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*Cranes of the World, by Paul Johnsgard*

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Cranes of the World: 8. Cranes in Myth  
and Legend

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# Cranes in Myth and Legend

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8 Wherever cranes occur in the world, their stature, intelligence, wariness, and sociality have captured the human imagination and have given rise to a variety of legends, myths, and folktales. Among the best sources of such information for England and southern Europe are the manuscript writings of Edward Topsell (1572-1625), which have been edited and recently republished (1972). Topsell reported that "when fables ruled the world" it was believed that a proud queen of Pygmies named Oenoe or Gerania was turned into a crane by Juno and Diana, because she taught her people to neglect other gods and worship her. Gerania thereafter began an irreconcilable war between cranes and Pygmies that has persisted ever since. Much the same story appears in the Iliad of Homer. From this legend perhaps came the Greek name *geranos* or *gereunos* for cranes. Likewise, they were sometimes known as the birds of Palamedes, since, at about the time of the Trojan Wars, the mythic hero Palamedes reputedly invented several Greek letters by watching the convolutions of flying cranes. The avian genus *Palamedea*, however, was subsequently applied to the South American crane-like birds known as screamers. On the other hand, the Romans called cranes *grues*, evidently because of their grunting voices.

According to Topsell, even the African crowned cranes were well known to Pliny and other early Roman writers, and the Eurasian crane was even more familiar to the early Romans, who were greatly impressed by its longevity. An Italian professor at Padua, Leonicus Tomaeus (1457-1533) reportedly maintained a crane in captivity for some forty years. Cranes were also evidently raised as pets or fattened for the pot in ancient Greece. Plutarch referred to the practice of fattening them by sewing shut their eyelids, which quiets the birds (from which practice the English term hoodwinking derives), and a design on an ancient Greek vase in the Hermitage Museum of Leningrad shows a seated woman offering a

morsel of food to a crane (Armstrong, 1979). Aristotle and other early Greek writers believed that the feathers of cranes changed color with age. Thus, as humans age from black to gray and finally to white, so too were cranes thought to change from black through yellow to white. On the other hand, later writers used the absence of plumage changes in cranes as symbolic of constancy and singular endeavor.

Besides apparently contributing several letters to the Greek alphabet, cranes and their behavior are responsible for several words that have gained general use. The geranium plant is so named for the seed capsule's resemblance to a crane's bill. The Latin *congruere*, meaning an agreement, is the origin of the English word *congruence* (Topsell, 1972). Soon after the Norman Conquest of England there was a general interest developed in genealogy, and the branching form of a family tree was referred to as a "crane's foot," or *ped de grue*, from which is derived the present word *pedigree* (Ingersoll, 1923). The calling of cranes, or *iangling*, also gave rise to the modern English word *jangling*.

The migrations of cranes, marked by large flocks and clamoring calls, were well known to the Greeks and Romans, and were used to mark the changing of the seasons. Topsell noted that the birds have keen senses of sight, hearing, and smell. Further, like the kings of Persia, the cranes have both summer and winter dwellings, and they follow certain limited and determinate schedules during which they change their habitations. Thus, Pliny praised the regular order of crane and quail migrations, in which the quails regularly appeared one month before the cranes in spring and likewise departed a month before them during fall. When the cranes were about to leave Thrace they were believed to assemble in rank and order in the manner of soldiers. Before the flock finally left, the oldest of the cranes would fly about in a circle three times, after which he would fall down and die of exhaustion, to be buried by the others. After

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this ceremony the rest would take flight toward Africa to spend the winter.

Topsell noted that during flight, the birds attain unusual heights and fly in triangular formation, and that unlike other birds they fly both night and day. The high flight was attributed to the birds' desire to see great distances ahead, and perhaps foresee the onset of rains or storms in order that they might avoid them. Further, when at such heights the stragglers can better be observed and helped. The usual triangular formation, like the Greek letter lambda, allows the birds to cut the air more readily, while during high winds they tend to fly in the form of a half-moon. When set upon by eagles, the birds were believed to assume the shape of a ring, or that of a heart, in order that they might fly with greater courage and strength. It was noted that the birds sometimes change places in formation, and by this regular changing of formation various letters of the alphabet are imitated. More remarkably, Cicero believed that each crane rested its head on the back of the bird flying immediately ahead of it. The lead crane, having no bird to rest its head upon, eventually retired to the end of the line, to place its head on the back of the trailing bird, which had previously supported none.

