

The Summer Triangle and the Stymphalian Birds

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Abstract. In western celestial cartography there is a grouping of three birds which are the constellations of Cygnus the Swan, Aquila the Eagle, and Lyra the Lyre, all found north of the ecliptic. Within each constellation, the three bright stars of Deneb Adige in Cygnus, Altair in Aquila, and Vega in Lyra constitute what is known today as the Summer Triangle, as they are visible in the summer months and form a triangle in the night sky. Rather than just a geometrical pattern, however, this essay argues that there is a myth that draws these three magical birds together. Using extant works of art, as well as the writings of Apollonius Rhodius (*Argonautica* 2, c.3rd century BCE) and Pseudo- Hyginus (*Fabulae* 30, c.2nd century CE), amongst others, this essay focuses initially on the Greek myth of the three Stymphalian Birds (*Ornithes Stymphalides*) which haunted Lake Stymphalis in Arkadia and suggests that, by searching within other myths, there are alternate ways that these three sky birds may have been understood through other cultures.

Introduction

In western celestial cartography, the Greeks and Romans saw three constellations in the sky as a group of birds, all found north of the ecliptic.¹ These are the constellations of Cygnus the Swan, Aquila the Eagle (known as the Great Flying Eagle), and Lyra the Lyre, identified as the Great Swooping Eagle, or the Swooping Vulture, and often depicted as the vulture holding the lyre in its beak. Within each constellation, the three bright stars of Deneb Adige in the tail of Cygnus, Altair on the back of Aquila, and Vega in Lyra, constitute what is known today as the Summer Triangle, visible in the summer months and forming a triangle in the night sky (Fig.1).

¹ Allen, Richard Hinckley, *Star Names: Their Lore and Meaning* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), pp.56, 192, and 281.

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Figure 1. The night sky showing the Summer Triangle of Deneb Adige in the tail of Cygnus, Altair on the back of Aquila, and Vega in Lyra visible in the northern hemisphere during the summer months. Image: Starlight software/D.Gunzburg.

The name The Summer Triangle, however, is a relatively recent one. Celestial cartographer Johann Bode (1747-1826) connected the stars as a triangle without labelling them in his *Sternatlas* (1816), providing what appears to be the earliest contemporary diagram.² In his 1866 atlas Austrian astronomer Joseph Johann von Littrow (1781-1840) called it the ‘conspicuous triangle’.³ The name ‘The Summer Triangle’ appeared in 1913 in Alice Mary Matlock Griffiths’ constellation guidebook designed

² ein sehr auffallendes, grosses und gleichschenkliges Dreieck/a very conspicuous, large and isosceles triangle. John Flamsteed and Johann Elert Bode, *Vorstellung Der Gestirne Auf 34 Kupfertafeln Nach Der Pariser Ausgabe Des Flamsteedschen Himmelsatlas. Durchgehends Verbessert Und Mit Den Beobachtungen Neuerer Astronomen Vermehrt, Etc.* (Berlin: G.A.Lange, 1782), p.4.

³ Joseph Johann von Littrow, *Atlas Des Gestirnten Himmels Für Freunde Der Astronomie* (Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1866).

to engage children with the stars.⁴ The term was popularised in 1954 by Hans Augusto Rey (1898-1977) and subsequently by British astronomer Patrick Moore (1923-2012).⁵ Whilst the name links all three stars astronomically, they are also linked via mythology through the figure of Hercules, whose constellation is found on the eastern side of the group, and whose arrow, the constellation Sagitta, lies in the centre of the group. This established Herculean myth is that of the Stymphalian Birds. There is, however, sky mythology that exists further back in time, with possible cultural roots in Mesopotamia. From an outline of the Greek myth with Hercules at its centre and its emergence in Greek art and Greco-Roman literature, followed by a consideration of the mythology of the individual constellations, this essay will then reach back into the Mesopotamian past to find a sky myth that may offer another explanation for this group of birds.

