

# **Heavenly Messengers: The Role of Birds in the Cosmographies and the Cosmovisions of Ancient Cultures.**

**Michael A. Rappengluck**

## **Abstract.**

Birds played an important role in the cosmographies and cosmovisions of ancient cultures all over the world. Evidences are given by artifacts, symbols, myths, and rituals. People studied carefully the body, the behavior, and the phenology of birds. Thereof they associated certain species to the luminaries, special celestial phenomena, archaic calendars, orientation and navigation, social, political, religious, cosmological and cosmogonical conceptions.

## **1. Birds and solar symbolism**

People occasionally associated certain bird species with the moon, but applying a solar symbolism was uniformly widespread worldwide and through the epochs: The multicolor plumage of some birds symbolized vital solar energy, the power of air and sky, fire and light, and the play of colors at dawn or dusk. The rays of the rising sun are compared with a single bird or a flock of birds flying up. Certain bird species were thought to be descendants or messengers of the sun or the sun itself. The ancient Chinese imagined a two or three-legged raven in the sun.

## **2. Birds signal time and predict weather phenomena**

Since the Upper Paleolithic and even today watching birds' behavior helped people to predict weather, to announce wet and dry seasons, and to signal daytime. That is substantiated by the fact that birds are able to sense changes in barometric pressure, temperature, wind direction, and other parameters to find the best conditions for flight, roosting, and breeding. Solar birds were thought to bring life-giving water from sky down to earth. The most powerful birds, e.g. raptors, were thought to cause cyclones, thunder and lightning. People considered the time at which certain birds herald dawn by their activity, especially by their cries or singing, to be a very important signal of the rising sun, showing the triumph of light over darkness. They for instance thought that the crowing cock, a symbol of solar fire, heat, and light, attracts the sun to rise up from the darkness of the netherworld. In addition other bird species were thought to indicate certain hours of the day.

The events of moulting, mating, laying eggs, fledgling, migration, which are mainly triggered by photoperiodism, set important time signals and were frequently used for purposes of time-reckoning. Special months dedicated to these peculiarities are known from ancient phenological calendars. The migrations of birds were an important calendar marker for the seasons and evoke spring and autumn. They symbolized the cyclical power of the sun and the annual period turning life and death up and down. Moreover ancient people considered the life cycles of some bird species to run parallel with star phases and upper or lower culminations of certain asterisms during the seasons. They thought that these celestial birds as divine totem animals were responsible for the behaviour of their terrestrial descendants.

### **3. Birds develop three-dimensional space**

According to traditions worldwide birds have the unique ability and mobility to dominate the verticalness through all cosmic strata, allowing them to develop and control three-dimensional space: Some species, e.g. raptors and migratory birds, which due to their biological aptitude fly at very high altitudes, are thought to access the realm of luminaries and to reach the zenith or the celestial pole. Amerindians told that the divine creator, shaped like a bird, lived in the zenith. It derived its origin from another bird localized at the celestial pole, which signified the place of cosmic creation. Asian natives knew a bird-like helper associated to the spirit of the zenith. Moreover a giant bird pushed up the sky by his wings or a bird-man supported the vault, separating the heaven from earth. In addition aquatic birds were thought to manage the domain of water. Birds, notably sitting on trees or posts, indicated the center, the cardinal directions, and the point of sunrise and sunset.

Thus people regarded birds to be powerful and dominating animal lords or gods controlling aerial and celestial places, regions and bodies, having knowledge of what is going on in the world. Avian species, in particular migratory birds and raptors, were considered to master the elements, to act as divine messengers between the realms of the worlds, and to indicate omens. Shamans and rulers dressed themselves as birds and often used a bird-stick as a symbol of authority to participate in these powers.

### **4. Celestial fire birds**

Throughout the world people deliver myths of a celestial bird or bird-hybrid, like a bird-man, stealing cosmic fire from the sky sphere to donate it to mankind. This act often is thought to initiate human culture and to be accompanied by the gift of various cultural assets. There exist two prominent places in the sky, which above all house the primordial fire: the sun and the celestial pole. The first point embodies the celestial energy in a more sensible manner; the second illustrates how it is produced. Ancient people thought the polar world axis resembles a colossal “fire driller” which turns in the pivot bearings of the celestial pole and the center of the world. They gave reason for the rotation by associating it with a celestial bird, which represents the heavenly powers of gyration. The bird, hovering above or sitting on a support, which was given by a stick, a column, a cross, a mountain, a nail, a phallus, a pillar, a pole, a plug, a scepter, a temple, a tree or a vertebral column, signified the polar world axis and the power of cosmic fire. The cosmic fire, produced at the celestial pole, where creation started, was thought to be stored predominantly in the sun, as the very important source of heat and light. At a lesser degree it was seen in the moon and the stars, too. So the fiery bird at the celestial pole had a derivative localized in the ardent solar bird, circling around the cosmic fire drill and related to it. This leads to the globally widespread motif of the sun-bird perched on a tree. Frequently the solar bird and the bird of the celestial pole are connected and occasionally intermingled. That may be substantiated in the imagination of a shadow stick, aligned to the celestial pole and compared to a fire-drilling procedure.

