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Bats in Greco-Roman Antiquity
'The literary creation of 'demon bats'
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Bats around the world have been reviled and persecuted over the centuries “ and still are today “ because of a legacy of harmful myths and misinformation. Rare exceptions are found in China and other parts of Asia, where bats have a much gentler image and are considered harbingers of good fortune. In Western culture, however, legends, folktales, books and movies have mostly described villainous, hateful creatures. But it was not always so.

Bats appear very near the birth of Western literature, in one of the oldest and most important works of ancient Greece: The Odyssey, an eighth-century B.C. epic poem usually (though probably erroneously) ascribed to Homer. To describe the awesome nocturnal atmosphere of the underworld, the author compares the souls of the dead gathering together to bats flying in a dark cave.

"As bats fly squealing in the hollow of some great cave, when one of them has fallen out of the cluster in which they hang, even so did the ghosts whine and squeal as Mercury the healer of sorrow led them down into the dark abode of death."

The passage relates to the idea that bats supported the souls living in the netherworld and that the souls detached from the body in the form of bats. During the Greco-Roman Age of Antiquity, the desire of the soul to be freed from earthly chains was expressed by the metaphor of winged animals: birds, butterflies and sometimes bats.

Generally speaking, Greco-Roman writers display a neutral “ if not positive “ attitude toward bats.

These classical authors might well have been dealing with the widespread European species now known as the brown big-eared bat (*Plecotus auritus*). But writers of the time also mention an alopec dermopteros or a nyktalopez, which translates as a "fox with skinny wings" or "nocturnal fox," suggesting perhaps a flying fox of the genus *Pteropus*.

Writers interested in science were almost certainly drawn to bats because of what must have seemed a remarkably ambiguous taxonomy: mammals that looked and acted like birds. Many sources listed them as birds, while some considered them rodents.

This apparently dual nature is emphasized in tales such as this one ascribed to Aesop (sixth century B.C.): A bat falls to the ground and is caught twice by a weasel, predator of both mice and birds. The bat manages to escape with its life by claiming first to be a mouse, then a bird. There is also a famous riddle in Plato's Republic (fourth century B.C.): a man who is not a man (a eunuch) throws a stone that is not a stone (pumice) at a bird that is not a bird (a bat) sitting on a tree that is not a tree (a reed).

Bats' nocturnal habits are among their most striking features, leading some authors, including the playwright Sophocles, to declare that they cannot tolerate sunlight. In Greek,

the word for bat is *nykteris*, which is related to "night," while in Latin, it is *vespertilio*, derived from "twilight."

This is spelled out in one of the most beautiful accounts of bats in Latin literature, that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, composed between the years 2 and 8 A.D. The poem explains the origin of bats as punishment meted out to the daughters of Greek King Minyas for neglecting Dionysius' rites:

"Now the day was past, and the time had come when you could not say that it was light or darkness, but a borderland of light and uncertain night. Suddenly the ceiling shook, the oil lamps seemed to brighten, and the house to shine with glowing fires and fill with the howling of fierce creatures' deceptive phantoms. Quickly the sisters hide in the smoke-filled house and in various places shun the flames and light. While they seek the shadows, a thin membrane stretches over their slender limbs, and delicate wings enfold their arms.

"The darkness prevents them knowing how they have lost their former shape. They do not rise on soft plumage, but lift themselves on semitransparent wings and, trying to speak, emit the tiniest squeak, as befits their bodies, and tell their grief in faint shrieks. They frequent rafters, rather than woods, and, hating the light, they fly at night, and derive their name, '*vespertiliones*,' from '*vesper*', the evening."

Many Greco-Roman authors, including such towering figures as Aristotle in fourth-century B.C. Greece and Pliny the Elder of first-century A.D. Rome, provided rather detailed descriptions of bats. These writers variously noted that at least some have cartilaginous wings, pig-like snouts, big ears and no tail, and they cling to walls in clusters. Some naturalists declare that bats are the only birds that possess teeth and that they fight against storks.

A range of superstitious practices are also noted: bat blood is said to be an antidote for snake bites, bat hearts are supposed to repel ants, and bats or bat organs are listed, sometimes in combination with plants, as powerful remedies against a range of illnesses.

The fact that bats give birth to live young (known as "viviparity") was often reported. In the first century A.D., the naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote, "Among the winged animals, the only one that is viviparous is the bat; it is the only one, too, that has wings formed of a membrane. This is, also, the only winged creature that feeds its young with milk from the breast."

Artemidorus proclaimed in the second century A.D. that dreaming about a bat foretells a lucky pregnancy because bat mothers take special care of their newborns.

Bats' communal behavior was noted, especially by Basil of Caesarea (fourth century A.D.). In recounting the creation, this influential "Father" of the Christian church, wrote: "How is it that one animal, the bat, is at the same time quadruped and fowl? ... That it is viviparous like quadrupeds, and traverses the air, raising itself not upon wings but upon a kind of membrane? What natural love bats have for each other! How they interlace like a chain and hang the one upon the other!"

But Basil seems an exception among the Church Fathers, who frequently described bats as vile and repellent creatures. With their dark color, membrane wings and nocturnal habits, bats seemed devilish beasts linked to blind moles and creatures of darkness. Their

ambiguous taxonomy was unsettling. The Bible makes a few references that seem to list bats as impure, and Isaiah 2:20 states (English Standard Version): "In that day mankind will cast away their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats." This passage likely refers to Babylonian idols in the shape of bats. The Talmud likewise presents bats as negative animals.

Fathers of the Church, including Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome and others of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., took up this view, regarding bats as symbols of the blindness of heresy or the darkness of evil. The transformation of bats into wicked creatures was completed in the Middle Ages, which began in the fifth century, as demonstrated in religious writings and artwork of the time and in the diabolical sculpted bats of Gothic cathedrals. The most striking example of this medieval attitude is probably found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the Devil himself, "emperor of the kingdom dolorous," is depicted as a gigantic bat with three faces.

The famous art historian Jurgis Baltrusaitis of Lithuania argued that the iconography of demon bats was transplanted into Western culture from East Asia. That view has been challenged in recent years, however, because of literary sources such as those cited here and, of course, the positive images of bats in China.

The West seems to have forged its own concept of evil bats. And now we must continue our efforts to replace that harmful concept with a new, more accurate and positive image of these gentle and invaluable creatures.

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