The Stymphalian Birds in Greek mythology

The myth of the Stymphalian Birds appeared in Greek mythology as one of the tasks given to Heracles by Zeus. Whilst in a state of temporary insanity, Heracles inadvertently killed his wife and children. Mortified by his actions, he sought penance from Zeus, who conferred upon him Twelve Labours. The myth was so popular it became one of three traditional subjects in Greek art (the other two being the Gigantomachy and the Amazonomachy).⁶ Neither Homer (late eighth century BCE) nor Hesiod (active between 750 and 650 BCE) specifically mentioned the Twelve Labours of Heracles, of which the Stymphalian Birds was the sixth.⁷ Fifth-century philosopher and historian, Xenophon of Athens (c.430–354 BCE) in his *Memorabilia* (2:1:21-34) related a story told by fifth century sophist Prodicus of Ceos that described Heracles' choice to follow the

⁴ Alice Mary Matlock Griffiths, *The Stars and Their Stories: A Book for Young People* (New York: H. Holt, 1913).

⁵ H. A. Rey, *Find the Constellations* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), p.46. Patrick Moore, *Patrick Moore's History of Astronomy*, 6th edn (London: Macdonald & Co., 1983), p.186.

⁶ Mary C. Sturgeon, *Sculpture: The Reliefs from the Theater*, vol. IX, Part 2, Corinth (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1977), p.1.

⁷ William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (London: John Murray, 1872), p.394.

virtuous path.⁸ It was, however, Hercules' subsequent struggle and agony that he experienced through the imposition of the Twelve Labours, resulting in his recognition and immortality by the hand of Zeus, that took hold in Greek thought and established Heracles as the quintessence of the suffering hero.⁹ The formalised grouping of Hercules' twelve labours within the literature was fashioned, it was thought, by the Alexandrine scholars and their followers, who flourished in Hellenistic Alexandria in the third and second centuries BCE, as part of their concern for the restoration and interpretation of the classical texts.¹⁰

Thus it was that the story of the Stymphalian Birds was captured in written sources via the Twelve Labours of Heracles from Apollonius Rhodius (fl.third century BCE) to Strabo (c.64 BCE—c.24 CE), Hyginus (c.64 BCE—17 CE), and Pausanias (c.120—180 CE), who all noted these *Ornithes Stymphalides* which haunted Lake Stymphalos on the island of Ares in Arcadia. These writers described the Stymphalian Birds as man-eating, with beaks of bronze, with the capacity to use their sharp metallic feathers like spears to kill people before eating their flesh, and whose dung was highly toxic.¹¹ They were said to be the pets of Ares, the god of war, and were thought to have migrated to Lake Stymphalia to escape a pack of wolves. Around the lake they propagated rapidly and infested the countryside, demolishing local crops and fruit trees. Heracles was tasked with driving away the flock from this lake deep in the woods. It was not, however, an easy mission, as Apollonius observed when writing of the *periplous* (travelogue) of the Argo on its voyage from Iolcus to Colchis: 'For not even Heracles, when he travelled to Arcadia, was strong enough to drive off the birds floating on the Stymphalian lake with his bow.'¹² Seeing Heracles' dilemma, the goddess Athena took pity on him and offered him a pair of bronze *krotala*, castanet-like clappers made by

⁸ Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apology*, ed. J. Henderson, trans. E.C.Marchant and O.J. Todd, The Loeb Classical Library 168 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2013 [1923]), pp.102–113. Malcolm Davies, 'The Hero at the Crossroads: Prodicus and the Choice of Heracles,' *Prometheus* 29 (2013): pp. 3–17, p.3.

⁹ M. S. Silk, 'Heracles and Greek Tragedy,' *Greece & Rome* 32, no. 1 (1985): pp.1–22, p.1; Davies, pp.3–4.

¹⁰ Michael Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.339.

¹¹ Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, ed. and trans. William H. Race, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2:1030–1082, pp.1195–1199.

¹² Rhodius, *Argonautica*, 2:1052–1057, pp.1196–1197.

the immortal smith, Hephaistos. By standing on a mountain that overhung the lake, Heracles was able to shake the *krotala* whose clashing noise dislodged the birds from the vegetation.¹³ Once free of the foliage, it was an easy task for Heracles to shoot them with his bow and arrow.

The ferocity of the Stymphalian Birds is reflected in what is known of these three constellational birds in today's world. The swan is admired for its grace and elegance; nevertheless, it will attack if its young are approached and its beating wings can break a person's arm. The eagle is respected for its strength and audacity, yet it is a bird of prey whose large powerful hooked beak is designed to tear flesh from its quarry. The vulture rarely attacks animals that are healthy, yet it is a scavenging bird of prey and will kill the sick or wounded and feed on the carcasses of dead animals. It could thus be argued that this is indeed a vicious part of the sky and as it stands, this is a myth about the eradication of a pestilence from a lake by a hero who, in removing these birds, leaves the lake still and peaceful once more. Yet it raises questions as to the value of the lake that it had to be cleared of these birds and why this Herculean myth should be placed in the sky and not the other eleven labours. A consideration of how the myth was represented in art offers some clues.

