

# BIRDS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA



AMERICAN SCHOOL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES  
AT ATHENS

EXCAVATIONS OF THE ATHENIAN AGORA  
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Front cover: Athenian silver tetradrachm, 5th century B.C.

# Birds of the Athenian Agora



For Spyros Spyropoulos and Eugene Vanderpool

AMERICAN SCHOOL  
OF CLASSICAL STUDIES AT ATHENS  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

1985

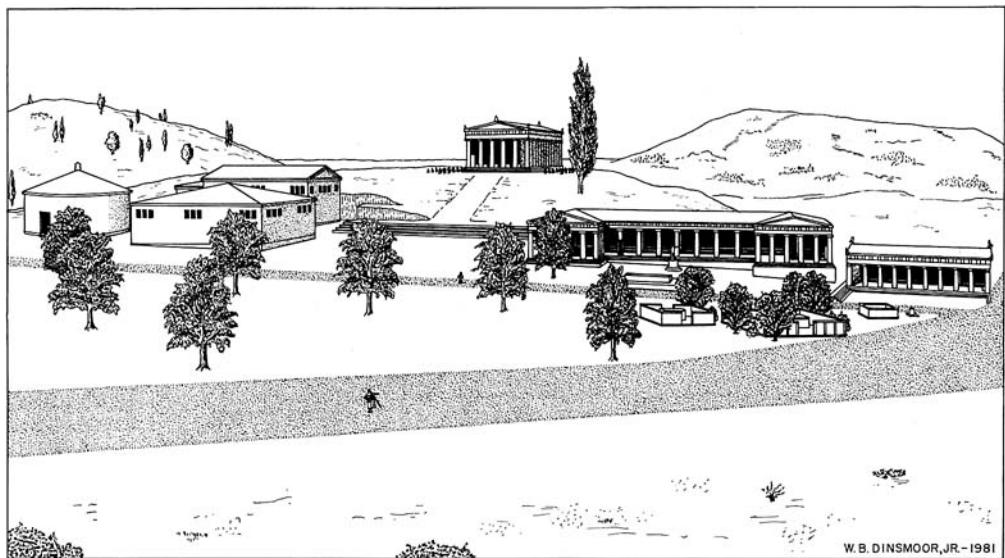


1. West side of the Agora today

THE BIRDS for which the ancient Athenian Agora was justly famous were metaphorical birds. The Agora was a place for the exchange of goods for money, and when Aristophanes made jokes about the "owls of Athens" that came flocking to the prosperous, his audience knew he meant coins like the one illustrated on the cover. It was also a place for the exchange of ideas, for conversation, for words, which as every schoolchild learned from Homer were "winged".

But beyond these metaphorical winged denizens of the Agora, we can point to evidence for actual birds there, both those that were objects of trade and those that occurred in either a wild or feral state. Unfortunately the birdwatchers of ancient Athens (Pausanias included) have failed to leave information on the wild birds, but it is possible to present a partially reconstructed picture of the birdlife of the ancient Agora and to offer an introduction to the birds of the modern archaeological park.

The Agora today bears a strikingly different relationship to its immediate surroundings from that it enjoyed in antiquity. Today it is an eight-hectare oasis of green parkland, one of many in a system which covers 1.8% of the sprawling metropolitan area of 433 square kilometers (nearly one fifth of the total area of Attica), containing over three million people. At the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.), Attica had a population of roughly 300,000–400,000, about one half of whom lived within the area of the modern capital. In a valley studded with scattered communities in a rural environment, the Athenian marketplace was the opposite of a green



W.B. DINSMOOR,JR.-1981

2. West side of the Agora as it was in the 5th century B.C.

oasis; this role belonged rather to the many groves and gymnasia in the city itself and near by. The Agora today is far more densely planted than at any phase of its life in antiquity as the economic and civic center. In the 5th century B.C. it was preserved as open space with only scattered plane trees (planted by the statesman Kimon) which probably required regular watering as do their modern successors. We know of a few other trees (white and black poplars) and have shakier evidence for a grove of olives and laurel. As the open Agora was increasingly cluttered with buildings in Roman times, the situation must have deteriorated, and the abundance and variety of birdlife must have suffered a decline. As the vegetation planted in the modern archaeological park since the 1950's reaches maturity, it is safe to guess that the Agora today supports a richer and more varied avifauna than at any earlier phase of its existence.

## BIRDS IN THE MARKETPLACE

Fill our market with goods!

Show us geese and ducks from Boiotia,  
shorebirds and woodpigeons . . .

Aristophanes, *Peace* (421 B.C.)



3. The bird on this small black-figure pitcher of the early 6th century is perhaps a swan

In plays written in the dark hours of the Peloponnesian War, Aristophanes often evokes the lavish market days of peace-time, a colorful and important element of which were the birds of all sorts brought from the woods and wetlands of Boiotia. Another list from his *Acharnians* adds Jackdaws, Coots, and grebes.

It is not surprising that most of the birds in Aristophanes' lists are waterfowl and marsh birds, which have been among the most prized of birds for culinary purposes since classical antiquity and long before. Waterfowl also occur very frequently as decorative images on pottery of all periods, both in the Agora and elsewhere. Such images are difficult to identify to species, or even to family. As the illustrations show, a modular waterfowl body may be fitted with neck and legs of various lengths, often dictated not by the mimetic intention of the vase painter but rather by the width of the