Topsell noted that the three most likely letters to have been extracted from the flight of cranes, alpha, lambda, and upsilon, are probably not actually attributable to Palamedes, who was reputed to have invented several new Greek letters from watching the formations of cranes. Yet, M. Martial (A.D. 40-104), a Roman epigramist, and Flavius Cassiodorus (c. 490-575) both affirmed that the entire Greek alphabet was obtained from the flight of cranes by the god Mercury.

Topsell observed that while in flight, cranes always treat the foremost of them as captain and arrange themselves so as not to obscure the view of the lead bird. The older birds take turns being leader, and should any of the flock become weary before reaching their destinations two other birds will take the tired individual on their backs or wings, or support it with their outstretched legs. Topsell observed that cranes rarely fly against the wind, except when being chased, and they also avoid strong backwinds that might ruffle their feathers and weaken them; of the two they prefer to fly against the wind.

Many early writers believed that when cranes flew long distances they would swallow a heavy stone that served as ballast, to strengthen themselves against sudden gusts of wind. Others believed that the birds carried the stone so that when nearing the end of their journey they could drop the stone and on hearing it land could determine whether they had crossed the ocean or not. Yet others believed that the birds kept the stones in their mouths to stop their voices and thus escape detection from eagles. Some, such as Aristotle, denied this story, but Pliny believed that the birds filled

their throats with sand and also carried stones. Some believed that the stone was carried by their feet, and Topsell suggested that perhaps the carrying of stones by the individuals that were swiftest of flight prevented them from flying so fast that they might outstrip and lose contact with the slower ones. Pliny reported that after the cranes had crossed the Sea of Pontus and had dropped the stones that they were carrying in the feet for ballast, they landed and cast up the sand carried in their throats, which had by then been transformed into a perfect yellow stone. Through the help of fire, this stone could then be transformed into gold.

On their fall flight to Egypt the cranes were believed to choose a captain, since they knew they would meet with enemies there, but on their return flight to Europe they neither chose a captain nor posted watches. In their choice of a guide, they select one of the strongest and oldest birds, which might be best able to find the proper way and strong enough to withstand the wind. In the middle of the flock the youngest and weakest birds fly, in order that they might be encouraged by those both in front and behind. Other watchmen and officers are placed at the rear, to call to the captain and inform him that all are following. The captain must not only fly in the foremost position and guide the flock properly, but must also help stand guard while the flock rests at night. Many watchmen are also posted, while each of the others in the flock sleeps with one leg lifted and its head under a wing. Plutarch stated that the birds stand their watch like Hercules, who leaned with his head and hand upon his club. Thus the crane stands on one leg and holds a stone in the claws of the other foot, so that if sleep should overtake the bird, it would drop the stone, awakening itself and the other sleeping birds (Topsell, 1972).

According to Topsell, when the cranes have reached three years of age they leave the cold climates for their breeding grounds. Then the birds form couples, and the males fertilize their mates while the latter are standing upright rather than lying on the earth. In addition to two eggs, a stone is also often "laid" in the nest, at least in captivity. In one account, a male and female crane that were being held in an orchard laid eggs and raised two young. As the female led the young about, the chicks would sometimes forsake her and follow the male instead. Once, after calling the young away from their father, the female was viciously attacked and killed by the male.

Topsell stated that cranes, like wild geese, eat all kinds of wild grain. He also noted that cranes feed on serpents, and that in Thessaly (central Greece) were it not for the storks and cranes the people would be forced to leave the country. Thus, people were forbidden by law to kill the birds, an immunity referred to as "antipelargia" (from the Greek *palargos*, or stork).

Aristotle, Homer, and many other early authors

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believed that the cranes regularly engaged in warfare with Pygmies, or *geranomachian*. These Pygmies were believed to live in caves and were called Troglodytes, and at times were thought to ride on the backs of various animals. According to Pliny, the Pygmies were driven out of Geranea, their first city, by cranes, and later made warfare with them, attacking with iron weapons and darts or by riding on the backs of rams and holding in their hands a kind of clapper. They attacked the birds at the time of breeding, descending thus on their nesting areas and destroying the birds and their eggs. This was done only during the breeding period, for later in the fall the arrival of other cranes might overthrow the Pygmies by their very numbers.