The Stymphalian Birds in art

Evidence of the myth was captured on pottery earlier than its written sources. From the sixth century BCE onwards, Attic Black Figured amphoras such as that in the British Museum, London c.540 BCE (Museum No. 1843,1103.40) (Fig.2) and that in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, 525-475 BCE (Catalogue No. Louvre F387, Beazley Archive No. 7590) (Fig.2) depict Hercules in the midst of taking action against the birds, portrayed as swans. These pottery amphorae were used throughout the Mediterranean for the transport or storage of goods such as olive oil, wine, milk, olives or grain, as well as for ceremonial or social purposes.

¹³ Rhodius, *Argonautica*, p.197.

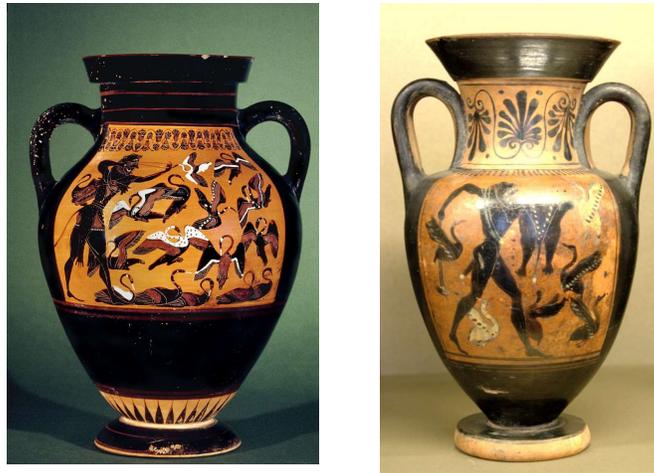


Figure 2. Left: Heracles attacking the Stymphalian birds with a sling, Attic black figure amphora, c.540 BCE (Museum No. 1843,1103.40). Image: British Museum. Right: Diosphos Painter, Heracles and the Stymphalian birds, Attic black-figure amphora, H: 20.40 cm, D: 11.90 cm, 500-490 BCE, Louvre Museum. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the Twelve Labours of Hercules were also sculpted on temple metopes as part of the sculptural friezes that decorated the ends of the inner building over the east and west porches, such as the Treasury at Foce de Sele (570-550 BCE), the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi (510-280 BCE), the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, in Greece (c.470-457 BCE) and the sanctuary at Alyzia, in Acarnania, in west-central Greece along the Ionian Sea:

Between Leucas and the Ambracian Gulf is a salt-lake, called Myrtuntium. Next after Leucas one comes to Palaerus and Alyzia, cities of Acarnania; of these, Alyzia is fifteen stadia distant from the sea, where is a harbour sacred to Heracles and a sacred precinct. It is from this precinct that one of the commanders carried to Rome the 'Labours of Heracles,' works of Lysippus, which were lying out of place where they were, because it was a deserted region.¹⁴

¹⁴ Strabo, *Geography Book X*, trans. H.J. Thompson, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library 211 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), X,2:21, pp.60–61.

Rather than Hercules chasing the Stymphalian Birds with *krotala* or a sling, he is shown on the metopes presenting the slain birds to Athene (Fig.3). These two depictions place Hercules at different ends of the narrative of the myth—on the amphorae he is at the beginning of the myth, while on the metopes he is at the end of the myth. Such image selection is appropriate for the two quite different audiences. On pottery amphorae, Hercules shooting at the Stymphalian Birds conveyed strength and heroism and thus for those seated at a dinner table, provided a discussion starter that illustrated a way to solve a troublesome problem.¹⁵ On temple metopes, on the other hand, the image of Hercules' delivering the dead birds to his benefactress conveyed gratitude to a goddess for helpful intervention in a location appropriate for such a response.



Figure 3. Hercules presents Athena with a Stymphalian Bird, West Metope 3, the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, c.470 BCE—c.457 BCE, Archaeological Museum of Olympia. *Photo: Joanbanjo/Wikimedia Commons.*

¹⁵ Susan I. Rotroff and John Howard Oakley, *Debris from a Public Dining Place in the Athenian Agora* (Princeton, N.J.: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1992), p.36.