4. The floor of a 5th-century cup

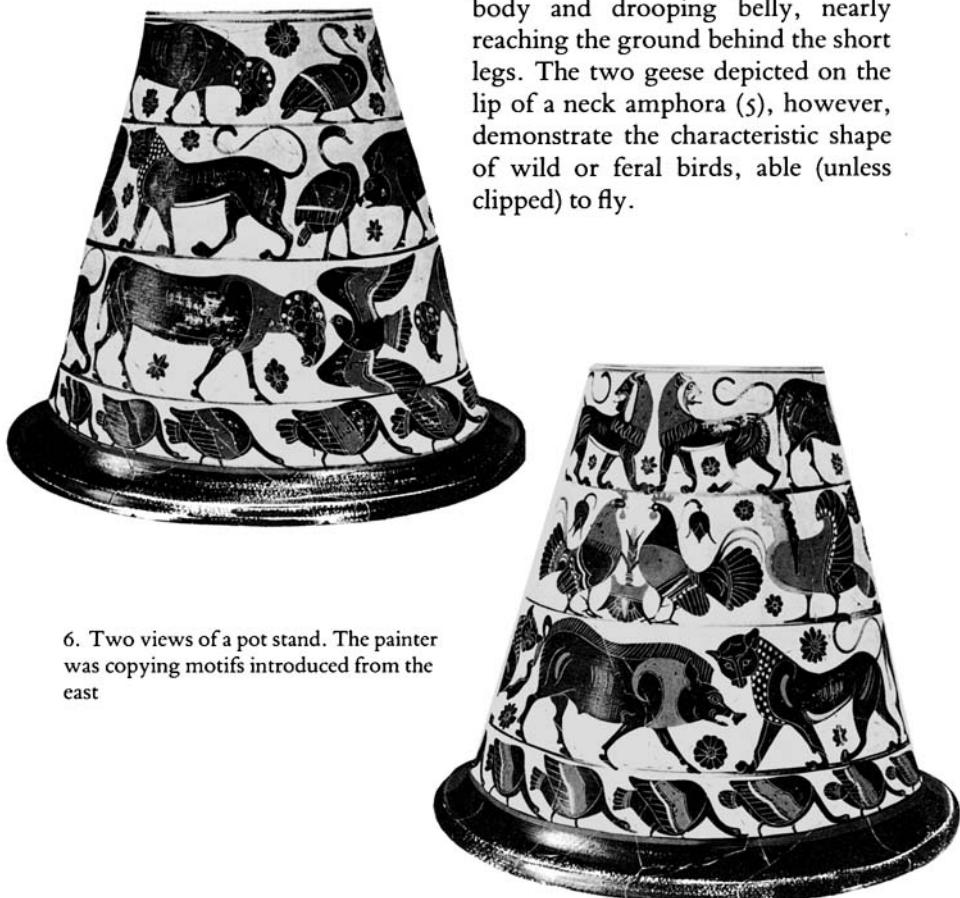


5. Two geese on the top surface of the rim of an early 6th-century vase

band or register he had to fill. Thus, on a 6th-century stand (6), the lowest, third, and highest registers contain birds of similar characteristics whose adaptation to the space allocated might well lead them to be identified variously as swans, or geese, or even, in the case of the standing bird in the third register, as wading birds.

As domestic animals, neither ducks nor swans seem ever to have been common in antiquity, but Odysseus' faithful wife Penelope kept twenty geese (*Odyssey* xix. 535–543), and numerous references in ancient literature to goose breeding and fattening make it clear that the domestic goose was a familiar sight throughout the ancient world. The remarkable uniformity of the Indo-European words for "goose" has led to the suggestion that domestication goes back before the differentiation of those languages. Images of waterfowl like that in the medallion opposite (4) show the characteristic

effects of domestication in the heavy body and drooping belly, nearly reaching the ground behind the short legs. The two geese depicted on the lip of a neck amphora (5), however, demonstrate the characteristic shape of wild or feral birds, able (unless clipped) to fly.



6. Two views of a pot stand. The painter was copying motifs introduced from the east



7. Fragment of a large pot of *ca.* 650 B.C.



8. The Agora's earliest cock, on a vase of the early 7th century B.C.



9. Two blue-and-white painted bowls made in Athens in the 17th century after Christ

## CHICKENS

The Red Jungle Fowl of Southeast Asia had been fully domesticated by 2000 B.C. and was known in Egypt five or six hundred years later. Although representations appear in Corinthian pottery and Athenian figurines of the last years of the 8th century, it was not until later that the domestic fowl penetrated the Greek world in numbers. It seems to have been common in Asia Minor in the 6th century, moving into Greece in the 5th, somewhat in advance of the expanding Persian Empire. In the 5th century the Athenians established an annual public cock fight to commemorate an incident in the Persian Wars when Themistokles had held up fighting cocks as an example to his countrymen: "These endure pain not for their country or for the gods of their fathers but simply for the sake of avoiding defeat." Near the end of the

century, Aristophanes in the *Birds* could get laughter by painting a portrait of the pompous "Persian Bird" that had ruled in the dim past as the first Great King.

There is a wide range of representations of fowl on Archaic, Classical, and post-Classical Greek pottery, where fighting cocks (often as love gifts) predominate. Examples from the Agora include an early Attic cock, on a sherd of the early 7th century (although this may in fact be a griffin, see p. 22). Less ambiguous are others from the second half of the century (7, 10). The Orientalizing pot stand (6) has, along with the waterfowl already described, a pair of fighting cocks, and it belongs to the first quarter of the 6th century. The red-figured oil flask or *askos* (11) is Classical, and the little terracotta cock (12) is a child's rattle of the Roman period. The tradition is a long one, and dynamic representations of fighting cocks are found on glazed ware of the Turkish period (9).



10. A black-figured amphora of ca. 625 B.C.



11. An oil flask of the 5th century B.C., seen from above



12. Clay rattle. 4th century after Christ



13. A small bowl of the Turkish period

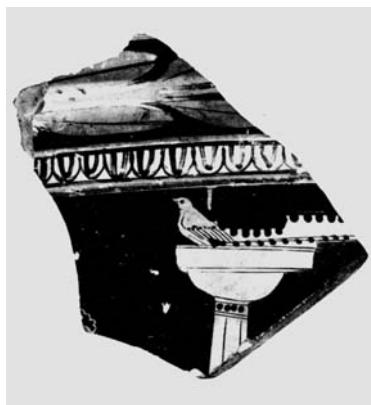


14. A bronze ornament of the late Roman period

### THE PEACOCK ZOO

The Peacock was probably first domesticated in India and was highly prized in Persia, where it was displayed in large aviaries and palace gardens (*paradeisoi*). In something of the same manner, a Peacock zoo was maintained by a private individual in 5th-century Athens. The public was admitted only once a month, but admirers came from as far away as Sparta and Thessaly to see the birds and to obtain eggs. This and the price (10,000 drachmas per bird, at the time when a skilled workman earned one drachma a day) are indications of its rarity.

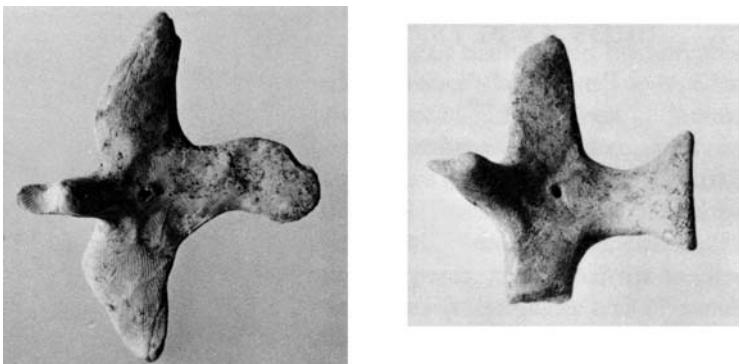
By the 4th century, however, the Peacock had become a common luxury and was proverbial for its pride and vanity. Popular belief held that it knew it was the most beautiful of birds but brooded over the unattractive wrinkles in its feet. In later times it was a popular decorative motif and is shown here as a late Roman bronze miniature (14) and on a Turkish bowl (13).



15. A pigeon perches on a Doric column. Fragment of a wine-mixing bowl of the Classical period

### DOVES

The ancient authors distinguished several species of dove or pigeon, to which they applied a bewildering array of names. It is difficult to determine which species are intended, but it seems likely that the Rock Dove, the Woodpigeon, and the Turtle Dove were recognized. The now ubiquitous Collared Turtle Dove has moved into southern Greece in recent times (see p. 29) and was probably unknown to ancient Athenians. The



16. Votive doves of the 5th century B.C.

most familiar variety, of course, was the tame pigeon (domesticated from the wild Rock Dove), and the *Geponika* (a Byzantine compilation of ancient farming lore) gives instructions for its care and for the construction of an elaborate dovecote. Monumental dovecotes have been erected until quite recently on some of the Cycladic islands, and many of these structures can still be seen there today.

The iridescent plumage of the pigeon is mentioned by Aristotle, among others, but a white variety was also known. The white paint which adheres to many simple figurines (16) is evidence that the white form was widely cultivated. Ancient Athenian pigeons, like their modern descendants, could be an urban nuisance as they perched on statues and buildings (15).

Small clay doves (16) may have served as toys or votives. The dove was sacred to various gods and goddesses, including Zeus, Dione, and Demeter, but was most commonly associated with Aphrodite, who had a sanctuary on the north side of the Agora. Her shrine at Eryx, in Sicily, was home to a large flock of doves.

