

NOTES

Θραξ, Δυτίνος, Καταρράκτης

During the course of four months' work with oil-damaged sea-birds at the Richmond Bird Rescue Centre in California, I made notes which may help to establish meanings for the following names, which are left doubtful in D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *Glossary of Greek Birds*.

Θραξ. Mentioned only in Dionysius, *Ixeuticon* ii 14, iii 25, where it is coupled with the κόλυμβος as a bird that sleeps upon the water. Κόλυμβος or κολυμβίς is almost certainly the Little Grebe, being described by Alexander of Myndus (*ap.* Athen. ix 315d) as 'smallest of all the water birds',¹ and θραξ should also be a grebe. As the grebes treated at Richmond recovered their health, there was abundant opportunity to observe the bird's preference for sleeping on the water, and it was in fact accepted as a rule that birds should spend two days and nights continuously on the water in an outdoor artificial pool before being released in the sea. These were Western Grebes (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*), a species unknown in the eastern hemisphere. For θραξ I would suggest the Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus cristatus*), which is certainly known in Thracian waters—'nowhere so numerous as in the harbour of Istanbul' in March.² But I would suggest that its name (or nickname—οἱ καλουμένοι θρακες: Dionysius *loc. cit.*) comes rather from its crest, comparable to that of the fox-skin cap and helmet nowadays called Thracian.³ In a writer of the Roman Imperial period there may also be some reference to 'Thracian' gladiators. Western Grebes are very pugnacious birds, until one has gained their confidence, and Great Crested Grebes may share this characteristic.

Δυτίνος, mentioned only by Dionysius, *loc. cit.*, should be yet another grebe, perhaps the Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps caspicus caspicus* or *nigricollis*).

Καταρράκτης. 'The references . . . are so discordant as to suggest that the meaning was early lost, if indeed the name was ever applied to an actual species.' So Thompson,⁴ rightly. But at least one of the writers upon whom Dionysius (*Ixeuticon* ii 3) drew had looked at birds, not books. 'There is another bird, short like the smaller gulls, but strong,

white in colour, and resembling those hawks that carry off doves, which is called Cataractes. For it watches for certain swimming fish (and it sees to the very bottom of the sea), then it raises itself to a height and, folding its wings all together, launches itself as though falling into the sea, cutting the air faster, one would say, than any missile, and dives to a fathom's depth or more. And sometimes after taking the fish it snatches it up and swallows it, still wriggling, in flight.' Upon hearing this description, an experienced bird-watcher at once said 'A Tern', confirming my own opinion. Perhaps the Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*), 'the lovely sprite that hovers on long slender wings before diving headlong into the sea and emerging with a sprat',⁵ might be intended, though its plumage is pale grey rather than white and Dionysius makes no mention of its black cap. 'Raises itself to a height' (πρὸς ὕψος ἑαυτὸν αἶρει) means, I take it, that the bird soars slightly immediately before diving—a generally accurate observation. But the web-footed tern cannot be the Cataractes of Aristotle (*HA* ix 12.605)—ὄρνις σχιζόπους.⁶ Sophocles (*fr.* 344) uses the word Cataractes of the eagle—'like a thunderbolt he falls'—and (*fr.* 641) of the Harpy, that is, as Miss Benton says, the Shearwater.⁷ Moreover Dionysius continues with a description, presumably drawn from another source, of a bird which fishes from rocks overlooking the sea. This might be a cormorant; it is certainly not a tern. The curious account of how this bird hatches its eggs reads like misunderstood observation of seabirds raiding each other's nests, but has much book-learning behind it. 'The males take up those eggs that have male chicks in them, and the females similarly the females, and gripping them in their claws fly up into the air and let them fall down into the sea. They then follow them down to the water and quickly snatch them up from the sea. This they do for several days continuously. Thus the passage through the air (ἢ φορὰ—not, it would seem, the act of carrying; *cf.* κατὰ τοῦ πελάγους φέρεσθαι ἀφιᾶσιν, translated "let them fall down into the sea") warms the eggs and hatches the chicks.' Classically educated birds would of course have no difficulty in distinguishing male eggs from female; the rounder eggs produce females, the rest males, as Pliny tells us.⁸ For objects, from stars to slingstones, being strongly heated by

¹ Thompson, *op. cit.* 90-1.

² A. David and W. Mary Bannerman, *Birds of Cyprus* (Edinburgh, 1958) 276. *Cf.* also O. Reiser, *Materialien zu einer Ornithologie der Balkanica* iii (Griechenland) (Wien, 1905) 552-3.

³ Bruno Schröder, 'Thrakische Helme', *JdI* xxvii (1912) 317-44; A. Snodgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks* 95.

⁴ *Op. cit.* 74-5.

⁵ Francis Pitt, *Birds in Britain* (London, 1948) 493.

⁶ Thompson, *op. cit.* 75, properly rejects the suggestion that Dionysius's description refers to the Gannet or Solan Goose, and notes suggestions (to which I have nothing to add) on the identity of Aristotle's bird.

⁷ S. Benton, 'Nereids and two Attic Pyxides', *JHS* xc (1970) 193.