The Herculean cycle also appeared on the proscenium at the front of the stage in the Temple of Delphi, built in the fourth century BCE and restored in the first century CE, and at the Theatre at Corinth in south-central Greece in the second quarter of the second century CE.¹⁶ On Greek coins of the late classical period, such as a silver *obolus* (a Greek silver coin worth a sixth of a drachma) from Stymphalos, dated to c.370-350 BCE, Hercules wearing a lion skin is stamped on the front, with the reverse showing the head of a Stymphalian bird as a non-crested water bird and the inscription ‘ΣΤΥΜΦΑΛΙΑ’ (Stymphalia).¹⁷ These monuments and artefacts indicate how deeply the myth was embedded into the cosmology of Greece and the sustained meaning the myth offered across the millennium.

When the myth was encountered by the Romans in the imperial period (27 BCE to 284 CE) the Twelve Labours of Hercules became a particularly popular subject matter in Roman funerary art of the second century CE. The images of Hercules enacting his Twelve Labours are generally shown as sculptures on the exterior of a sarcophagus (Fig.4). They take the form of Hercules with an attribute of each Labour. For the Stymphalian birds, Hercules is depicted in the act of taking aim with his arrow and in Figure 4, being the sixth labour, it is placed centrally along the side of the sarcophagus. The similarity of these sarcophagi across the period was due to the widespread practice of carvers relying heavily on pattern books for consistency. Nevertheless, for the Romans, as Anna Marguerite McCann observed, the Herculean cycle represented the successful labours of a human life on earth which ended in immortality.¹⁸ The practice between 220 and 250 CE was to transpose the portrait of the deceased man onto the head of one of the mythical Hercules, such as is the case in Figure 4.

¹⁶ Sturgeon, *Sculpture*, p.5, 96.

¹⁷ Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (CNG). Available online at <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=108278> [accessed April 2017].

¹⁸ Anna Marguerite McCann, *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), p.70.



Figure 4. Top: Mythological frieze sarcophagus showing the Labours of Hercules, c.240-250 CE. Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, Rome (Inv. 8642). Below: The dead man whose head has been transposed onto the figure of Hercules slaying the Stymphalian Birds. Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

As Mont Allen described: ‘Equipping these mythological characters with portrait features of the deceased was a way to make the metaphorical connection between them emphatic: it demanded that the viewer read the mortal through the mythic, and the mythic through the mortal.’¹⁹ Building on Allen’s evidence, I reason that, although the labour may have been chosen to depict the head of the dead man due to its centrality on the sarcophagus, its selection not only emphasised the connection between the dead man and the myth of Hercules and the Stymphalian Birds mythically. It also suggested a connection between the dead man and the constellation of Hercules in the sky with its proximity to the three Birds. Thus the promise of immortality was reflected visually in the sky. The Roman understanding of Hercules who, as a dead man, gains a place in the heavens thus echoed the Greek understanding of Hercules as the quintessence of pathos and the path to immortality.

¹⁹ Mont Allen, *Why Does Hercules Look Like Uncle Rufus?*, to Roman Sarcophagus News (blog), 2014, <http://www.montallen.com/roman-sarcophagus-news-blog/why-does-hercules-look-like-uncle-rufus>.

A Different Sky Myth

To return to the question of why these birds needed to be eradicated from this lake and why this Herculean myth should be placed in the sky and not the other eleven labours. In ancient times the gods were thought to live in the landscape well before temples were built to house their images. Such landscapes included high mountains, the sources of rivers and streams, caves, and trees.²⁰ Offerings of gifts eventually defined an altar and the need to protect and defend the sacredness of the space led to the building of the first temples.²¹ The word ‘temenos’ originally referred to a temple enclosure surrounding a sanctuary, a piece of land marked off from common uses and dedicated to a god, a sanctuary, holy grove, or garden.²² In the valley of north-western Arcadia, Lake Stymphalis provided such a sacred space for the Stymphalian Artemis. Pausanias (c.110-180 CE) visited the site and in his *Description of Greece*, wrote an eyewitness account of the spring that created the lake in Stymphalos in winter. He noted that wild, man-killing birds the size of a crane and with powerful beaks bred in the Arabian desert were named Stymphalian Birds and suggested that ‘a section of them might have flown on some occasion’ across to Arcadia and reached Stymphalos, thus actualising the myth.²³ More importantly for the understanding of the myth, he carefully observed the old sanctuary of the Stymphalian Artemis and how the statue of her (‘the image’) was made ‘of wood, for the most part gilded’. He then added, ‘There are here also maidens of white marble, with the legs of birds, and they stand behind the temple.’²⁴

