

NOTES

Stymphalian and Other Birds

Miss Sylvia Benton, in a recent note,¹ identifies the bird which appears on some of the coins of Stymphalos² 'rising above the leaves of a Water Plantain . . . with a Fritillary on either side. . . . The bird wears ear-flaps, and for me a marsh bird with ear-flaps must be meant for the Great Crested Grebe'.

This identification seems to me convincing, though the bill as represented on the coins is perhaps rather short and thick. On April 29th and May 23rd 1974 I visited Stymphalos, in company with my family, in the hope of confirming that the Lake is still within the Grebe's range. This we were unable to do, and I am delighted to learn from Mr Buxton's note that 'the bird breeds now on the Stymphalian lake'.³

The Lake certainly offers in its extensive reed-beds a most suitable breeding-ground for Grebes, which build partly floating platforms of marsh vegetation to serve as nests. Adult birds sleep on the water and are fish-eaters. Grebes cannot therefore have suggested the different literary variants of this Labour of Herakles. Apollodorus (ii 5.6) says that the birds sheltered in great numbers in a thick forest overhanging the lake, where they were protected from wolves. This might suggest a heronry (unless Apollodorus meant that the birds were not aquatic at all), and we were very pleased during our first visit to the lake to see six Squacco Herons (*Ardeola ralloides*) feeding on the frogs which abound on the mud flats at the west end of the lake. But herons would not destroy the crops in the country round about, as Diodorus (iv 13.2) says the Stymphalian birds did. His birds might be geese (he does not mention the wood), and Miss Benton justly notes that 'Athenian artists make Herakles attack swans or geese'. Both Diodorus and Apollodorus make Herakles startle the birds with a bronze rattle, though they disagree as to whether his object was to put them up so that he could shoot them with his arrows (Apollodorus) or merely to drive them away (Diodorus). A similar doubt is noted by Pausanias (viii 22.4), who gives the rattle story on the authority of Peisandros of Kameira, while Hellanikos (Jacoby *FGrH* 4 F 104) and Pherekydes (*FGrH* 3 F 72) are cited by the scholiasts on Apollonios of Rhodes ii 1052 ff.⁴ As Roscher pointed out,⁵ the writers wished to attribute to Herakles or to Athena, who gave him the rattle according to Apollodorus, the useful invention of the bird-scarer.⁶ They were not concerned, as Miss Benton justly says the Stympha-

lians themselves were, to know what birds were actually to be found on the Lake.

On our second visit to the Lake we saw no herons, but two small flocks of Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), whose curved bills at once made us turn to Dr Peter Levi's *Pausanias*—our constant companion on our travels. Levi publishes⁷ a drawing from a bronze coin of Stymphalos in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, which shows a bird with a distinctly curved bill. (Those of Grebes are straight and dagger-like.) But we accept the suggestion made to us by this Journal's (anonymous) referee that the coin does not in fact show an Ibis, but may represent a sketch from memory in which details of two or three birds were combined.

Pausanias (viii 22.5) expressly notes that the armour-piercing beaks of the Stymphalidai of the Arabian desert are not curved like those of the Ibis, Miss Benton suggests that Pausanias's account of these birds might have been prompted by the 'axe name' of Pelicans, though she rightly says that their characters and beaks are different. I have nothing better to offer, but have one further observation, connected with Pelicans if not with Stymphalidai. A recent account of bird-rescue work in Florida⁸ describes how Pelicans are injured by diving upon fish which modern 'sportsmen' have fastened to boards floating just below the surface of the water. In the note that accompanied Miss Benton's,⁹ I doubted the statement of Dionysius (*Ixeuticon* iii 22) that the ancients took the bird named Cataractes by means of pictures of fish painted upon floating planks. I am afraid that this method was indeed practised in antiquity, and leave it to others to determine the probable victims from among the different sea-birds which appear to have contributed features to ancient descriptions of the Cataractes. The referee of *JHS* again has a suggestion to offer. He notes that only birds which dive from the air to catch fish (like Terns and Pelicans) can be taken in this way. The Tern certainly (as I remarked in my previous note) contributed some features to the Cataractes, but 'would hardly be worth catching—too small . . . the reference is therefore to the White or Dalmatian Pelican: either *Pelecanus onocrotalus* or *P. crispus*—and probably the latter'.

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'birds' were princesses killed by Herakles for entertaining his enemies the Molione.

¹ W. H. Roscher, *Lexicon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie* iv Col. 1563 s.v. 'Stymphalische Vogel'.

² Called either *κρόταλον* or *πλαταγή*, apparently indifferently. *Et sonitu terrebis aves*, says Virgil (Georgics i 156), without saying precisely how the noise is to be made.

³ Peter Levi, *Pausanias: Guide to Greece* (Harmondsworth, 1971) ii 423, fig. 13.

⁴ Downs Mathews, 'Volunteers rescue injured wildfowl', *Smithsonian Magazine* v no. 5 (August 1974) 31.

⁵ J. K. Anderson, *Θραξ, Δυτινος, Καταρράκτης*, *JHS* xcii (1972) 172.

¹ Sylvia Benton, 'Note on Sea Birds', *JHS* xcii (1972) 172.

² Compare F. W. Imhoof-Blumer and Percy Gardner, *A Numismatic Commentary on Pausanias* (2nd ed. revised by Al. N. Oikonomides; Chicago, 1964) pl. T xi. The ear-flaps appear more clearly on pl. T x, where the head is shown without vegetation.

³ John Buxton, 'A Further Note on Sea Birds', *JHS* xciv (1974) 170.

⁴ The scholiasts reject the tale of Mnaseas that the