### **5. Shooting down the sun**

The custom of ritually shooting down the figure of a sun-bird, fastened atop of a supporter existed across Eurasia. The ceremony was carried out at summer solstice. The bird, symbolizing the culmination of solar life giving power at that time was shot down to indicate the start of decreasing

light and heat towards winter solstice. The supporting post was called the “bird’s tree”. Who shot down the bird down became the champion shot for a year. The ancient Chinese story of archer Yi shooting down the sun-birds, which perched at a tree, also seems to belong to this gamut of themes.

## **6. The motif of the raptor-reptile combat**

The motif of the cosmic raptor-reptile combat is globally widespread. The bird mostly is considered to be a raptor, e.g. an eagle, which is able to fly to the highest point of the sky sphere. It is related to the cosmic tree and opposed to a reptilian creature (snake, crocodile, mythical dragon) localized at the deepest point of the cosmos. Often it is represented as a hybrid of the two animals. The combat symbolizes the antagonistic powers of light and darkness, fire and water, dry and wet season, upper and lower world, chaos and cosmos set at both ends of a vertical axis.

## **7. Avian cosmogony**

Mostly waterfowls and migratory birds, but also other species, were thought to bring life essence from the heavens down to inseminate earth. One motif, widespread in the northern hemisphere, but also existing in Oceania and Australia, is about a bird, in general a waterfowl, diving down the primordial ocean to fetch matter for creating the island earth, floating on the sea. In other stories an ornithomorphic, sometimes humanoid creator, hovering over or drifting in a vast, dark chaotic abyss or primeval ocean, lays one egg. It bursts and splits up into the yellow and white colored part, which appeared as sun and moon or the two separated shells of heaven and earth. From the broken egg the spatiotemporal world originated. Sometimes several eggs are laid, which let out sun, moon, and the stars or are taken for islands swimming in the primordial sea. Often the celestial bird incubates on the world mountain or tree. Frequently the origin of a shaman, ruler or a tribe was derived from the celestial ancestor bird or egg. According to another idea the human bird-like souls, those of the shamans most of all, which are considered to be stars, hatched out of eggs laid in a nest atop of the cosmic tree, which embodies the world axis. That a migratory bird (swan, stork) seasonally brings the children refers to a similar idea. Finally mythical birds, e.g. the Phoenix, symbolized the cycle of creation, destruction, and recreation.

## **8. Shaman and souls as celestial bird beings**

Departed spirits, but also the souls of shamans during their ecstasy, frequently are considered to appear as flying hybrid beings, having partly human, partly avian characteristics. Shamans and rulers dressed themselves as birds to adopt the bird’s powers and capacities. The feather headdress symbolized the fiery mental power during ecstasy, which people thought to be solar and to originate at the center of the cosmos. Birds, serving as helpers and carriers, took the shaman through the cosmic strata right up to the center of the world, localized at the celestial pole.

Shamans considered supporters crowned by birds to show the way up to this place of origin. There they believed to get in contact with the power, which caused the world and maintains it. At that place a bird or a bird-man was thought to reside as the ruler of the world and to guard the celestial fiery energy. The Milky Way was conceived to be the path departed bird-like spirits and shamans as well as migratory birds took to reach other cosmic strata. It was compared to a gate, which following the migration of birds during spring and autumn periodical opened the entrance to the

otherworld, occasionally related to the motif of the “Clashing Rocks”. The mythical relation of migratory birds to the Milky Way and the celestial pole has a scientific basis: These species inter alia even orientate themselves by a time-independent star compass, based on certain shapes of constellations to pinpoint the rotation of the sky and the celestial pole. Hence it is not surprising that ancient people identified galactic constellations of birds or flocks of birds. In addition the bird, birds or bird-man in the Milky Way were considered to bring down powerful watery, inseminating life essence down from the sky to earth.

Basic essentials of the celestial bird motifs can be already found in the cave of Lascaux, 16.500 years ag: A bird-stick depicts the world axis, aligned to Cyg (2.86 mag), which was the celestial pole in those days. A bird-man can be identified with an asterism, partly built by stars of the today’s constellation Cygnus and the dark zone in the southern Milky Way. At that time the celestial bird motifs were well illustrated: The world-axis crowned by a bird pinpoints the cosmic center at the celestial pole, localized in the Milky Way, which as a path takes birds, souls, and shamans to mythical other worlds.

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