*Birds of prey and owls in culture*

For millennia birds of prey have captured our attention mainly because of their excellence in flight. Although naturally impossible for humans, flying has always stirred our imagination. Numerous legends and tales in many different cultures revolve around the theme of obtaining the ability to fly in some unnatural manner, just like in the popular Greek myth about Daedalus and Icarus. This primeval longing to soar in the sky has definitely had an impact on our representations of birds. In ancient times it was believed that thanks to their high flights, birds were able to contact the divine beings living in the heavens. Autumn passages to their wintering sites were seen as journeys to other worlds which were unreachable for humans.

Birds of prey and owls have always held a special place in human imagination. They stood out because of their strength, agility, swiftness and quite often their size. Owls were special for their ability to see in the dark. Man’s attitude towards various birds of prey differed from species to species - from complete admiration and awe, through contempt and aversion, to being treated as embodiments of evil demons. Among the birds that were admired was surely the eagle. Often perceived as the king of all birds and a messenger of the gods, eagles frequently adorned national emblems and coats of arms of towns, lands, countries and aristocratic families. Falcons were also admired, mainly for their speed and exceptionally keen sight. Completely different notions were associated with the scavenging vulture or the nocturnal owl. Owls were often linked with evil forces, breeding feelings of fear and reluctance. Hawks were perceived as mysterious and exceptionally bloodthirsty predators.

Such perceptions of birds of prey varied depending on the times (for example, the ancient Greeks saw owls as unusually wise animals) and the culture of different nations. However, they have left their mark on European culture, creating a symbolic code which to this day is used to decipher the cultural messages of our environment. Examining these culturally imprinted models of thought about birds is rewarding as they reflects our feelings, beliefs and representations.

The aim of this publication is to introduce readers to the realm of *lingua symbolica*, a sphere remote from the precise language of scientific descriptions of reality. The world of human representations, myths and symbols is often quite intricate. Its individual elements may at times contradict each other, a result of ages of transformations. It is certainly worth exploring in order to further the understanding of its complex character and current condition. The beliefs about raptors and owls presented here were commonly known not so long ago and started rapidly disappearing only in the last several decades.

Humans today have a completely different perception of their relationship with the natural environment. Based on firm scientific foundations, there is no room for the old, metaphysical approach to nature. Unfortunately, this attitude greatly impairs our perception of the world around us - a world stripped of the old beliefs, which are pejoratively called superstitions. Lack of immediate contact with nature makes it impossible to observe wild birds, which are no longer present in our everyday lives. Still, the representation of the surrounding world formed by our ancestors determines many contemporary areas of life, like the everyday contact with the image of an eagle in Poland’s national emblem. Symbolic thinking shapes our culture code. For countless ages our ancestors lived in a world which was explained through magical and symbolic criteria. In a mythical reality everything is connected: the actions of men affect the transcendental sphere, birds have human emotions and are guided by human values.

The eagle

For ages many different cultures have considered the eagle to be the ruler of all birds. This unique role stemmed from its natural characteristics - its size, strength, appearance, and majestic motion. The largest birds of prey have always somewhat naturally earned man’s admiration, which used to be connected with a belief about their supernatural origin.

The eagle’s high flights meant being in the clouds and therefore was associated with contacting divine beings. It was thought that the eagle is the only earthly creature capable of flying so high as to reach the heavens where the gods lived. That is why the eagle was believed to be a messenger of the gods that did their bidding here on earth. As a divine emissary, the eagle was believed to be prophetic. It knew the will of the gods and with that, the course of future events, including man’s fate. Through his association with the sun and light, the eagle was the opposite of chthonic creatures, especially snakes. The theme of eagles clashing against snakes was very popular in antiquity, frequently appearing in literature and arts. In Christianity, the eagle was a symbol of Christ, especially in the context of Ascension. Being a symbol of the sun and light, the eagle was often surrounded by beams of light, making its connection to the symbolic brightness of Jesus even stronger.

The falcon

Falcons are seen as the perfect hunters who catch other birds in a spectacular manner. Birds belonging to this family vary in size depending on the species, from the large Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) to the tiny Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). The falcon played a significant role in ancient Egyptian mythology, where it was admired for its ability to fly high and for its finesse in attacking prey in mid-air. Soaring through the skies allowed the bird to be close to gods and, consequently, to be associated with them. It was believed that the falcon was a messenger of the god Horus, who ruled the sky. Greek and Roman mythology favoured the eagle and rarely mentioned falcons.

The falcon is one of the birds which frequently appeared in the belief system of the Slavs. It was very much liked and admired for its agility and ability to soar high in the sky. Associated with the spirit of heroism and chivalry, the falcon was a symbol of hunting rights. It also symbolized the feeling of shame, as it was believed that the bird was ashamed to return to the falconer after a failed hunt. The falcon’s grandeur did not allow it to feed on carrion.

Falcons are inseparably associated with falconry, the art of training birds of prey and hunting other animals with them which originated several thousand years ago, likely somewhere in the steppes of Central Asia. It later flourished in Arabic countries during the middle ages, there a lot of the practices connected with this type of hunting was picked up by the crusaders from Europe. German Emperor Frederic II (1215-1250) wrote a treatise in Latin titled *De arte venandi cum avibus* which to this day has a special place in the history of falconry. The introduction of firearms to hunting resulted in a rapid decline of falconry, which in the 19th century was practiced only by a handful of continuers of the tradition.

In 2010 falconry was inscribed into the UNESCO immaterial heritage of humanity list. This exclusive status of stemmed from falconry’s rich history and its contemporary role in supporting the protection of birds of prey. UNESCO highlighted that falconry has been around us for more than 4000 years, meaning that at least two hundred generations continued to pass on the traditions connected with training birds of prey and hunting.