²⁰ Marietta Horster, 'Religious Landscape and Sacred Ground: Relationships between Space and Cult in the Greek World,' *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 4 (2010): pp.435–58, p.439. Michael Scott, 'Sacred Space in Greece and Rome,' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p.2. 13 December 2018.

<http://oxfordre.com/religion/view/2010.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.9780199340001.9780199340001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-9780199340257>.

²¹ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Early Sanctuaries, the Eighth Century and Ritual Space: Fragments of a Discourse,' in N. Marinatos and R. Hägg, eds, *Greek Sanctuaries. New Approaches* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.3–4, 6.

²² Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East : The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.373.

²³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece. Volume 4. Books 8.22-10: Arcadia, Boeotia, Phocis and Ozolian Locri*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 297 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). 8.22:6–9, pp.5–7.

²⁴ Pausanias. *Description of Greece*, 8.22:26–29, p.7.

Women and birds have previously been twinned in mythology in connection with violence and destruction. Sirens were women with the legs of birds who lived on small islands surrounded by cliffs and rocks, the *Sirenum scopuli*, and who were said to lure sailors to their death by their sweet singing (Homer, *Odyssey*, 12.39 and 158-9; Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 5.864). Harpies were birds with the heads of maidens, personifying the wind and its destructive nature during storms (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 20. 66 and 77). Artemis was, however, the patron of birds, of lakes and hunting bows, and her principal attributes were the golden bow, quiver, and arrows. The bird-footed maidens accompanying the goddess at her Temple express this ornithological association between Artemis and her worship at Stymphalos. Rather than being destroyers of men, their placement suggests they are acting as temple guardians, preserving her sanctity.

The origin for the cult worship of the Stymphalian Artemis came from across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus (near modern Turkish Selçuk) on the coast of western Turkey, where according to Tacitus (c.56-120 CE), the Ephesians believed that Artemis was born.²⁵ It was Xenophon of Athens who, in the fourth century BCE, established the first cult site to Artemis on mainland Greece. In *Anabasis* (5.3.7-12), he recorded that, having been exiled from Athens, and resident at Scillus, near Olympia he built an altar and a temple to the worship of the Ephesian Artemis and established her annual festival.²⁶ The land contained a river with fish and mussels and animals for hunting and the sacred precinct contained hills for raising cattle and a grove of fruit trees. The temple itself, he wrote, 'is like the one at Ephesus, although small as compared with great, and the image of the goddess, although cypress wood as compared with gold, is like the Ephesian image.'²⁷

The Ephesian Artemis was, however, unlike the customary understanding of her as the goddess of the hunt. At Ephesus she was worshipped for fertility and the Temple was founded, according to Callimachus (310-240 BCE), by the Amazons who 'established an image [of Artemis] beneath an oak trunk', and then raised a shrine around the

²⁵ Tacitus, *Histories: Books 4-5. Annals: Books 1-3*, trans. Clifford H. Moore, vol. 249, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931). *Annals*, 3:61, p.619.

²⁶ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson. Revised by John Dillery, vol. 90, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Book 5.3.7-10, pp.402-403.

²⁷ Xenophon, *Anabasis*. Book 5.3.7-12, pp.402-405.

image around the eighth century BCE.²⁸ When this was destroyed by a flood, a new Temple built entirely of marble except for the roof, was completed c.550 BCE. Two hundred years later, on July 21, 356 BCE, the wooden roof-beams were torched by a man named Herostratus, who thought that being an arsonist would be his path to glory.²⁹ Rebuilding began in 323 BCE and it was this Temple that came to be known as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It lasted nearly six-hundred years until, once again and finally, it was destroyed in 262 CE by the Goths.³⁰ In 1869, an expedition led by John Turtle Wood and sponsored by the British Museum, uncovered its remains.

