguistic register: περιστερά is identified as more prosaic, while πελειάς is considered a poetic term. V. Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque. Contribution à l'étude de ses cultes et de sa personnalité dans le panthéon archaïque et classique* (*Kernos Supplement* 4) (Athens/Liège, 1994), 414 argues that περιστερά is the domestic pigeon, whereas πελειάς 'le biset migrateur et sauvage'. This distinction can be more accurately framed by identifying πελειάς as an epic word, as it is the only one of the two used by Homer. The Homeric scholia employ the word περιστερά as a synonym to explain πελειάς (for example ΣbT Hom. *Il.* 5.778; ΣA 11.635a; ΣT 21.493c; ΣbT 23.855b Erbse).

[4] J. Diggle et al., *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (Cambridge, 2021).

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as Odysseus is the sovereign of Ithaca.[5] In this passage doves are again associated with those who are going to be defeated.

Even though the omen can be interpreted in the opposite manner (the helpless dove could be Telemachus and the eagle the suitors), this would contradict the association of the dove with the weaker party, which is a consistent feature in Homer. Moreover, this reading would not make such good sense because Telemachus does not possess a fearful nature. He decides to go looking for his father, despite all the dangers, whereas the suitors are panic-stricken at the prospect of slaughter.[6] Therefore, they could only be the frightened bird, and never the eagle. It is thus more plausible that, when they drop their plans to kill Telemachus because of what they had just seen, they are recognizing their weakness without knowing it. The gods may dispatch eagles or hawks, while the dove is reduced to a mere object, serving solely as prey. This explains how a dove never embodies a god itself,[7] although Homeric gods appear among men in the shape of some birds, often as birds of prey.[8] The divine message in these omens always implies the death or the mistreatment of the weaker creature, the dove.

2.2. Doves in comparisons

In a dispute between two Homeric goddesses the dove represents the subdued party, whereas the attacker is compared to a hawk. Artemis is likened to a dove and Hera to a hawk when she grasps from the former's hands the bow and the arrows and hits the goddess with them on the ears.[9] In addition to emphasizing frailty and, at times, fear, the comparison may also accentuate the beauty of the goddess, although this is neither the central concern nor thoroughly explored in the passage.

In his last battle Hector, when he is about to be killed, is compared to a dove, whereas Achilles is the hawk (*Il.* 22.139–40).[10] This comparison primarily emphasizes the

[5] R.B. Rutherford (ed.), *Homer Odyssey Books XIX and XX* (Cambridge, 1992), 224–5 writes that it is poetic simplicity and the wish to emphasize the suitors' inertia that explains the suitors' interpretation; in my view, it is rather the tendency toward a pejorative association of doves in Homer that accounts for it.

[6] This happens when they see Athena rising her aegis, on high from the roof (*Od.* 22.298). The kind of fear is probably different from that felt by heroes and gods because it is expressed by a lemma, πτοέω, whose two occurrences in Homer are very much associated. The other is a compound verb, διαπτοέω, which expresses the fear caused in the suitors' lovers by Odysseus' words (18.340). D. Steiner (ed.), *Homer Odyssey Books XVII and XVIII* (Cambridge, 2010), 208 explains the servants' reaction through 'the strong language coming from a beggar'. More important is the parallel between Odysseus and Athena, whose revelation produces the same effect. The behaviour of Leodes, a diviner and one of Penelope's suitors, when he begs for his life, clearly shows his cowardly nature: M.M. Fornielles, 'Deslealtad y súplica en la *Odisea*: análisis pragmático de *Od*. 22.312–370', *Veleia* 40 (2023), 53–65, at 57–9.

[7] J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (London, 1977), 146 wrongly states that 'Hera and Athena assume the dove form in Homer'. He followed the interpretation of Thompson (n. 1), 228. The goddesses are compared to doves at *Il.* 5.778, but they do not assume dove form.

[8] E.g. *Il.* 7.59; *Od.* 3.372, 22.240.

[9] *Il*. 21.489–95. N. Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume VI: Books 21–24* (Cambridge, 1993), 95 notes the dactylic rhythm of line 493, which suits Artemis' bird-like flight.