⁸ Pliny, *NH* x 74.145.

their passage through the air, Aristotle and Vergil provide the very best authority.⁹

Dionysius continues his account with a description of the birds' education, which begins directly they are hatched and which he likens to that of farmers' boys helping their aged parents at the plough. The birds' end is miserable, when, blinded by old age, they dash themselves upon the rocks, thinking that they are diving into the sea—a statement that perhaps derives from the sight of broken wave-washed corpses along the water's edge.

Dionysius also gives an improbable account (iii 22) of how the Cataractes is taken by means of pictures of fish painted on planks, upon which the birds dash themselves. His description of netting sleeping grebes by night rings more true (iii 25), though we may doubt whether the birds would take a boat's light for a star. Dionysius's wildfowlers are careful to paddle quietly up to the birds, so as not to awaken them by the splash of the oars. Grebes from Richmond were set free in a channel frequented by motor boats. More than once watchers on the shore were alarmed to see a boat heading straight for a group of newly-released birds, but the grebes always took avoiding action in plenty of time. Their eyes were of course close to the water-level and their field of vision therefore limited, and they were perhaps warned by the beat of the screw and noise of the engine.

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⁹ Vergil, *Aeneid* ix 588; Aristotle, *De Caelo* ii 7.289A. W. K. C. Guthrie, in the Loeb *Aristotle: on the Heavens* (Harvard, 1953) cites numerous other Latin texts, but adds that he can find no Greek authors who mention this belief, apart from Aristotle. The 'origin of a belief so patently at variance with the facts' is no doubt the fact that leaden bullets (sling or rifle) picked up immediately after impact, are hot because their kinetic energy is converted into heat.

Note on Sea-birds

I am delighted with Mr Anderson's article in this number of the *Journal* (171–2) on the Greek names of sea-birds. *Αντίνοος* is a rare word and it must refer to a bird diving from the surface like our divers, the commonest of which is our Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*), but of course the term could include all ducks. The name *κολυμβίς* could also be applied to all these birds but it need not be confined to them. The Greeks knew that terns dived from a height and said *κῆξ* or *κανάξ*: Homer compares the bird to the lady, who fell into a hold (*Od.* xv 479).

There is a picture of two birds with plumage like that of Black-throated Divers or Great Northern

Divers on a Middle Minoan mug found at Palaikastro near the sea in East Crete (*Unpublished Objects* 92 fig. 77: Zervos, *Crete* no. 742). One bird is diving from a rock, towards a root on the bottom, the other is standing on a stone opening its beak to give an alarm signal. It might be objected to this picture that divers do not dive from rocks, nor stand upright on stones; otherwise it is a good picture. According to the *Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe*, there appear to be two birds, but I can only find one Latin name: *Colymbus Arcticus*. In spite of its name the bird is known in Greek waters.

I have been dive-bombed by Black-headed gulls here, near their nests on the shores of the Moray Firth. The Icarus Painter drew a picture of this (*ARV*² 696.1 and 1666) on a lekythos in New York (24.97.37). The deepest divers are the Gannets (*Sula bassana*) of which more later.

I like Mr Anderson's identification of *Θραξ* with the Great Crested Grebe, the bird who puts on a Thracian helmet in summer, with his sinister ear-flaps. Such a bird would have to have a reputation for fierceness, and Mr Anderson who has handled them, says that they are inclined to be aggressive. The Latin name for this Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*, must refer to the family's poor legwork though it is said that the Crested Grebe does occasionally stand upright. The modern Greek name for the family is *πυρόπους*, Bottom-foot or *πυρόσκελις*. Compare the name *οὔρα* (Athen. 395e). Of course the name would apply more obviously to the Pin-tail duck but the bird is said to be near to a duck, but presumably not an actual duck. No duck has a long thin beak, many are the colour of dirty potter's earth, i.e. Attic earth. The bird that is weak on the leg, has red on it and a sharp, thin beak, is our Great Crested Grebe.

I should like to make one more identification of our Grebe. Coins of Stymphalos show a long bird's neck rising above the leaves of a Water Plantain (*Platanus Magnus*) with a Fritillary on either side. I have found a Fritillary at Ithome, not too far away. The bird wears ear-flaps, and for me a marsh bird with ear-flaps must be meant for the Great Crested Grebe. We can go further: when it is on Stymphalos lake, it must be the bird driven away by Herakles, a story which suits its fierce appearance. The Stymphalians should have known what their own bad birds looked like. Athenian artists make Herakles attack swans or geese, the gentle marsh-birds they could see at home. The Stymphalian birds offered by Herakles to Athena on the metope from the temple of Zeus at Olympia cannot be identified.

I was unlucky when I looked for this Grebe near the ancient temples: that part was dried up, the East side would have been better for bird-watching. Pausanias (viii 22) probably identified Herakles' birds with Pelicans, no doubt because of their axe name and those formidable looking bills; actually the bills are soft and the birds timid. He also speaks of Stymphalian birds as acroteria on the temple of Artemis at Stymphalos, made of wood or gypsum.