Three cult statues from late antiquity of Artemis were discovered in 1956: the 'Great Artemis' (98-117 CE), the 'Beautiful Artemis' (c.117-161 CE), and the 'Small Artemis' (c. 150 CE).³¹ They once stood in the Prytaneion of Ephesus, the place of the enduring sacred flame and where religious ceremonies, official receptions and banquets were held. In each statue Artemis is depicted as a woman with her stomach and womb covered with multiple breasts or eggs, suggestive of fertility.³² These breasts/eggs have also been interpreted variously as the testicles of sacrificed bulls, although there is a lack of evidence for such sacrifices, and as the hives of wild bees (mastoeideis) that resemble female breasts. Her necklace is made of acorns from her sacred oak tree, her breastplate is carved with signs of the zodiac, and rows of animals, representing fertility, and images of bees along the sides, decorate her tight, fitted skirt. Visually different to Greek statues, she stands with tapered legs resembling a pillar or sarcophagus.

As one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, not only did the temple attract visitors from across the Mediterranean, but the cult of

²⁸ A.W. Mair and G.R. Mair, *Callimachus, Hymns and Epigrams, Lycophron, Aratus*, ed. C.P. Goold, trans. G.R. Mair, vol. 129, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp.80–83.

²⁹ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume I, Books 1-5*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library 493 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.14, ext.15, pp.276–279.

³⁰ Jordanes, *The Gothic History of Jordanes*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 550 [1915]). Available online at: <https://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/jordgeti.html#XX>.

³¹ Franz Miltner, *Ephesos, Stadt Der Artemis Und Des Johannes* (Wien: Verlag Franz Deuticke, 1958).

³² Robert Fleischer, *Artemis Von Ephesos Und Der Erwandte Kultstatue Von Anatolien Und Syrien*, *Études Préliminaires Aux Religions Orientales Dans L'empire Romain* 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

Artemis of Ephesus spread across Greece and Asia Minor.³³ Macrobius (390-430 CE) in *Artemis*: 778, described the Ephesian Artemis as being a ‘hurler of swift shafts’.³⁴ Although writing some eight hundred years later than Xenophon of Athens, Macrobius’ description may have been carried across the Aegean to the Stymphalian Artemis and become embedded into the Herculean myth of the ferocious Stymphalian Birds.

When Xenophon of Athens constructed the temple to the Ephesian Artemis at Scillus, near Olympia, however, it was to worship the goddess. Further evidence along these lines comes from the sky. The constellation Hercules was not named as such by Aratus (315-240 BCE) but described as the Engonasin / Ἐγγόνασιν (The Man On His Knees or The Kneeler) and The Phantom or Silhouette, a constellation so old and ancient that ‘... no-one can divine / The sure form or vocation of this sign...’³⁵ G.J. Toomer emphasized the fact that neither Ptolemy, who also described the constellation as ‘the [figure] on its knees’, nor writers in the earlier Greek tradition identified this constellation with a mythological figure.³⁶ Rather, it had always been held as a human figure kneeling on one knee above the head of Draco while holding an arm upward and bent, below the head of Ophiuchus, orbiting around the pivot-point of the North Pole, paying respect to it. Marco Perale argued that the Heracleian classification may have arisen in the Hellenistic period when Heracles was first connected to Zeus by Eratosthenes (c.276-194 BCE) in his *Catasterisms*.³⁷ That this link could be made, Perale maintained, was due to Heracles being seen as the forefather of the royal Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty and thus made sense of these Alexandrian writers placing Heracles resplendently in the heavens

³³ F. Sokolowski, 'A New Testimony on the Cult of Artemis of Ephesus,' *The Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 4 (1965): pp.427–431, p.429.

³⁴ David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Volume V: The New School of Poetry and Anonymous Songs and Hymns*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library 144 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.82–85.

³⁵ Aratus, *Phaenomena*, trans. Aaron Pochigian, Johns Hopkins New Translations from Antiquity (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p.3.

³⁶ Claudius Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Almagest*, trans. G. J. Toomer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.348.