Doves were proverbially affectionate, and pairs were said to mate for life; they were therefore often given as tokens of affection, and "dove" was a term of endearment in both Greek and Latin. People kept them as pets, and this, along with the familiarity of the bird, made it a suitable form for a child's rattle of the Roman period (17).



17. Clay rattle. 4th century after Christ

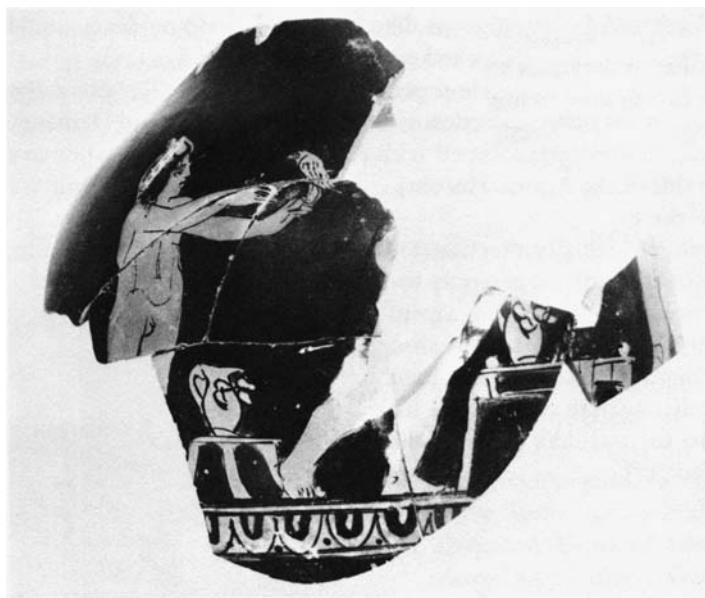
## BIRDS AS PETS

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope makes it clear that the geese she keeps in her house are first and foremost pets, objects of tender care and concern. The chubby girl with a pet goose shown on a red-figured pitcher (18) beautifully illustrates the relationship. Chickens as well, as we have seen, emerge in the Greek world first as animals for sport and as love gifts, not as creatures raised for the table. The line between domestication for esthetic and for economic purposes is very difficult to draw, but there is abundant evidence in literature and in art for the ancient Greeks' and Romans' appreciation of pet birds.

The same taste is conspicuous in Athens today, where caged songbirds abound (20). Aside from Canaries, most of those now regularly kept for their song are native species such as the Goldfinch (*karderina*), the Greenfinch, and the Chaffinch. In antiquity, Nightingales seem to have been kept as caged songbirds, and the Romans kept Blue Rock Thrushes. Exotics



18. Small pitcher or *chous*. 5th century B.C.



19. Fragment of a 5th-century jug



20. Caged Goldfinch

regularly kept today include the usual range of easily raised finches, as well as parakeets, parrots, and mynahs. Like urban parks elsewhere in Europe and in America, the modern Agora is a place where one might well see an escaped Java Sparrow taking a bath in a puddle or a budgie perched in a plane tree. Caged parrots were kept in antiquity as well and like their modern counterparts doubtless sometimes escaped.

In the opening of Aristophanes' *Birds* (414 B.C.) we find evidence for birdsellers in Athens who sold crows and Jackdaws, although this may be a joke at the expense of poultry sellers. The black-figured *lebes* stand showing women processing fibers (21) includes a medium-sized bird, perhaps a member of the crow family, looking on with interest, and the bird's proximity to the women suggests that it is a pet. More difficult to identify satisfactorily is a bird held at arm's length by a nude boy in a late-5th-century red-figure scene (19). The pose suggests that of a falconer, but the image of the bird is ambiguous, and there is no evidence for falconry in Greece in this period (see p. 17).



21. Base of an elaborate vessel of the 6th century B.C.

## OWLS



22. Athenian silver and bronze coins of the 5th to 3rd centuries B.C.



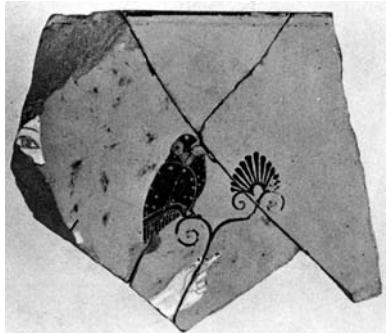
23. An Athenian bronze weight

24. A *glaux* of the 5th century B.C.

The Athenian bird *par excellence* was the *glaux* or Little Owl (see back cover), whose Latin binomial, *Athene noctua*, preserves its association with the patron goddess of Athens. Athena is often shown in company with the owl (25, 26) and had as one of her epithets *glaukopis* (variously translated as "bright-eyed" or "owl-faced"). The conspicuous presence of the Little Owl on the Akropolis was probably responsible for this relationship. Happily, the *glaux* is still present today and may be seen at dusk in the Odeion of Herodes Atticus, on the south slope of the Akropolis, hunting the numerous beetles which are attracted to the lights during evening performances.

The owl was the symbol of the city as well as of her goddess and appeared on the reverse side of Athenian coins from their inception in the 6th century until the 1st century B.C. (cover, 22). It marked other official materials as well, such as weights (23) and the prize amphoras awarded to successful competitors in the Panathenaic games (25, left). The owl was such a common motif on one variety of 5th-century drinking cup (24) that the shape has been





25. Athena and her owl. On the right, a Panathenaic amphora, above, a plaque found on the north slope of the Akropolis. 6th century B.C.



christened "the glaux" by modern scholars; the vertical handle suggests the beak of the bird, the horizontal one its tail.

Beyond its specifically Athenian associations, the owl held a fascination for the Greeks which was translated into numerous fables and bits of lore. The hostility of small birds and particularly of crows to owls entered Indo-European folklore very early, and a full-scale war of crows and owls was fought in the Indian tales of the *Panchatantra* (ca. 200 B.C.), echoes of which can be heard in Greek anecdotal historians such as Aelian. Aesop's fables are an early source for the "wise old owl", a widespread motif doubtless stemming from the owl's frontal (and hence disturbingly human) eyes. It is this trait that suggests that the otherwise rather crowlike bird on the black-figured plaque above (25, left) is an owl. Allegorizers of myth soon linked the wisdom of the owl with the wisdom of Athena, and the true origins of both associations were forgotten.

These mysterious denizens of the night are regularly visible by day as well and so mediate between the two realms. On the dark side, they were credited with surreptitiously milking goats (as Nightjars were thought to do) and of using the heart of a bat as a charm to free their nests of ants.

The owl of Athena continued to be a symbol of the city in Roman times and can be seen on the breastplate of a statue of the emperor Hadrian (26), a devoted benefactor of the city, as well as on a Roman lamp of Athenian manufacture (27).