[10] The word for hawk here is κίρκος, used again at *Il.* 17.757; in this poem ἴρηξ is more common (13.62, 13.819, 15.237, 16.582, 18.616, 21.494), although in the *Odyssey* these terms are equivalent in number (κίρκος, 13.87, 15.526; ἴρηξ, 5.66, 13.86). Whereas ἴρηξ is the generic term, κίρκος is more specific, although the species cannot be identified (LSJ, s.v. κίρκος I; *CGL*, s.v. ἰέραξ). According to Thompson (n. 1), 114, 144, ἰέραξ is a non-Hellenic word and the generic term especially for the smaller hawks and falcons, whereas κίρκος is a poetical name for a hawk, which is 'oftentimes a mystical, probably an astronomical, perhaps a solar symbol'.

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difference in strength between the two parties and underscores Hector's inability to alter his destiny, as he is as fragile as a dove pursued by a bird of prey.

At *Il.* 5.778, Hera and Athena are once again compared to doves as they arrive on the battlefield to assist the Argives. The text does not explain the comparison, and there is nothing in the passage that supports the belief of Pollard and Thompson that the comparisons are a prefigurement of the deity as sacred.[11] The first two explanations given in the bT scholia are both simpler and much more reasonable, since they do not devise anything beyond the text but rather justify the image by drawing on the inherent characteristics of the animals used for comparison:

> τρήρωσι πελειάσιν ἴθμαθ' ὁμοῖαι: τὴν ὁρμὴν καὶ τὴν πτῆσιν· ἄτοπον γὰρ τρυφερῶς βαδίζειν τὰς εἰς πόλεμον ἐσκευασμένας. ἄλλως· καλῶς τῶν βουλομένων λαθεῖν τὰ ἴχνη περιστεραῖς εἴκασεν· ἀφανῆ γὰρ τὰ τῶν περιστερῶν ἴχνη καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης λέγει (fr. 154 Rose).
>
> Swift as doves in their flight: in terms of their movement and their speed; for it would be absurd for those prepared for war to walk delicately. Alternatively: [The poet] appropriately compares those who wish to leave no trace to doves, for the tracks of doves are invisible, as Aristotle also states.[12]

A comparison of the suitors' lovers, the servants killed by Telemachus, with doves or thrushes caught in a trap (*Od*. 22.468) emphasizes despicability as one of the main features of the Homeric dove; the birds are here indisputably connoted in a negative manner. This comparison, besides emphasizing the doves' senselessness and insignificance, could also point to their lascivious character—a trait developed in Hellenistic literature, as will be discussed below. The women are presented as equally obtuse to the birds: both are incapable to foresee the ambush and avoid it.[13] Moreover, they were, like doves, expendable, though probably for different reasons; as far as the birds go, perhaps because they reproduce profusely.[14]

2.3. The Pleiades

At *Od.* 12.62–3, doves are said to carry ambrosia to Zeus. Probably under the influence of this Homeric passage, a poem by Moero entitled *Mnemosyne* (fr. 1 Powell) states that Zeus grew up fed in a cave by doves who carried ambrosia from the streams of the Ocean and by an eagle who brought nectar from a stone. There was a dispute in antiquity about this detail, because it was considered undignified that doves would have fed Zeus.[15]

The Homeric lines allude to the myth of the daughters of Atlas and Pleione, who were transformed into doves and later into stars after being pursued by the hunter Orion

[11] Cf. n. 7 (above).

[12] Ed. Erbse. According to Pollard (n. 7), 157, the simile 'may be intended to suggest women strutting with importance', but this interpretation lacks parallels. Attic theatre explores the lightness and swiftness of doves through adjectives such as ταχύρρωστος ('swift-flying') and ἀελλαία ('storm-swift') at Soph. *OC* 1081; πτηνή ('flying') at *Aj.* 140; and ὑπόπτερος ('winged') at *Phil.* 288. Eur. *Bacch.* 1090 underlines their speediness with the noun ὠκύτης ('swiftness').

[13] Aesop, *Fable* 217 highlights the imbecility of doves: a thirsty dove breaks her wings trying to reach a jar of water painted in a picture and then she is caught by a passer-by. Cf. A. Hausrath and H. Hunger, *Corpus fabularum Aesopicarum* (Leipzig, 1970).

[14] This is probably the reason for their use in sports. In the archery competition at Patroclus' funeral games doves are used for sporting entertainment: a dove's foot is tied to a mast and Meriones hits the bird (*Il.* 23.853, 23.855, 23.874).

