

White Ravens

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EUSTATHIOS (pp.1746,61–1747), commenting upon the Raven’s Rock in *Odyssey* 13.408, remarks that Pausanias Grammaticus had told a story about the origin of the expression *φεῦγ’ ἐς κόρακας*: “Apollo had declared to the Boiotians in an oracle that wherever white ravens were seen by them, there must they settle; when therefore they saw flying beside the Gulf of Pagasai ravens which boys had powdered with chalk, they dwelt there, and called the place *Korakes*; but later the Aeolians, having expelled them, sent thither persons whom they had driven into exile.” The same tale is to be found in Photios *s.v. ἐς κόρακας* (p.215 Naber).

A significantly different version is to be found in Zenobios:¹ the Boiotians at Arne (*i.e.* Kierion) were told that they would be driven from their land when white ravens appeared. Some young men became drunk and seized some ravens, which they whitened and then let fly. The Boiotians were distressed at this spectacle because the oracle had been fulfilled, and in the ensuing uproar the youths fled to a place called Korakes. Later the Aeolians expelled the Boiotians from Arne and took the place as their own. Their wrongdoers they transferred to the so-called Korakes.

A third version of this Thessalian tale is to be found amongst the Magnesians of Crete, who, tradition asserted, had come to the island from the Peneios valley and the vicinity of Mount Pelion.² ‘The god’ had told the Magnesians settled between Phaistos and Gortyn that white ravens would appear when the time had come for them to return home. Eighty years after the settlement the white ravens were duly seen, but Delphi, on being asked, directed the Magnesians to Asia instead, where in the course of time Magnesia by the Maeander

¹ 3.87, in Leutsch/Schneidewin, *Paroemiographi Graeci* I (Göttingen 1839, repr. Hildesheim 1958) 78.

² O. Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander* (Berlin 1900) no. 17 lines 16–20 = *FGrHist* 482 F 3.

was founded.³ In this version the white ravens are explicitly linked with Apollo of Delphi; in the other two the oracle is not named, but in all three Apollo sends his special bird, the raven.⁴

From the three stories we infer: (1) white ravens were part of Thessalian folklore, (2) the Aeolians of Thessaly used to expel persons to a place called Korakes (Zenobios), (3) Korakes was by the Pagasitic gulf (Pausanias Gr.), (4) Boiotians were at one time settled there (Pausanias Gr.). (5) Aeolians expelled Boiotians from Arne (Zenobios),⁵ and (6) later, Aeolians drove Boiotians from Korakes (Pausanias Gr.). The chief contradiction between Zenobios and Pausanias Grammaticus is that in the former the Boiotians were told by the god that they would be expelled from Arne when the white ravens appeared, but in Pausanias they were to settle where the ravens were sighted.

The context of these stories is the eastward thrust of the Thessalians who came from Thesprotia and drove the Boiotians out of Arne (Herodotos 7.176.4, Thucydides 1.12.3); the Thessalians are the 'Aeolians' of Zenobios and Pausanias. Of specific interest is the mention of a place called Korakes beside the Pagasitic gulf. Skylax (75) places a *Κορακαί* on the eastern shore of the gulf, between Methone and Spalauthra, and in view of the evidence of Zenobios and Pausanias there is no need to doubt the existence of a place called Korakes or Korakai thereabouts. The proposal of Wace⁶ and others to read *Κορόπη* in Skylax for *Κορακαί* is therefore unnecessary, though the two places cannot have been far apart and may well be identical.⁷

The gathering of Boiotian fugitives in the remote country east of the Gulf of Volo accords with the, admittedly scanty, archaeological evidence for migrations of people in late Mycenaean and Dark Age Thessaly and Magnesia. V. Desborough suggests⁸ that the Sub-Mycenaean and later tombs at Theotokou in Magnesia, not far from Korope, represent a movement of population, perhaps from the

³ *Inscr. Magnesia* (*supra* n.2) no. 17 lines 1-5.

⁴ Cf. Hesiod fr.123 Rzach³.

⁵ Steph. Byz. *s.v.* "Αρνη, who equates Thessalian Arne with Kierion, quotes an oracle about the Boiotian emigration from the place: "Αρνη χηρεύουσα μένει Βοιώτιον ἄνδρα. It seems that Arne waited in vain, because there is no evidence in favour of the assertion by Stephanos that the Thessalian Arne was an ἄποικος τῆς Βοιωτίας. Boiotian Arne is already named in the Homeric Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.507); that there were two places of this name occupied by Boiotians need be no more than a coincidence.