³⁷ Marco Perale, 'A Hellenistic Astronomical Poem from Oxyrhynchus,' in *Proceedings of the 27th International Congress of Papyrology, Warsaw 29.07–3.08 2013*, ed. T. Derda, A. Lajtar, and J. Urbanik (Warsaw: Raphael Taubenschlag Foundation, 2016), p.162.

after his death, having successfully achieved his penance-driven twelve labours on earth.³⁸

Richard Hinckley Allen pointed to the possibility that the Kneeler may have been the quasi-historical figure of Izhdubar, also known as Gilgamesh, who slew Taimat, the dragon, represented by Draco, and that this Chaldean myth may have become the basis for Hercules' second Labour of killing the Lernean Hydra. Allen used as evidence a cylinder seal (c.3500—3000 BCE) of Izhdubar resting on one knee with a foot on the dragon's head.³⁹ If these constellations known now as the Stymphalian Birds were once an earlier expression of the women who served and guarded Artemis, whose initial temple was established by the Amazons at Ephesus, then renaming the constellation of the Kneeler at a later stage as 'Hercules' may have been a deliberate linking to the subsequent myth of Hercules and the Stymphalian Birds.

As for Sagitta, the Arrow, lying between all three birds, Allen maintained that both Eratosthenes and Aratus described the arrow as separate to the figure of Hercules. Aratus called it the Feathered Arrow and the Well-shaped Dart, distinguishing it from Sagittarius, though Allen noted that it has often been considered to be a stray arrow that belonged to the constellation The Archer.⁴⁰ It is possible therefore to see in this grouping of constellations an alternate sky myth for the Stymphalian Birds, one that engaged in the worship of Artemis and her female temple guardians suggested by their bird talons.

Further evidence comes from the fact that the temple at Ephesus was established by the Amazons. From examining Homer's *Iliad*, Lorna Hardwicke has clarified how the Greeks regarded the Amazons: as a matrilineal people with male-like qualities, *antianerai*, 'a match for men'; as a group of women who, with their brazen bows, carried a powerful military reputation; and as providing status by their defeat.⁴¹ The Greeks saw the Amazons as a matrilineal people to be subjugated and as Maria-Ángels Roque wrote, 'Myths are distant cosmogonies, and many legends are transformed into foundational elements, whose meaning is related to the legitimisation of the possession of a place or a lineage, or with the

³⁸ Perale, 'A Hellenistic Astronomical Poem', p.163.

³⁹ Richard Hinckley Allen, *Star Names: Their Lore and Meaning* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), p.239.

⁴⁰ Allen, p.350.

⁴¹ Lorna Hardwick, 'Ancient Amazons - Heroes, Outsiders or Women?', *Greece & Rome* 37, no. 1 (1990): pp.14–36, p.16.

celebration of a hero.⁴² In this instance, Hercules' role in eradicating the Stymphalian Birds suggests such a myth, written to legitimise the incoming Greek patriarchy desirous of overriding this sacred feminine focus established by the Amazons, women who wielded brazen bows and arrows and who were ferociously successful in their military campaigns.

One further suggestion

There may therefore be another level to this sky myth, with possible cultural roots back into the Mesopotamian era using as evidence the Burney relief, now known as the Queen of the Night, held in the British Museum (Fig.5). The written evidence of writers such as Homer and Xenophon of Athens established the Greek presence in Turkey and the carriage across the Aegean of the cult of the Ephesian Artemis and its transposition to Lake Stymphalos. Robin Lane Fox further identified a Greek presence in north Syria c.800 BCE at Al Mina at the mouth of the river Orontes, west of Aleppo.⁴³ This fired clay relief known as the Queen of the Night depicts a naked female figure carved in high relief and depicted frontally and symmetrically looking forward, where frontality, as Dominique Collon observed, indicated communication with the viewer.⁴⁴ The Queen of the Night stands on a pair of lions and is flanked by two standing owls. Although naked, she wears an elaborate headdress of four superimposed pairs of bull's horns with a disc at the top, a headdress connected with gods and goddesses. She is adorned with a necklace and bracelets and holds at shoulder height in each upraised hand a rod-and-ring symbol, a symbol of divinity. Locks of hair fall to her breasts either side of her shoulders. Pertinent to the argument of this essay are the feathered wings that hang down from her shoulders and the talons of a bird of prey for her feet. The terracotta relief was made in Babylonia (now southern Iraq) and dated to the time of King Hammurabi (reigned c.1792-1750 BCE).⁴⁵ Examination of the Queen of the Night by the British Museum's Department of Scientific Research in 2000 revealed that it is a mould-made plaque by a craftsman with great expertise in using clay firing techniques.⁴⁶

⁴² Maria-Àngels Roque, 'The Amazons, the Contribution of a Greek Myth to the Patriarchal Imaginary,' *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 24 (2017): pp.39-47, p.47.