[15] Ath. *Deipn.* 11.489–90 = fr. 4 in L. Pagani, *Asclepiade di Mirlea. I frammenti degli scritti omerici* (*Pleiadi* 7) (Rome, 2007). According to Athenaeus, Asclepiades of Myrlea regarded it as ἄσεμνον.

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(Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* 2.21). The passage thus understood contains a reference to the constellation of the Pleiades, whose rising in May traditionally marks the beginning of the harvest season, a symbolic association that may be metaphorically reflected here.[16] These carriers of ambrosia seem highly specific. The passage appears to refer to the constellation and, therefore, does not provide sufficient evidence to support the notion that doves were already regarded as sacred in Homer, as attributing such significance to them requires stronger textual substantiation from the Homeric corpus itself. Moreover, as we have seen, in all other passages in Homer, doves are portrayed as fragile and expendable birds.

3 PROVERBIALLY FRIGHTENED

The second-century *Homeric Lexicon* of Apollonius, s.v. τρήρωνος,[17] explains the epithet as derived from the verb 'tremble' (τρέω), since the species is fearful (δειλὸν γὰρ τὸ γένος). The epithet in Homer is exclusively assigned to doves. This use prevails down to the third century B.C.E. The adjective is so characteristic of doves that on its own it evokes the image of a dove at Lycoph. *Alex*. 87, 423.[18] In Apollonius of Rhodes, the epithet is twice assigned to them (*Argon.* 2.535, 3.541), and Moero also uses it to describe doves in the fragment mentioned above.

Aristophanes in the *Birds* (575) recalls the passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (114) in which the gait of Iris and Eileithyia is compared to that of a τρήρων πελείη. This reference exemplifies Aristophanes' characteristic literary irreverence, since the passage of the *Hymn* provides a comic premise. According to Peisthetaerus, being winged is no reason for mortals to fail in recognizing the Chorus as gods, as both Hermes and Nike were also winged, and Iris was even compared to a dove. Aristophanes refers thus to the τρήρων πελείη to create a comic framework. In the *Peace* (1067), Aristophanes with his characteristic comic audacity boldly applies the adjective τρήρων in a unique manner, assigning it to creatures other than doves—namely, petrels (κέπφοι τρήρωνες), generally portrayed as dull-witted and voracious.[19]

Tragedy presents doves as fearful creatures, with various nuances. Aeschylus created a compound, πάντρομος (*Sept*. 294), a hapax legomenon that stresses a dove's traditional epithet. A more common strategy to emphasize the fearful nature of these birds is the use of lexemes derived from the stem φοβ-, unsurprising given that the verb φοβεῖσθαι is presented by the lexicographer Apollonius, as previously mentioned, as a synonym for τρέω: so φόβος with an objective genitive referencing the hawks feared by doves appears at Aesch. *Suppl.* 223; and φοβέω at Soph. *Aj.* 139 conveys the expression of fear in the dove's eyes.[20] This stem gains particular significance when we consider that φόβος in Homeric usage also has the idea of flight. Moreover, Euripides employs this semantic nuance in his depiction of doves at *Andr.* 1140, where their frightened behaviour is captured through the phrase 'turned their back in escape' (πρὸς φυγὴν ἐνώτισαν), clearly

[16] Cf. W.W. Merry and J. Riddell, *Homer's Odyssey. Edited with English Notes, Appendices, etc. Vol. I: Books I–XII* (Oxford, 1886), 233. For a different opinion, see Pollard (n. 7), 157.

[17] Cf. I. Bekker, *Apollonii Sophistae lexicon Homericum* (Berlin, 1833), 154.

[18] Thompson (n. 1), 226 suggests that τρήρων could be a wild rock-dove of the caves by the Cretan sea. Its use as an adjective, though, seems to contradict this likelihood.

[19] Aristophanes always uses the term κέπφος pejoratively; cf. *Pax* 1067, *Av.* 912. *Fable* 36 of Aesop (Hausrath and Hunger [n. 13]) gives a portrait of these creatures as rapacious and dull-witted. The idea is also echoed in Aristotle's description of these birds (*Hist. an.* 620a).

[20] On the manifestation of fear through the eye, see Soph. *OC* 729–30.