⁶ A. J. B. Wace, "The Topography of Pelion and Magnesia," *JHS* 26 (1906) 153.

⁷ Cf. Stählin, *RE* 11.2 (1922) 1370 *s.v.* Κορακαί.

⁸ *The Last Mycenaean and their Successors* (Oxford 1964) 138, 259.

northwest, into Thessaly, and there is related evidence for newcomers at Iolkos nearby.⁹ It may well be therefore that Boiotians were driven from Arne, not only to the former Cadmeian land about Thebes as Thucydides says, but also eastwards into Magnesia during the overthrow of Mycenaean power in Thessaly. Of this migration the quaint tale of the white ravens is almost certainly a memory.

The story of the ravens at Korakai beside the gulf of Pagasai was perhaps part of the local lore of Apollo's oracle at Korope. It is noteworthy that a decree of Demetrius, dating from late in the second century B.C., shows that the oracle, perhaps truly, claimed to be ancient:¹⁰ ὄν|τος ἀρχαίου τοῦ μαντείου καὶ προτετιμημένου διὰ προγό|νων. Excavations suggest that the place was already flourishing in the sixth century B.C. and the white raven story implies that, according to local myth-history at least, Apollo had interests in Magnesia as early as the late Mycenaean period of migrations; one may perhaps conjecture that in the original version of the white ravens' epiphany to the Magnesians in Crete, Korope, not Delphi, had directed the colonists' movements from Thessaly to Crete.

The story of ravens made white by chalk gains plausibility from the presence of white outcrops in the ground near Arne (Strabo 439). Albinism in ravens is, however, not rare. It is often noted today¹¹ and was recorded in antiquity: in Pedasa in Karia, of two ravens said to inhabit the temple of Zeus, one had a white throat;¹² Aristotle noted that ravens could turn white in cold weather;¹³ and in fable the raven was originally white.¹⁴ Thus it is possible that genuinely white ravens prompted the story of the portent sent by Apollo to Boiotians at Korakai on the coast of Magnesia or to Magnesians in Crete. The chalked ravens at Arne would then belong to a secondary development of the tale.

The ravens are of incidental interest. The significant fact is that Pausanias Grammaticus and Zenobios recall two stages of a Boiotian

⁹ *op.cit.* 38, 138.

¹⁰ L. Robert, *Hellenica* 5 (Paris 1948) p.17 lines 13–15. Cf. Stählin, *RE* 11.2 (1922) 1436–7 *s.v.* Κορόπη.

¹¹ I am grateful to my Belfast colleague Gareth Owen, Professor of Zoology, for confirming this.

¹² Aristotle, *Mirab.* 844b8 (137); cf. D'Arcy W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford 1936) 160.

¹³ *Hist. Anim.* 3.12.1, 519a6.

¹⁴ Ovid, *Met.* 2.536.

migration through Thessaly, a movement which also brought Boiotians to Boiotia proper and according to Thucydides (1.12.3) had already begun before the Trojan war. Boiotians were expelled by Thessalians from Arne, sixty years after the Trojan war according to Thucydides, and some of the fugitives, we learn from the raven story, made their way not to Boiotia proper but to the eastern shore of the gulf of Pagasai. Pausanias does not report what happened to the Boiotians who were expelled from Korakes; other writers do not help; and to guess is pointless. But it is interesting that a migration from inland to eastern Thessaly is also suggested by the evidence of dialect: the Aeolic speech of Thessaliois (the district of Arne) and Hestiaiiois—and, one must add, of Boiotia proper—was strongly influenced by Northwest Greek, but the Aeolic of Magnesia and Pelasgiotis remained remarkably pure.¹⁵ Thus eastern Thessaly may well have been a place of gathering for speakers of a pure Aeolic dialect (or of proto-Aeolic), some of whom had been driven eastwards by the intrusive Thessaloi and other migrants from Northwest Greece at the end of the Mycenaean age and later.¹⁶

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¹⁵ See E. Risch and J. Chadwick (pp. 99 and 114f respectively) in *Language and Background of Homer* ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge 1964).

¹⁶ For a Rhodian oracle about white ravens see Ergias, *FGrHist* 513 F 1 with Jacoby's comments. A new text of the Pausanias fragment is given by H. Erbse, *Untersuchungen zu den attizistischen Lexika* (Berlin 1950) p.218 lines 12ff (= *Pausaniae atticistae fragmenta*, φ 5); here Boiotians are said to have been uprooted by *Thracians* before settling at Korakes; but this seems to be a secondary version of the tale.

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