26. Detail of the armor on a statue of Hadrian (ruled A.D. 117–138). The owl perches on a tendril to the right of the goddess Athena

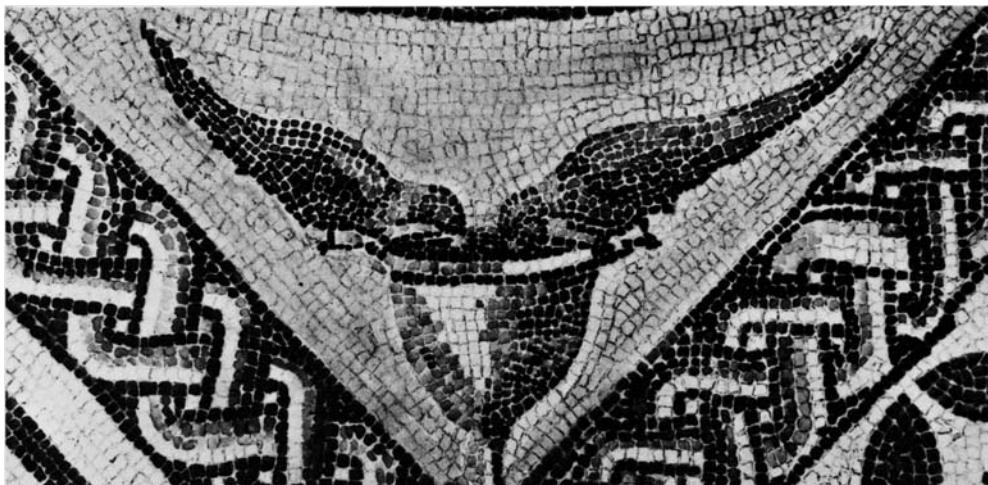


27. Fragment of a large lamp made in Athens in the 4th century after Christ

## PARAKEET

The Alexandrine parakeets were brought to Greece from India, where they were highly prized for their ability to mimic human speech. They were unknown in Greece before the eastern campaigns of Alexander the Great but by Roman times had become popular pets. A detail of a mosaic (28) from a private house on the slopes of the Areopagus illustrates an ancient observation that the parakeet "becomes more insolent when it drinks wine."

28. Detail of a mosaic of the 2nd century after Christ





29. Fragment of a plate. Late 5th century B.C.

30. A bronze coin minted in Asia Minor in the 3rd century after Christ shows the eagle of the Roman military standards



31. A bronze coin minted in Hellenistic Egypt bears the eagle of Zeus on its reverse

## EAGLES

Large raptors (birds of prey) that soar on updrafts or fly with a heavy flap-and-glide pattern are very difficult to identify to species, even with binoculars. There are many localities in Greece today that bear the name "Aetos" (Eagle), but the visitor will almost invariably find them occupied by conspicuous Buzzards (*Buteo buteo*) rather than eagles. Thus most ancient references to eagles should be thought of as designating a class of birds including Buzzards, as well as vultures and true eagles.

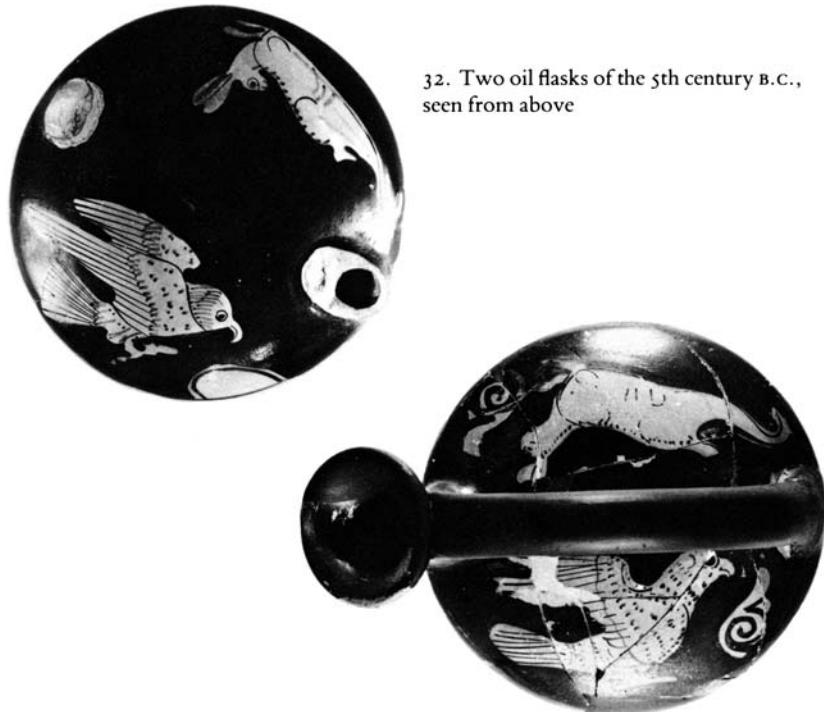
In some instances, the species masked behind the general designation "eagle" can be distinguished in the myths, on the basis of behavior. Thus the *aetos* of the Prometheus story, which came periodically to spend the day feasting on the liver of Zeus' immobilized victim, can reasonably be supposed to represent a vulture. The eagle said to have mistaken Aischylos' bald head for a rock and to have killed the poet by attempting to smash a tortoise on it may well have been a Golden Eagle or a Lammergeyer, for both species have been observed feeding on tortoises in this way. Numerous myths connect the eagle with Zeus and establish a special relationship between the king of the gods and the king of birds.

Whatever the difficulties of identifying to species the "eagles" of myth, the iconography of the eagle in the Classical period is quite distinctive. The remarkable painting of the head of an eagle (29) suggests that the artist was working from personal experience of a captive Golden Eagle or from an image derived from someone else's personal experience. It is clear that the large, heavy-billed eagles are the ones that set the pattern for the symbols displayed by the Ptolemies and by the Romans (30, 31). Although both

Greeks and Romans worked consciously from the *Aquila* eagles to represent the bird of Zeus, the eagle standard used by the Roman armies (30) may in fact have been inspired by the similar use of the Griffon Vulture (whose relevance to the battlefield is far clearer than that of the eagle) as the standard of the Assyrian and Persian armies.

The habit of some large eagles of preying on hares gives rise to a particularly pleasing group of 5th-century *askoi* or oil flasks (32). In profile, either the fleeing hare or the reaching raptor can be seen in isolation, but the entire scene can be grasped only from above. This fragmented, hide-and-seek quality is surely very much part of the intention of the artists, and in the upper example the hare seems just to have disappeared into his hole, creating a situation visible in its entirety only to the eye of the imagination.

Here again, we are at a loss to identify the large raptor; two *Buteos* are candidates, as are Bonelli's Eagle and the larger eagles. The scene represented may in fact be drawn from hunting experience rather than from observation of simple predation. Although they are less exciting to fly than falcons, buteonine hawks are today sometimes trained by falconers to take squirrels and rabbits.



32. Two oil flasks of the 5th century B.C.,  
seen from above



33. A faience falcon from a votive pit of the Archaic period

34. Floor of an Athenian drinking cup of the 5th century B.C.



### FALCONS AND FALCONRY

Our earliest literary source for hunting with hawks is Aristotle, who describes contemporary customs in Thrace, late in the 4th century, where

people hunt little birds with hawks. Some hit the thickets and the trees with sticks to make the little birds fly up, and then the hawks appear from above and chase them down. They are terrified and fly back down close to the ground where men knock them down with their sticks and then share their prey with the hawks.

*Historia animalium* 9, 620a

The same description is repeated with slight variations in the pseudo-Aristotelian work *On Wondrous Things Heard*: the hunters are boys, and it is made explicit that the hawks are tame and that their function is to drive the birds to take refuge in thickets where they are vulnerable to the children with their sticks. This does not, of course, constitute falconry as we know it, but it does involve kept small hawks, although probably Sparrowhawks rather than falcons.