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evoking their instinct to flee. In short, doves mentioned in comparisons within tragedy evoke the frightened Homeric dove[21] and underscore a sense of weakness in behaviour, as such analogies are more typically suited to females.[22]

4 SACRED CREATURES

4.1. Aphrodite's dove

Doves from an early period were associated to the goddess Isthar/Astarte/Aphrodite.[23] Although two gold figurines discovered in a tomb at Mycenae, depicting women—one carrying a bird on her head and the other with three doves, one on her head and two on her shoulders—have been interpreted as a prototype of the image of Aphrodite,[24] only from the fifth century B.C.E. onward does this association become unequivocally evident. Statuettes depicting Aphrodite holding a dove have been preserved,[25] as well as coins[26] picturing the goddess with this bird. One of the most significant centres of the worship of the goddess was established in Eryx on Sicily, and the departure of Aphrodite from there to Libya took place in the company of hundreds of doves. According to Aelian, it was

[21] A.H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aeschylus Suppliants* (Cambridge, 2019), 153 draws attention to the impact of *Il.* 21.493–4 and 22.139–42 on Aesch. *Suppl.* 223–4.

[22] Doves are more frequently compared to goddesses or women than to men, a trend evident since Homer; cf. P.J. Finglass (ed.), *Sophocles Ajax* (Cambridge, 2011), 180.

[23] Aphrodite's cult demonstrates a degree of syncretism with the worship of the Syrian goddesses Astarte and Ishtar. I. Cornelius, 'Revisiting Astarte in the iconography of the Bronze Age Levant', in D.T. Sugimoto (ed.), *Transformation of a Goddess: Isthar – Astarte – Aphrodite* (Zurich, 2014), 87–101, at 91 observes that 'the dove is shown with Ishtar in a famous Mari painting, while on cylinder seals, the dove flies between the storm god and his consort, and the naked goddess is also shown with birds'. A. Tsukimoto, 'In the shadow of thy wings: a review of the winged goddess in ancient Near Eastern iconography', in D.T. Sugimoto (ed.), *Transformation of a Goddess: Isthar – Astarte – Aphrodite* (Zurich, 2014), 15–31, at 23 presents iconography from the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. from the Syrian, Anatolian and Mediterranean regions, depicting winged goddesses holding a dove in the left hand. According to Diodorus Siculus (2.1.4–2.8.7), the Greek author Ctesias of Cnidus recounts an Eastern legend about the Assyrian queen Semiramis, said to be the daughter of the fish-goddess Derceto, whose infancy was miraculously preserved by doves that fed her, and who was later transformed into a dove. S. Lewis and L. Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity. A Sourcebook with Commentaries* (London and New York, 2018), 259 note with regard to this excerpt that 'in the Near East the dove was the symbol par excellence of the goddesses Ishtar, Astarte, Asherah, Tanit and many others, and in the Classical period the association continued with Aphrodite and Venus'. In New York the Metropolitan Museum of Art holds a terracotta female figurine holding a dove from Cyprus, dating to 600–480 B.C.E. (object number: 74.51.1559). The figure, linked to the cult of Astarte, depicts a woman holding a dove, symbolizing fertility and divinity. On doves as sacrificial victims, cf. Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones (this note), 254. Herodotus says that the Phoenicians who came from Syria founded Cythera's sanctuary (1.105). Although this should be understood with some caution, according to Xenophon (*An.* 1.4.9), doves were venerated as divine beings in certain Eastern religious practices.

[24] Pirenne-Delforge (n. 3), 3–4, 8. On doves as sacrificial animals to Aphrodite, see A. Villing, 'Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg? Some thoughts on bird sacrifices in ancient Greece', in S. Hitch and I. Rutherford (edd.), *Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge, 2017), 74–5.

[25] The Fogg Museum, part of the Harvard Art Museums, houses a bronze statuette titled 'Aphrodite holding a dove', dating to *c.*460–450 (object number: 1960.666). The piece is reportedly from Epidaurus.

[26] Arnott (n. 1), 179 mentions a silver tetradrachm from Eryx (*c.*413) with a seated Aphrodite holding a dove. F.E. Zeuner, *A History of Domesticated Animals* (London, 1963), 461 (fig. 24) reproduces a silver obol from the town of Sicyon, dating between 400 and 300 B.C.E., depicting a pigeon in flight with both wings spread.

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commonly believed that these doves were departing as escorts accompanying the goddess (*VH* 1.15).