The hawk and the sparrow hawk

The hawk is one of the best known birds of prey in Poland, mainly because of its widespread occurrence. Compared to the eagle or the falcon, the symbolism of the hawk is rather negative and is associated with wildness, ferocity, blood-lust, cruelty, greed, as well as jealousy and deceit. Today, the metaphorical meaning of the *hawk* refers to a person who preys on others.

The popular opinion about hawks is that they are exceptionally bloodthirsty and secretive predators. It is even believed that they kill other birds only for practice and do not eat all of their prey. Hawks were being eradicated mainly because they preyed on poultry and domesticated pigeons. The hawk is a diurnal species of raptors, therefore it is associated with similar beliefs as with the eagle and the falcon. As with the eagle, it was believed that the hawk can look straight into the sun without blinking.

In ancient Egypt, the god of the moon Khonsu was depicted with a falcon’s or sometimes a hawk’s head. Hawks in ancient Greece were believed to be prophetic - fortune was told from the direction of flight and the behaviour of this bird of prey. In general, it was seen as good fortune when a hunting hawk was spotted, flying from right to left. Flying in the opposite direction was seen as a bad omen. Medieval bestiaries describe hawks as stern parents to their chicks. As soon as their young were able to fly, the parents would stop bringing them food in order to force them to leave the nest and into independence. In the folk beliefs of the Slavs, the hawk was considered as an evil omen. It was thought that the devil was able to take the form of this bird. The souls of the dead were also believed to transform into hawks, among other birds.

The kite

The kite is a bird of prey which is rarely mentioned in legends and old beliefs. The ancient Greeks believed the kite was an emissary of the god Apollo. Greek myths depict this bird as a thief stealing from people in the marketplace. In the treatise titled *Aviarium* from the 12th century, the kite is presented in an extremely negative light, as a predator seeking easy prey, for example, by snatching meat from the butcher’s stall.

The kite is associated with a popular Polish proverb saying that it longs for rain. In the region of Kaszuby, Poland, in the 19th century there was a popular tradition called the *beheading of the kite,* which survived only as a relic in the 20th century. Spotting a kite in a village was seen as a bad omen. The bird was captured, locked away, and kept until St. John’s feast day. On that day, the bird was transported on a cart around the village in a ceremonial cage, and everyone was called to gather for court. When the villagers assembled in the central square of the village, a trail was staged in which the bird was charged with all the bad things that happened in the village, sentencing the kite do death by guillotine. After the execution there was a feast which lasted until the morning hours.

The vulture

Feeding on carrion - rotting corpses of animals - has certainly affected the negative perception of vultures. Their positive role in clearing the area populated by humans of the remains of dead animals was completely neglected, even though it prevented the spread of disease. Vultures were seen as lazy birds that, unlike eagles or falcons, do not hunt for prey but rather passively wait for their food to die. It is worth noting that even though vultures are classified as birds of prey, they do not kill the animals they feed on.

In distant times, humans revered vultures, believing that they connected the dead with the other world. One of the signs of worshiping vultures was leaving the bodies of the dead for them to eat. This cult was especially prominent in ancient Egypt. The goddess Nekhbet took the form of the vulture which was usually depicted with spread wings symbolising divine protection over the land of the Pharaohs. The vulture symbolised Upper Egypt. Together with the symbol of Lower Egypt - the snake - the two animals adorned the crown of the Pharaohs.

Vultures also appear in numerous Greek myths. They were associated with Pallas Athena, Ares, Apollo, and Chronos, who used them as mounts. One of the most popular myths in which vultures play a key role is the one about Prometheus. Vultures were also worshipped by the Romans who saw them mainly as animals that could tell the future. According to the mythical story, these birds played a significant role in deciding where Rome was to be established.

Today more than half of the twenty three species of vultures face extinction because of human activity. In the Indian subcontinent this is the result of using diclofenac in the veterinary treatment of cattle, which was banned in 2006. Every year in Africa even up to one third of the population of each species die as a result of feeding on poisoned animals set up as bait for hyenas and lions.

The owl

The specific character of the beliefs associated with owls was certainly shaped by the way they look and live. Although owls frequently build their nests near buildings or even in dark attics or church towers, they have always remained mysterious in nature and with unique behaviour, compared to other birds. Usually leading a solitary and nocturnal life-style, owls were rarely observed. And when they were seen, it was during the dangers of the night when demonic creatures revealed their powers.

Throughout history, almost every culture has perceived owls as bad omens which foretold death or some other despair. In ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the symbol of the owl referred to the night, cold, adverseness, and death. Owls were associated with the world of the dead and belonged to the night realm of the sun-god Ra, where he swam along the Nile in the underworld from west to east.

Ancient Greeks were the only people who did not identify owls with demonic powers and, quite the contrary, associated them with wisdom of the goddess Athena. This goddess is especially close to the city of Athens which is named after her. The reverence of owls, as the messengers of Athena, was expressed in putting their image on the reverse side of coins minted for several ages in the capital of Attica.

Celtic mythology also found these birds important. This came from the ancient belief in the Mother Goddess, whose characteristic features included large eyes. The association with owls is obvious and that is why this bird was one of the goddess’s attributes. The beliefs of Slavic peoples did not differ greatly from other European nations in relation to owls. They too perceived them as evil and demonic. Slavs in the East, West, and the South saw owls as devilish creatures who are bad fortune for everyone who sees or even hears them. It was commonly believed that the owls hoot near human settlements meant something bad was going to happen, death and disease included. One of the most popular superstitions known throughout Poland is the one saying that an owl hooting near a house meant that something bad was going to happen, possibly even death.

Today all owl species are protected. Most certainly this has a positive effect on their populations and shows that these are majestic and useful creatures.