All other references to hunting with birds in antiquity describe the habits of easterners, and there is little doubt that the Persians (in this the heirs of the Assyrians) were training hawks by the Classical period. In Egypt as well, the falcon, often the symbol of Horus, was held in great respect and abundantly represented in art. The little faience falcon above (33) was found in the Agora in an Archaic context; although it certainly looks Egyptian, it may in fact have been produced in the Egyptianizing faience works of some other center such as Rhodes.

We do not, however, have evidence that the Egyptians practiced falconry, and the sport seems to have been limited to the fertile crescent and

35. Fragments of Byzantine plates. 11th to 12th centuries after Christ

the steppes of Asia to the north. Mosaics of the 5th century after Christ found at Argos, along with literary evidence of the 4th and 5th centuries, suggest that the Goths and other invaders of that time brought falconry to eastern and western Europe alike, although it became the sport of kings primarily in the west.

Glazed pottery of the Byzantine period in the Agora sometimes has images of small birds of prey (35) which may be held by figures who are apparently falconers (36).

Finally, we have from the Classical period a single image (34) which seems to represent a hovering Kestrel. The position of the bird's wings, extended forward over the head, probably indicates actual observation of this small falcon (still a common one in Attica and elsewhere in Greece) in the characteristic position it takes up repeatedly in its hunting, just before it stoops. Somewhat inconsistent with this interpretation of the image is the fact that the bird is carrying a (largely faded) snake in its talons, but both position and prey are consistent with this identification, even if one would not expect to see a hovering bird carrying prey.

Of all the raptors discussed thus far, this is undoubtedly the one most

likely actually to be observed in the Agora, and Kestrels were seen not uncommonly around the Akropolis as recently as the 1950's. They can still be seen over the slopes of Hymettos and Pentelikon, as can Buzzards, but birds of prey now visit the center of Athens only sporadically while migrating.



36. Falconer on a Byzantine potsherd



37. Digenis Akritas on a 12th-century plate

### DIGENIS AKRITAS

A hero attacks a dragon on the floor of this *sgraffito* plate of the 12th century after Christ. Dragon slayers are common in mediaeval lore of both east and west. The one shown here is probably that greatest of Byzantine heroes, Digenis Akritas, whose exploits were the subject of epic poetry as early as the 10th century and served also as material for popular songs or *tragoudia*. The second part of his name identifies him as one of the *akritai*, warriors who fought against brigands and infidels on the boundaries of the empire and maintained considerable independence from the Emperor.

Digenis is shown here with a bird, possibly one of the hawks his father-in-law is said to have given him as part of his wife's stupendous *proika* or dowry. Aside from old coins, the traditional woven goods, and fourteen cooks, this dowry contained a vast collection of livestock, beginning with "four hundred first-class horses" and including

Twelve snow-white Abasgian hawks,  
twelve falconers and as many falcons.

Digenis was a great hunter in the region of Cappadocia and the Euphrates valley, and the poem depicts him going out to hunt with his father and his uncle, carrying white Gyrfalcons. His expertise as a falconer is echoed in the song which describes him as "the eagle of the world" and credits him with such high leaps that he "caught the birds, the falcon in flight."

## BIRDS IN MYTH

Birds generate fantasy, and the myths of all peoples are filled with bird stories. Among the tales told by the Greeks were many which involved transformation from human to avian form. Consider the unhappy family of Tereus, king of Thrace. Although he had a faithful wife, Prokne, he fell in love with her sister Philomela. After seducing the sister, he cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling tales. But Philomela embroidered the story into a robe and sent it to Prokne, who got revenge on her husband by killing their son and serving him for dinner. All three were turned into birds. Tereus became a Hoopoe; Prokne became a Nightingale, whose lovely song is a lament for her dead son; and the tongueless Philomela became a Swallow, whose cries sounded to the Greeks like the name of the dead boy, Itys. Later authors reversed the names of the sisters, and thus the Nightingale appropriately became Philomela ("lover of song") and inarticulate Prokne (or Progne) entered the scientific literature to designate a genus of swallows. The Hoopoe has sometimes been seen in the Agora, but there are no certain records of Nightingales. In antiquity, however, Nightingales sang near Plato's Academy in the suburban grove of Kolonus, 2.5 kilometers north of the Agora. Swallows and House Martins can be seen in the Agora all summer.

Metamorphosis to birdhood was terminal for humans, but the gods could don and doff other forms at will. In many cases this was simply the guise a divinity chose for appearing to men, who were too weak to bear the presence of his divine form. But sometimes there was an ulterior motive. Zeus' transformations were commonly for the purpose of seduction. His



38. The shoulder of a 5th-century *hydria* or water jug



39. Lamp made in Athens in the 3rd century after Christ

courtship of the very coy Hera, which is said to have lasted for 300 years, succeeded only when he took on the form of a bedraggled Cuckoo, which the tender-hearted goddess offered to warm between her breasts. A similar trick was useful in the context of human dalliance as well. A well-known tale tells of Zeus' seduction of Leda, the wife of the Spartan king Tyndareos. Zeus mated with her in the form of a swan, after which she laid an egg and hatched out anywhere from one to four divine offspring. The scene appears on a Roman lamp (39) and has of course inspired more recent artists and poets as well. In a similar adventure, Zeus transformed himself into an

eagle and snatched up a beautiful young man, Ganymede, to be his lover and cup-bearer (40).

The earliest surviving piece of Greek literature, the *Iliad*, mentions the familiar story of the cranes "who bring death and destruction to the Pygmy men" (3, 6), with whom, it seems, they had a traditional enmity. The story, which may be based on garbled travelers' reports of Pygmies and their hunting of large birds, is illustrated on a fragment of a red-figured *hydria* (38).



40. Fragment of a moldmade bowl of the late 3rd or early 2nd century B.C.



41. Ivory *pyxis* or jewel box and lid, from a wealthy grave to the south of the Agora. 15th century B.C.

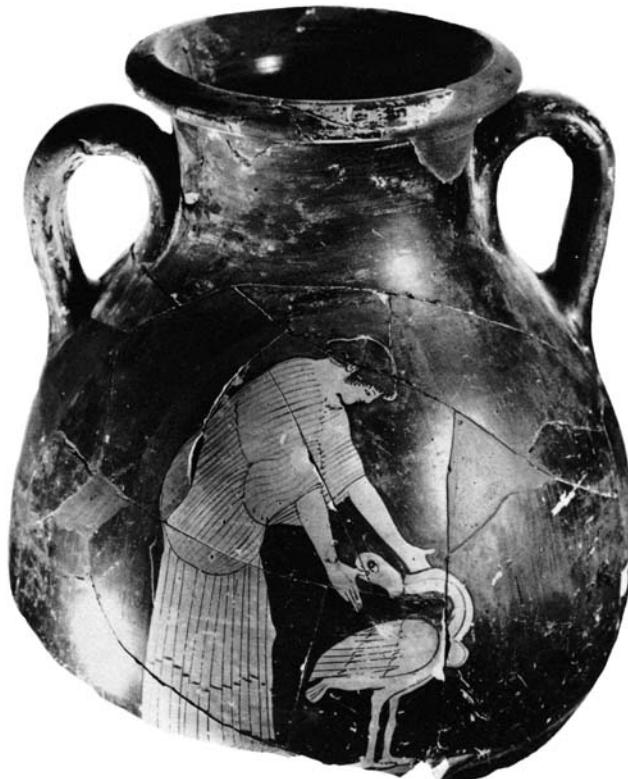
### FABULOUS AND MONSTROUS BIRDS

At many times in her long history, Greece has looked to the east for inspiration. Close contact with the east through trade presented new images to Greek eyes, including a large repertory of composite creatures which were soon reworked into distinctively Greek forms. The best known, the sphinx, takes only her wings from the birds, but other creatures have a larger avian component.