It is also from the fifth century B.C.E. onward that Greek authors begin to associate doves with this specific deity. Pherecrates mentions Cythera and Cyprus together with a περιστέριον (fr. 143 K–A). In the following century, Alexis also writes: 'I am the white pigeon of Aphrodite' (λευκὸς Ἀφροδίτης εἰμὶ γὰρ περιστερός, fr. 217).[27] In Hellenistic poetry, doves are explicitly linked to lascivious female behaviour, a connection probably derived from their association with the goddess of love. But this link may also have been subtly suggested by the Homeric comparison between the lovers of the suitors and doves. In Lycophron's *Alexandra* the dove is a metaphor for women who are either lascivious (Helen and Amyntor's mistress)[28] or the victims of rape (Cassandra)[29]. In the first scenario the gaze conveys a negative sentiment, while discussing assaulted women through the metaphor of a dove merely underscores their vulnerability and inability to confront their aggressors.[30]

In Apollonius of Rhodes, doves appear related to Aphrodite and the strategies of heroes. In a narrative where eros replaces combat, a dove's persecution by a hawk has a totally different outcome. After arriving from a meeting with the hateful Aeëtes, in which the king had imposed insuperable tasks upon Jason, the Argonauts see a hawk chasing a dove. But the fragile bird escapes, whereas the hawk became impaled on the mast at the stern. The seer Mopsus explains that this was an omen sent by the gods, which indicated that their success was in Aphrodite's hands, since the dove was her bird (*Argon.* 3.541–54).[31] The Hellenistic epic poem thematizes love where once there had been war and reverses the imagery of the pursuing birds' scene to announce a message, something which would be absurd for Homeric heroes. Even the place where the dove takes refuge underlines its erotic significance: Jason's lap.[32]

4.2. Apollo's doves

Associations with another god, Apollo, are made by Euripides. In the *Ion* doves live without fear in Apollo's house at Delphi (1197–8).[33] Therefore, Apollo's swift messenger, which was the hawk, 'killer of doves', φασσοφόνῳ (*Il.* 15.238), in Homer,

[27] Arnott (n. 1), 178. On the connection between Aphrodite and these birds, see Pirenne-Delforge (n. 3), 415–17.

[28] A. Hurst and A. Kolde, *Lycophron: Alexandra* (Paris, 2008), 161 mention different accounts of Phoenix's misfortunes. At line 423 it is said that Phoenix is blinded by Amyntor for having slept with his father's mistress. At line 131 the dove, which is Helen, receives the worst attribute possible: κάσσα, strumpet, that is, πόρνη, prostitute, according to Σ Lycoph. *Alex.* 131e Leone. Doves are linked to lust already in Homer, when the suitors and their mistresses are associated with these birds (see above).

[29] The terms describe the rape of the defenceless Cassandra by Ajax. In contrast to πελειάς (131) or τρήρων (87, 423) associated with Helen, the chosen words for Cassandra are φάσσα (357) and οἰνάς (358). Might only πελειάς be capable of conveying a sense of lust?

[30] Latin poetry elaborates on the association between doves and Venus, introducing variations by replacing doves in instances where Greek authors employed a different bird. Doves pull Venus' chariot at Ov. *Met.* 14.597–9 and Apul. *Met.* 6.6, an image inspired by Sappho's description of Aphrodite's chariot driven by sparrows (fr. 1.10 Neri). On doves as a symbol of faithful love for the Romans, see I.S. Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans. Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Ideas* (London and New York, 2006), 173.

[31] R. Hunter, *Apollonius of Rhodes: Argonautica Book III* (Cambridge, 1989), 156 suggests that the two Homeric passages important to the creation of this scene are *Il.* 22.139–42 and 23.877–81.

[32] See Hunter (n. 31), 157. Σ Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 3.550 Wendel associates doves with Aphrodite because of lust (τὸ λάγνος).

[33] Diodorus Siculus also alludes to pigeons living in Apollo's temple precincts (16.27.2).

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shelters its former prey; instead of being caught and displumed, the fragile birds can live fearlessly (ἄτρεστα) in their former chaser's house, indicating that they have gained a new place in the communication channel with the gods.