Topsell noted that cranes exhibit hostility toward eagles and hawks, and when cranes see such predators they usually flee with haste and utter loud calls. Yet, when there are enough cranes present to resist, he noted that they would gather into a circle or ring and, with their heads lifted to the highest, would advance on the eagle or hawk and force it to depart. Besides protecting one another, cranes show a special love for their own young, and at times the pair will fight with one another over the education of their young. At such times, when the cranes are thus engaged in fighting, they are more easily captured by men. A more cunning method of capturing cranes was recounted by Topsell. A bottle or gourd is emptied and is coated with birdlime. Then a bee is placed inside. When the crane hears the humming of the bee it thrusts its head inside to capture the insect, only to be caught fast by the head feathers and blinded. Then the bird stands helplessly until it is captured alive. From this practice a Russian fable perhaps arose in which a fox invited a crane to supper but prepared a dish of broth, which the fox could readily lap up but which the crane was unable to take up with its beak. In return, the crane invited the fox to supper, putting meat into a deep pot with a thin neck into which the crane was able to reach but not the fox.

Wild cranes were also captured or killed by the use of falcons or small eagles. In Germany, such large falcons were called "crane falcons" or "girfalcons." Smaller falcons might also be used to force the cranes to the ground where they could be caught by dogs.

Topsell noted that cranes fly remarkably swiftly, although they fly so high that from the earth it would seem that they are actually flying very slowly. Further, by flying at night as well as during the day, they are able to cross great distances in a short time. At night they utter almost continuous calls to keep informed of their positions, and by flying high enough to escape the shadow of the earth they actually are able to see well enough to find their way. When the birds do sleep at night, they raise up one leg and place the head upon the wing, by which the heat of the body is transmitted to the brain; thus the bird is able to sleep more easily, according to Topsell.

Cranes occur in many historical and allegorical contexts, such as a city in Thrace (or Messinia) and a mountain on the Megaris Peninsula near Corinth that were called Gerania. Reportedly the latter, now called Yerania, was so named because the people followed the calls of flying cranes at the time of a flood, thus reaching higher ground and saving themselves from drowning. The death of Ibycus is probably the most famous of crane stories from ancient Greece. This poet of Rhegium (who lived about 550 B.C.) was set upon by robbers, and before expiring looked up to see cranes flying overhead. With his dying breath he told the robbers that the cranes would avenge him. Some time later, in the market place of Corinth the robbers saw the cranes flying overhead, and one fearfully exclaimed to the others, "Behold the cranes of Ibycus." On being thus overheard, the men were detained and questioned by the authorities, and later confessed their crime.

The sagacity of cranes, and the belief that they carried stones in their feet at night to keep them awake, are the basis for their frequent allegorical association with intelligence. The flight of a crane signified a wise man who had studied astronomy or any other "lofty and sublime" study. Yet, a fool who handled divine matters wickedly or without true wisdom was also at times compared to a flying crane, and Plotinus believed that such a man was eventually metamorphosed into a crane. The democratic form of government was compared to the orderly behavior associated with cranes, in which all the populace participates in elections. Thus the word *congruere*, to consent or agree, came from the unified and collective behavior of cranes. If a man should live his entire life in a consistent and singular manner, he was sometimes compared to a crane, for although many other birds change their colors with age, the crane remains much the same in appearance throughout its life. Cranes were believed to give equal honor to all, for their captains regularly give up their lead in flight to go to the rear of the flock, and thus the last becomes first, and the birds can live in freedom without king or tyrant. Christians were told that they must imitate cranes in their watchfulness, and avoid the fall of sin in much the way that a crane avoids sleep by holding a stone with its raised foot. Likewise, Christians must help one another, with a mutual concern for the weakest, in order that all might reach a final resting place safely. And, as a crane adds ballast for its flight, a Christian must ballast himself with the fear of God until he arrives in heaven, and at the end of the journey the ballast will turn to gold or to a precious stone (Topsell, 1972).

Cranes were often the sources of morality tales, as in the story of a group of cranes and geese feeding together in a field. They were soon approached by hunters. On seeing them, the cranes quickly took flight, but the heavier and fatter geese were unable to escape. Thus, in times of war, the poor that have little or nothing might

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easily flee while rich men cannot escape with all their possessions and are soon caught and killed by the enemy.