The griffin, as it appears in Greek art, has the body of a feline, while the wings and the head with its curved beak are borrowed from a bird of prey. The Greeks of the Bronze Age were particularly fond of the griffin as a decorative motif, and it often appears in wall painting and minor arts in a stiff, heraldic pose. It may also behave like a large and aggressive raptor, swooping out of the sky on a herd of deer, as depicted on an ivory pyxis from a late Bronze Age chamber tomb (41).



42. A lion and a siren painted on the rim of a child's potty. 6th century B.C.



43. An Athenian lady and her pet on a vase of the 5th century B.C.

The siren, a bird with a woman's head, became a popular motif in the 7th and 6th centuries. Most often she is shown as part of a decorative procession (6, 42), but, unlike the griffin, she has a mythology. Homer tells of the sirens who "cast a spell with their clear voice" (*Odyssey* XII.44), although he does not comment on their bodily form. Odysseus encountered them on his long journey home from Troy. Curious to hear their song but not wanting to succumb to their charm, he had himself bound to the mast of his ship as he sailed by.

The phallos bird (43), whose head and neck consist of an erect penis, sometimes with a wattle of scrotum at the base, is usually the familiar of women on Attic vases. It refers to the proverbial wantonness of women, who, according to the testimony of the seer Teiresias, enjoyed sex nine times as much as men.



44. Jug from a woman's grave. 8th century B.C.



45. Fragment of a Protoattic stand. Mid-7th century B.C.

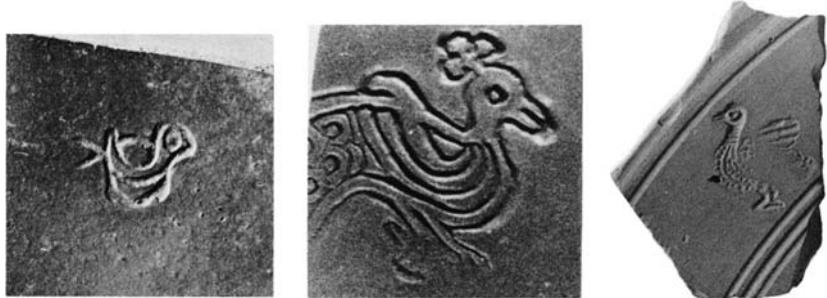
#### BIRDS AS A DECORATIVE MOTIF

The continuous history of the bird as a decorative motif on Attic pottery begins in the Geometric period (10th–8th centuries B.C.), although birds are frequently represented in Bronze Age art as well. Geometric birds are vignetted in single panels (44) or proceed solemnly in single file around a vase (46). The long history of the bird as a symbol of the soul suggests that on grave gifts such as these it may have been more than merely decorative.

Although the Cretan artists of the Bronze Age and Roman painters and mosaicists sometimes rendered birds natural-



46. Amphora from the grave of a man. 8th century B.C.

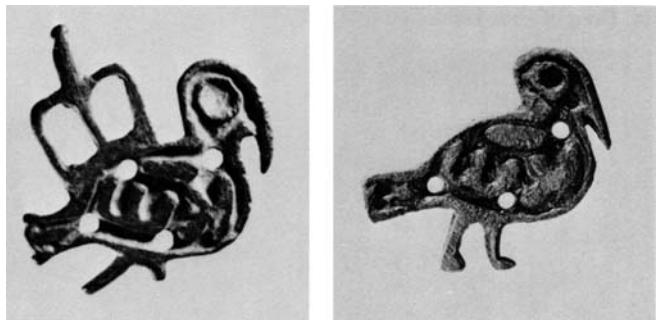


47. Three stamps from plates of the Roman period

istically, the imaginations of most artists were attracted rather to the decorative possibilities of the bird form, and most of our early representations are highly stylized. Long legs and necks suggest waders (heron, egret, or stork) or cranes (44–46), while short-legged birds may be geese, ducks, or swans, depending on the length of their necks (3–6).

The bird is a major component in the decoration of many vases of the 8th (44, 46), 7th (45), and 6th centuries (3, 5, 6). The greater interest of the Classical artist in narrative and genre scenes left less scope for bird decoration, but even here the bird is occasionally spotlighted (24). Potters of the Roman period used it to enliven the rims of plates (47) and lamps (27).

Birds decorate other objects as well. Two nearly identical bridle ornaments from the Agora (48) are mementos of the stay in Athens of the Byzantine emperor Constans II and his retinue in the winter of A.D. 662/663. Similar bridle pieces are found from Constantinople to Syracuse, along the route Constans followed as he and his court abandoned Constantinople and set out to found a new (and short-lived) Byzantine capital in Sicily.



48. Bronze bridle ornaments bearing the monogram of Constans II



49. An impressive bird, perhaps a raptor, fills the bottom of this black-and-green painted-ware bowl of the late 11th or early 12th century after Christ



50. Fragment of an incised plate of the 12th century after Christ



51. Floor of a bowl of the Turkish period

#### BYZANTINE AND TURKISH BIRDS

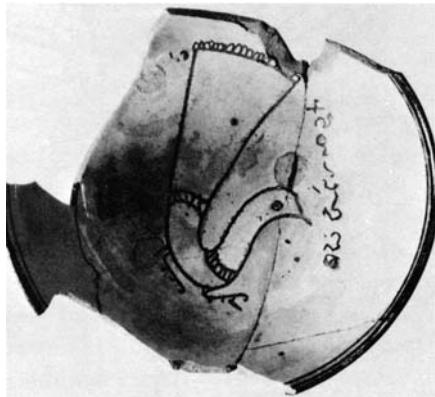
A bird often fills the floor of Byzantine and Turkish plates and bowls. The artist felt free to embellish and caricature at will, and we would not expect to meet such creatures as these in nature.



52. Two examples of Turkish blue-and-white ware of the 17th century after Christ. The bird on the left might plausibly be identified as a Peacock

## TALKING BIRDS

Among the pottery of the Turkish period depicting birds, two pieces from the Agora are particularly fascinating because they carry inscriptions, both of which have defied transliteration and translation. One (53) represents a Peacock in a stylized manner characteristic of Turkish pottery (see also 13). The marks to the right of the bird look tantalizingly like Arabic script, but some of the letter forms are impossible to make out. The other pot (54) shows two birds, perhaps fowl, with an unreadable inscription in letters which appear to be Greek but, like the Arabic letters of the peacock bowl, are largely unintelligible and yield no meaning. Perhaps the birds are to be imagined pronouncing the words written beside them, or, to put it differently, the inscriptions transcribe the non-language of birds.