To express the absence of fear through the lemma ἄτρεστα, 'without trembling', is powerful, for the word has the same stem as the consecrated doves' epithet: τρήρων. It thus subtly rehabilitates the doves' status.[34]

4.3. Zeus's doves

In the fifth century B.C.E. Sophocles and Herodotus report that the priestesses of Zeus's oracle at Dodona were called Doves (Πελειάδες).[35] A scholium on Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (172 Xenis) offers two possible explanations of the priestesses' name:[36]

> οἱ μὲν οὕτω λέγουσι θεσπίζειν, οἱ δὲ οὕτω τὰς ἱερείας γραίας οὔσας· καὶ γὰρ τοὺς γέροντας οἱ Μολοσσοὶ πελιοὺς ὀνομάζουσιν. Ἡρόδοτος δὲ ἐν β΄ φησί· «Πελειάδες δέ μοι δοκέουσι κεκλῆσθαι πρὸς Δωδωναίων αἱ γυναῖκες, διότι βάρβαροι οὖσαι ἐδόκουν ὁμοίως ὄρνισι φθέγγεσθαι, μετὰ δὲ χρόνον δοκοῦσιν ἀνθρωπίνῃ φωνῇ φθέγξασθαι» [ἐπείπερ ἐκ Θηβῶν Αἰγυπτίων ἦσαν].
>
> Some say they prophesy in this way, while others explain that the priestesses are old women; for the Molossians also call their elders 'pelioi'.[37] Herodotus in the second book (2.57) says: 'The women of Dodona seem to me to have been called "doves" because, being foreigners, they appeared to speak like birds. But over time, they seemed to speak with a human voice' [since they were from Thebes in Egypt].

The scholium also mentions Eur. fr. 1021 Kannicht and Pind. fr. 58 Snell–Maehler to exemplify authors who speak of Dodona's doves.[38] However, no extant author before the fifth century B.C.E. clearly mentions these Πελειάδες. In Homer the interpreters of Dodona's oracle are men (*Il.* 16.234–5); and Zeus speaks through the high-crested oaks, since Odysseus had gone there to hear the god's will from that tree (*Od.* 14.327, 19.296).

Herodotus (2.55) depicts doves as messengers of Zeus, as they indicated the locations where the shrines should be established:[39]

[34] Ion's description of doves drinking wine poured from the libation (1196–208) also links these birds to Dionysus, while the death of that who drinks the poisoned wine turns this dove into a symbol. B. McPhee, 'Apollo, Dionysus, and the multivalent birds of Euripides' *Ion*', *CW* 110 (2017), 475–89, at 483 states: 'the dove represents Ion's Xuthean–Dionysian identity whose falsehood Apollo will soon reveal through the tokens preserved by the Pythia', such that her 'death brings the feast celebrating Ion's false paternity to a premature close'. Therefore, through the doves' scene in *Ion* the spectator assists in Apollo's victory over Dionysus.

[35] At Soph. *Trach.* 172, Deianeira mentions the ancient oracle at Dodona that announces to Heracles the end of his labours through the mouths of the two doves.

[36] The doves were to Zeus what the tripod was to Apollo, according to the aforementioned scholium: ἦσαν πέλειαι δι' ὧν ἐμαντεύετο ὁ Ζεύς, ὡς Ἀπόλλων ἀπὸ τρίποδος.

[37] Cf. Chantraine (n. 1), s.v. πέλεια and s.v. περιστερά, and Beekes (n. 1), s.v. πέλεια.

[38] J. Mynott, *Birds in the Ancient World* (Oxford, 2018), 334 adds 'a further part of the explanation': the occurrence of the wild rock dove, *Columba liuia*, is frequent on the rocky cliffs of Dodona. Arnott (n. 1), 170 also recalls that the association with the bird's name could be because of 'the oracle's site in a mountainous area with cliffs to attract the Rock Dove and trees to attract the Stock Dove'. Beekes (n. 1), s.v. πέλεια states that 'the priestesses in Dodona (like the aged people in Cos and Epirus) were called "doves", because of the colour of their hair'.

[39] Cf. N.G. Wilson (ed.), *Herodoti Historiae*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2015); transl. A.D. Godley, *Herodotus. The Persian Wars, Volume I: Books 1–2* (Cambridge, MA, 1920).