⁴³ Robin Lane Fox, *Travelling Heroes: Greeks and Their Myths in the Epic Age of Homer* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.115.

⁴⁴ Dominique Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, British Museum Objects in Focus (London: The British Museum Press, 2016 [2005]), p.25.

⁴⁵ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.7.

⁴⁶ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.13.

Collon identified the Queen of the Night as a goddess and that the plaque was probably set into an interior mud-brick wall of a shrine.⁴⁷ As to which goddess the Queen of the Night represents is still uncertain. More pertinently for the purposes of the myth of the Stymphalian Birds, Collon noted a variety of mould made plaques showing a winged naked female goddess with bird talons that had been found in Babylonia dated to between 1900 and 1700 BCE.⁴⁸

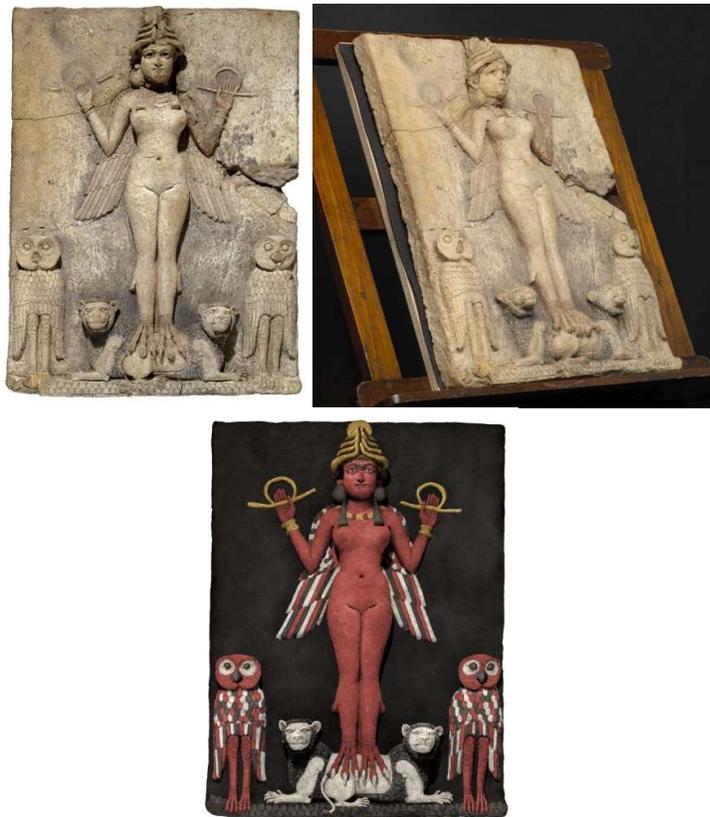


Figure 5. Left and centre: The Queen of the Night terracotta relief, 49.5 x 37 x 4.8 cm. Right: Digital reconstruction of the relief produced by the British Museum New Media Unit, London. Photos: British Museum.

⁴⁷ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.22.

⁴⁸ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.18 and images on pp.14 and 16.

Although many of the attributes point to the Queen of the Night being a goddess of the underworld and hence associated with death, there is still no definitive evidence to connect her in this way. What can be argued is the idea of a frontal goddess with wings and the feet of birds with two bird attendants from c.1850-1750 BCE that could well have travelled across the trade routes from Babylonia to Al Mina and from there become a goddess with female attendants with the feet of birds c.323 BCE.

In conclusion

The name 'The Summer Triangle' is a relatively recent one. Recognising that the sky mythology that is understood today is framed within the Greek Herculean myth, this essay has offered alternate ways that these three birds may have been understood through other cultures. From the myth of Hercules, where a masculine human hero overcomes female ornithological ferocity, this essay moved further back in time to explore the reverence offered to Artemis at Ephesus through her temple, built by the Amazons, and suggested that the Greek desire to subjugate the Amazons, a matriarchal and military ferocious, bow-and-arrow wielding culture, may have catalysed the change of meaning of the myth of the Stymphalian birds. Finally, building on the visual evidence from Ephesus, this essay suggested that an early articulation of the myth may have been one emerging from Mesopotamia, exemplified by the Queen of the Night as a possible prior image for the Ephesian Artemis. Such a reading suggests these three stars are a sky myth palimpsest, held together visually in the summer months by each of the constellations' three brightest stars, but linked at a much deeper level by Greek and Mesopotamian mythology.