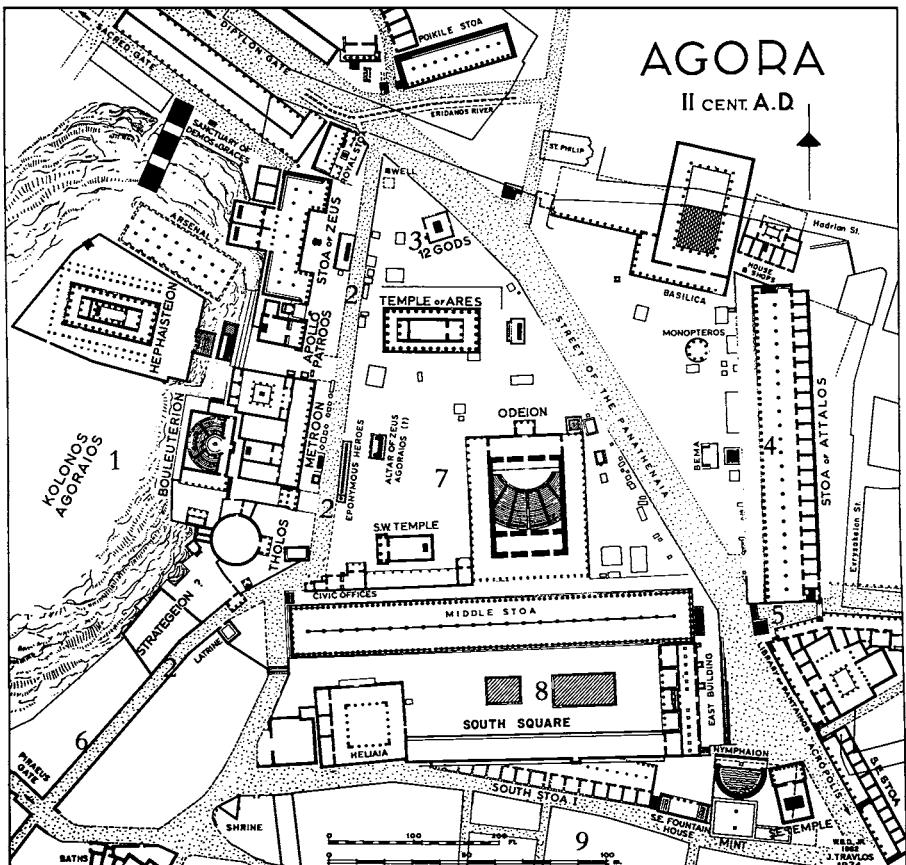
53. Small bowl of the Turkish period



54. Jug of the Turkish period

# AGORA

II CENT. A.D.



### 55. The Agora in the 2nd century B.C.

This plan includes most of the major structures visible in the Agora today, with the exception of those erected in the central open area in the Roman period. The following areas will be of interest to those concerned with the birds of the archaeological park. The Kolonos Agoraios (1), on its north and south slopes and along the west fence, has the tallest and densest vegetation. Note also the lawn south of the Hephaisteion. The West Road runs by the Great Drain (2), now uncovered in parts and often with standing water. Tall plane trees create excellent damp cover near the Altar of the Twelve Gods (3), and the triangle between the Panatheniac Way and the Stoa of Attalos (4), although drier, has dense vegetation and good cover. The road to the Roman Agora (5) often has standing water and is generally quiet, as is the road toward the Pnyx (6). The central area (7) has patchy cover and water daily under the plane trees, while the South Square (8) offers the most open as well as the driest habitat in the park. Near the south fence (9) habitat is continuous with that on the Areopagus.

## BIRDS IN THE AGORA TODAY

Birds in remarkable numbers and variety are to be seen in the center of Athens today in the larger parks, in spite of the congestion and air pollution which, over the past few decades, have doubtless rendered the area uncongenial to many species. Systematic observations in 1978/79 and occasional observations since that time have made it possible to describe in general terms the avifauna of the Agora archaeological park and to work in the direction of a species list and an over-all picture of the arrival and departure dates of the more conspicuous species. Of course, none of this information is definitive. Changes will occur with time, and many species may be far more (or less) regular than they appeared during the period when our sample was taken, but the following summary is offered as a basis for future observations.

July and August, when most visitors come to the Agora, is the nadir of the annual cycle of bird activity in the park. The heat at midday is intense, and those birds that are present throughout the summer keep to cover and to the coolest, dampest areas of the park, particularly to the shade of the plane trees near the Altar of the Twelve Gods, where water is always available. Here Great Tits and Blackbirds are to be found even in mid-summer. Blackbirds can usually be found along the west fence as well and occur in greater numbers beyond the fence under the taller crown and more developed understory of the Theseion Park. Here and elsewhere Collared Turtle Doves can always be seen, perched in the eucalyptus or cypress trees, flying across the park, or foraging with the pigeons and the ubiquitous House Sparrows in the open areas. These *dekaoktorides* (or "eighteen-ers", a name derived from their mournful call) are a recent arrival from further north in the Balkans, and only in the past generation have they come to be among the commonest birds of Athens and of many other European cities. In the scattered low bushes of the rest of the park Sardinian Warblers are always to be found, and in summer the grating chatter of Olivaceous Warblers is often heard issuing from the treetops, although these become inconspicuous after they stop singing in July. Greenfinches, Goldfinches, and Serins are likely to occur at any time in the spring and summer but are unpredictable. Swifts, Swallows, and House Martins can be seen any day catching insects over the Agora and particularly over the Kolonos Agoraios, although House Martins seem virtually to disappear by late July.

In late July and August there is a conspicuous increase in numbers of Spotted Flycatchers, both in the Agora and in other Athenian parks and gardens, doubtless representing fledged young and pre-migratory assemblies. They remain conspicuous through September, and the last disappear

by early November. During late August and September, a variety of passage migrants may be seen in the Agora, and the winter residents begin to arrive. The most frustrating of this group are the leaf warblers of the genus *Phylloscopus*: the inexperienced observer will find it next to impossible to separate the Willow Warblers, which probably do not remain to winter in the Agora, from the Chiffchaffs which tend to come through later. Swifts and Swallows are flocking in early September, and only stragglers are left by the end of the month. During the 1950's, September regularly brought Blue Rock Thrushes to winter in the Agora, but this phenomenon no longer occurs, partly, no doubt, because of the growth of the vegetation. In October the most conspicuous winter residents arrive, the Robins and the far less numerous Black Redstarts. A few Robins may be present from early in the month, but a noisy wave arrives in the last week, immediately setting up winter feeding territories which are defended against Black Redstarts as well as against other Robins. Counts at the end of October and early in November produced over fifty individuals, although after the initial establishment of territories average counts dropped into the twenties. There were only two Black Redstart feeding areas in the Agora in 1978/79.

November brings the most numerous migrants, the Starlings, which in some winters roost in the thousands in the eucalyptus trees of the adjacent Theseion Park and visit the Agora throughout the winter. By the beginning of March only stragglers remain. Chaffinches visit the park sporadically during the fall but become regular and numerous only in November, often feeding on the ground in the open with the House Sparrows. They too disappear in late February or early March. In the open areas both White and Gray Wagtails can sometimes be seen, usually near water or flying by overhead. Wrens and Song Thrushes also visit the Agora in mid-winter, and the last thrushes can still be seen in late March. Cirl Buntings can be seen on the slopes of the Areopagus and in the Agora during the fall and winter months and may well breed in the vicinity. They sing in March and can still be seen in May. Dunnocks visit the park in mid-winter, and in exceptionally snowy winters Woodcocks have been known to invade the Agora and other Athenian parks for a week or two. In February and March the ivy on the foundation of the terrace of the Stoa of Attalos and on the retaining wall of the entrance ramp at the north gate is heavy with berries, and the common wintering Blackcaps can usually be found there harvesting the crop. Just above the Agora, on the north slope of the Akropolis, there is a single record of Wallcreeper in winter.