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δύο πελειάδας μελαίνας ἐκ Θηβέων τῶν Αἰγυπτιέων ἀναπταμένας τὴν μὲν αὐτέων ἐς Λιβύην, τὴν δὲ παρὰ σφέας ἀπικέσθαι. ἱζομένην δέ μιν ἐπὶ φηγὸν αὐδάξασθαι φωνῇ ἀνθρωπηίῃ ὡς χρεὸν εἴη μαντήιον αὐτόθι Διὸς γενέσθαι, καὶ αὐτοὺς ὑπολαβεῖν θεῖον εἶναι τὸ ἐπαγγελλόμενον αὐτοῖσι καί σφεας ἐκ τούτου ποιῆσαι. τὴν δὲ ἐς τοὺς Λίβυας οἰχομένην πελειάδα λέγουσι Ἄμμωνος χρηστήριον κελεῦσαι τοὺς Λίβυας ποιέειν· ἔστι δὲ καὶ τοῦτο Διός.

Two black doves had come flying from Thebes in Egypt, one to Libya and one to Dodona. This last settled on an oak tree, and uttered there human speech, declaring that there must be there a place of divination from Zeus; the people of Dodona understood that the message was divine, and therefore they established the oracular shrine. The dove which came to Libya bade the Libyans (so they say) to make an oracle of Amnion; this also is sacred to Zeus.

4.4. On doves as sacred creatures: final reflections

From the fifth century B.C.E. onward, doves became firmly linked to Aphrodite, Apollo, and Zeus, each association reflecting a distinct religious function. With Aphrodite, doves symbolized love and desire, appearing in literary sources and artistic depictions. In Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi, they signified a reversal of their Homeric vulnerability, gaining a protected status. For Zeus, doves became divine messengers at Dodona, marking their transition from ordinary birds to sacred intermediaries. These evolving roles illustrate how doves were gradually integrated into Greek religious symbolism, moving beyond their earlier Homeric portrayal.

5 USEFUL CREATURES

The decline of the wild species, referenced in Homer, and its interbreeding with feral populations[40] explain the evolving Greek perspective on doves. In the fifth century B.C.E. Greek texts highlight the numerous uses of doves. In addition to being a source of nourishment for humans, they were also employed in medical treatments,[41] which explains the hundreds of dovecotes and pigeon-houses built in Hellenistic and Roman times.[42] Doves could also be used as bait to catch other birds.[43] In this connection Aristotle speaks of blinded decoy pigeons, which can survive for eight years (*Hist. an.* 613a).

Greek texts provide limited evidence regarding the use of pigeons as human messengers. However, a brief fragment from the fifth century B.C.E. suggests an association between doves and message transmission, though this may represent poetic imagery rather than concrete practice: ἀπόπεμψον ἀγγέλλοντα τὸν περιστερόν, 'send a dove to announce' (Com. Adesp. fr. 38 K–A).

[40] Arnott (n. 1), 177.

[41] In the medical field, for example, a patient's diet can include dove (Hippoc. *Aff.* 27, 41; *Vict.* 47, 81), and hair loss can be treated with a plaster made of pigeon excrement (Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 2.80 Potter = 189 Littré).

[42] Around one thousand columbaria have been found in Israel and Palestine dating to these periods. Cf. Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones (n. 23), 258. Mynott (n. 38), 120 distinguishes between dovecotes, where pigeons and doves were kept mostly for pleasure, and περιστεροτροφεῖα, houses where these birds were reared by a professional pigeon-keeper for the table.

[43] At Ar. *Av.* 1079–84, when the Chorus mentions the mistreatments inflicted upon birds by Philocrates, a popular sailor, the use of doves as bait is listed as one example of the cruelties inflicted upon them.

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6 CONCLUSION

This article has examined the ancient Greek understanding of doves. Zeuner's six concise paragraphs (n. 26) offer an oversimplified view of how Greeks and Romans regarded these birds, while also failing to explore the issue from a chronological perspective. Besides disregarding the chronological approach, Pollard (n. 7) draws premature conclusions from the comparisons between Homeric goddesses and doves, conclusions which I have shown to be hasty. In the twenty-first century, doves have once again become the subject of scholarly attention, notably in the works of Arnott (n. 1) and Mynott (n. 38). However, these studies too lack detailed analysis of the passages and do not take chronological development into account. This article aligns with the approach of Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones (n. 23), although it focusses primarily on Greek culture, interpreting key passages from the texts under consideration. In addition to tracing how the ancient Greeks viewed doves over the centuries, I have offered interpretations regarding the way in which the authors in question have handled their sources. Although the exact timing of the shift on Greek perception of doves is uncertain, it was clearly in place by the fifth century B.C.E.

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