

THE EAGLE PORTENT IN THE AGAMEMNON: AN ORNITHOLOGICAL FOOTNOTE

Professor Martin West's paper,¹ titled 'The Parodos of the *Agamemnon*', argues with characteristic learning and insight that Archilochus' fable of the fox and the eagle (frs. 174–81 West) was a major source for Aeschylus' description of the portent of the eagles and the pregnant hare in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* (108 ff.). The portent is vividly described by the chorus: two eagles, one black and one white behind (*ὁ κελευνός ὃ τ' ἐξόπιω ἀργᾶς*), feed upon a pregnant hare. Poetry is not real life, and Aeschylus' picture is not a naturalist's field-report. At the same time, an image's power increases in proportion to its precision, and I have no doubt that at some stage behind Aeschylus' description there was a personal sighting of a parallel incident by Aeschylus himself perhaps, or by Archilochus, or by an unknown figure who passed on his report. Fraenkel's commentary (p.69) avers that 'precise zoological identification of the species of eagle named by Aeschylus must not be attempted.' This is a fair warning, but not for the reason advanced by Fraenkel here: the plumage variation among different birds of the same species, which makes the identification of large raptors in the wilds of Greece today a problem for even the most expert ornithologists. There are two better reasons. One will emerge in the course of this note. The other is that no ancient writer using the Greek language came at all near to the modern classification of eagle species native to Greece.²

Despite such caveats, however, modern naturalists will still ask the question, 'If somebody sees two eagles, one blackish, and one white-rumped or white-tailed, together attacking a hare in the Greek countryside, what species of eagle is he or she most likely to have seen?', and the question is capable of an answer. Modern Greece is not ancient Greece, of course, but there is no evidence that raptors in ancient times differed in plumage or in species from their modern descendants, although today there are far fewer individual birds than formerly. It may, I believe, be plausibly assumed that two predators attacking a hare in concert are likely to have belonged to the same species.³ Given this assumption and the details of the Aeschylean description, the possibilities may be limited to two.

1. An adult golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), which is dark in plumage overall (the golden feathers on the nape, which give the bird its English name, do not stand out at a distance), accompanied by an immature bird of the same species, which has a clearly visible white tail edged with black.

2. An adult white-tailed eagle (sometimes called the erne or sea-eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*), which has a white tail, accompanied by an immature bird of the same species, which has dark brown plumage overall.⁴ Which of the two

¹ CQ 29 (1979), 1 ff.

² The best earlier discussions on ancient Greek descriptions and classifications of the various species are Oder in *RE* s.v. *Adler*, and Thompson's *Glossary* s.v. ΑΕΤΟΣ. Cf. now also J. Pollard, *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (London, 1977), pp.76 f.

³ This assumption, based on normal bird behaviour, rules out the Denniston-Page suggestion (their commentary, ad loc.) that the eagles were one adult golden eagle and one adult white-tailed eagle.

⁴ Cf. the note by Sylvia Benton, CQ 10 (1960), 111 f.

species lies behind Aeschylus' description it is clearly impossible to decide. In the last century the white-tailed eagle was still breeding as near to Aulis as Lake Kopais. Both species still breed in Greece, but much more rarely than they used to. And both species include hares in their diet.¹

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¹ Cf. A. Kanellis, *Catalogus Faunae Graeciae, pars II: Aves*, compiled by W. Bauer and others (Thessaloniki, 1969),

pp.43 and 47, with references to earlier literature.