Except for the resident species, the Agora appears to support only a very small breeding population of birds. Most of the wintering birds disappear in February and March, either (like the Starlings and Song Thrushes) for the north, or (like the Robins, Chaffinches and others) for the higher

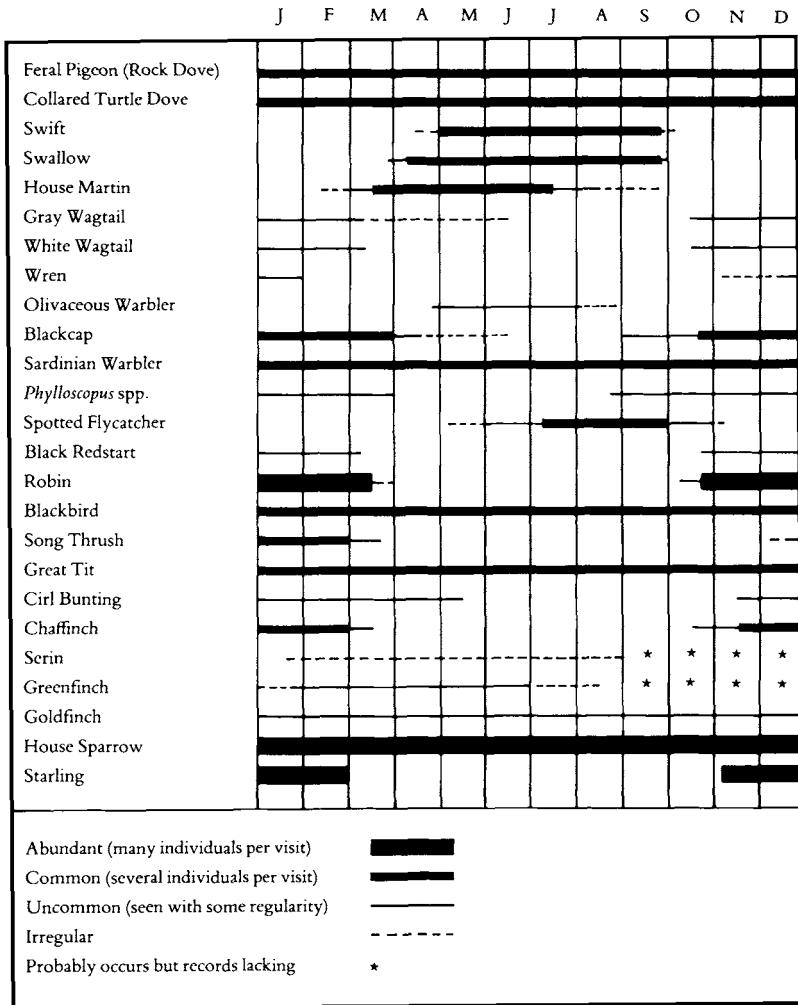
ground where they find nesting habitat. Much of the wintering bird population of Athenian parks consists of concentrations of altitudinal migrants wintering in lowland environments.

Summer resident House Martins arrive in numbers early in March, followed by Swallows in April and Swifts at the very end of the month. The Olivaceous Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers arrive in late April and early May with the passage migrants. As elsewhere, spring migration is a time of exciting birding in the Agora, when one has the best chance of seeing a Hoopoe or a rare warbler. Migrating Alpine Swifts regularly visit the Akropolis about May 1, and a few summer there, occasionally venturing out over the Agora. After this flurry of activity, however, the summer months are relatively uneventful, and by the latter part of June the bird population of the park has become rather impoverished, both in numbers and in variety. By far the most conspicuous breeding birds are the House Sparrows that utilize gaps in the masonry of the Hephaisteion.

Along Hadrian Street, just opposite the north side of the excavation, there are several shops displaying caged songbirds. Much of the birdsong one is likely to hear in the Agora comes from these captive birds, but through their song the caged native songbirds often act as live decoys for wild Goldfinches, Chaffinches, or Greenfinches. These can sometimes be heard duetting with the captive birds from the trees along the north side of the archaeological park.

On the plan on p. 28 are indicated a number of regions within the park which are of particular interest for birdwatchers. The more rewarding habitats are those which offer cover and water, although the level of human activity in various parts of the park is also a factor. The visitor to the park who wishes to observe birds will do well to start along the north wall in the deep shade of the plane trees, then to explore the Kolonos Agoraios and the clumps of bushes and trees along the Great Drain. These well-watered areas, along with the plantings between the Panathenaic Way and the Stoa of Attalos, will be the richest sections of the Agora, both for numbers and for variety of species.

Throughout the greater part of the year the diurnal cycle of avian activity in the park is very marked. Activity declines sharply late in the morning and resumes only at evening, when the park is likely to be closed. The unfenced slopes of the Areopagus, south of the park, and adjacent parts of the Theseion Park may offer comparable birding when the archaeological park is closed.



56. Seasonal abundance of 25 species frequently observed in the Agora

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Cover: H'-3859  
 Title page: Drawing by Eva Brann. Birds  
 on a pot of the late 8th or early 7th century B.C.  
 1. Photograph by Robert K. Vincent, Jr.  
 2. Drawing by W. B. Dinsmoor, Jr.  
 3. P 15002  
 4. P 18495  
 5. P 4727  
 6. P 13012  
 7. P 4950  
 8. P 5408  
 9. P 7815, P 10172  
 10. P 4626  
 11. P 29611  
 12. T 1423  
 13. P 20895  
 14. B 650  
 15. P 3045  
 16. T 1366, T 1367  
 17. T 1854  
 18. P 28326  
 19. P 16912  
 20. Photograph by Robert D. Lamberton  
 21. P 7897  
 22. II-510, Φ-391, Λ-410, IIΘ-312  
 23. B 152  
 24. P 18564  
 25. A-P 2073, P 24661  
 26. S 166  
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28. Watercolor by Weak's Gardner Smith  
 29. P 14982  
 30. ΠΘ-792  
 31. NN-1581  
 32. P 1856, P 23924  
 33. G 549  
 34. P 5445  
 35. P 14674, P 183  
 36. P 7870  
 37. P 9396  
 38. P 8892  
 39. L 519  
 40. P 23894  
 41. BI 511  
 42. P 18010  
 43. P 27396  
 44. P 4782  
 45. P 26413  
 46. P 5423  
 47. P 27465, P 1540, P 31196  
 48. B 96, B 1388  
 49. P 9554  
 50. P 7839  
 51. P 434  
 52. P 12079, P 7881  
 53. P 1416  
 54. P 1419  
 55. Plan by J. Travlos  
 56. Graph by Susan Rotroff
- Back cover: Little owl (*Athene noctua*).  
 Photograph courtesy of Alison Frantz

### Bibliographical Note

For identifying Greek birds, the following field guides can be recommended (in order of preference):

Heinzel, H., R. Fitter, and J. Parslow, *The Birds of Britain and Europe*, London (Collins) 1972  
 Peterson, R. T., G. Mountfort, and P. A. D. Hollom, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, 3rd ed., London (Collins) 1974 (recently published in Greek translation, with supplementary range maps, by A. Kanellis.)

Bruun, B., and A. Singer, *The Larousse Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe*, New York (Larousse) 1970 (rev. 1978)

No up-to-date study of the avifauna of Greece exists in English, but a wealth of information on birds and bird-lore in ancient Greece will be found in J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth*, London (Thames and Hudson) 1977.

The authors would be interested to have records of any bird observations within the Agora and would greatly appreciate any records sent c/o The Agora Excavations, American School of Classical Studies, 54 Souidias St., GR-106 76 Athens, Greece.