With all this symbolism, it is not surprising that cranes were believed to have special table and medicinal qualities. Their flesh was considered useful against cancers, ulcers, palsies, and "winde in the gutts." Dried powders of their flesh were used to treat cancers, ulcers, and fistulas, "nerves" from their wings and legs were believed to help a person recover his strength, and their bone marrow was used as an eye salve. Crane fat was placed in the ears to improve hearing and treat deafness, and their "gall" was variously used to treat forgetfulness or other maladies (Topsell, 1972).

Although not noted by Topsell, the dances of cranes have attracted the attention of many cultures. The somewhat circular movements of the crane's dance were associated by ancients with the sun's seasonal movements. The appearance of the cranes in the spring thus implied a resurgent sun-god, while their dancing epitomized both fertility and death. According to Plutarch, when Theseus returned to Delos from Crete after slaying the Minotaur, he and his friends danced the *geranos* or crane dance, going through the convoluted motions of entering and leaving the Cretan labyrinth (Rowland, 1979). Crane dancing has had its counterparts in both eastern and western cultures, for the Oskits of Siberia dressed in crane skins and performed funereal dances, and similar dances were associated with Chinese funerals. In Australia, many of the aboriginal tribes included crane dances in their corroborrees.

In Chinese tradition the crane is a common symbol of longevity, and the soul of the dead is often represented as riding to heaven on a crane's back. Likewise in Chinese tradition, old pine trees sometimes turn into cranes, since both are long-lived, and the two are often associated in both Chinese and Japanese art (Armstrong, 1979; Rowland, 1979).

As the Chinese culture gradually came to influence Japan, the Japanese accepted the idea of a crane as a symbol of longevity and gradually modified it to be an emblem of joy. Since the ninth century, in Japan the cranes have been regarded as a symbol of happiness, and typically in the marriage ceremony a design incorporating both the crane and the tortoise is used to symbolize both happiness and longevity (Taka-Tsukasa, 1967; Hattori, 1928).

In many parts of the world, such as Russia, Sicily, and India, the crane serves as an animal guide in various folktales, usually leading a younger brother into various adventures. Often the slyness of cranes is emphasized, as when a crane offers to transport fish to a place where there are no fishermen, only to eat them. Or, according to the North American Indians, Old Grandfather Crane helps others to cross a river by using his long legs as a bridge, and then later dumps their

pursuers in the water (Leach, 1972). Many cultures believe that cranes will sometimes carry small birds on their backs to help them on their long migrations. Thus the Siberian Tartars believed that cranes transport corncrakes southward, and Egyptians believed that both cranes and storks carry small birds across the Mediterranean. Similarly, the Crow Indians of Montana believed that the sandhill crane carries a small bird, the *napite-shu-ull*, or "crane's back," on its back. This small bird regularly accompanies the crane, and flutters up to settle on the bird's back when it takes off. At this time the bird utters a chattering whistle, which is the basis for the Crow warriors' blowing a small bone whistle when they go riding off to battle (Ingersoll, 1923).

Not only do cranes often carry small birds on their backs, but at times they even steal humans, according to the folklore of the Eskimos of the Bering Sea area:

One autumn day, very long ago, the cranes were preparing to go southward. As they were gathered in the great flock they saw a beautiful young woman standing alone near the village. Admiring her greatly, the cranes gathered about, and lifting her on their widespread wings, bore her far up in the air and away. While the cranes were taking her up they circled below her so closely that she could not fall, and their loud, hoarse cries drowned out her calls for help, so she was carried away and never seen again. Ever since that time the cranes always circle about in autumn, uttering their loud cries while preparing to fly southward, as they did at that time. (Nelson, 1896-97)

The characteristic circling of the cranes was noted fearfully by the slaves of Alabama, who believed that if a crane circles over the house three times someone in the family will soon die (Leach, 1972). The similarity of this belief to Pliny's story of a crane circling three times and then dying prior to migration of the rest of the flock is noteworthy. A similar coincidence is the Egyptian belief that the god Toth, whose symbol was the crane-like ibis, was credited with inventing hieroglyphs (Rowland, 1979).

Two final crane legends from the Orient can be used to exemplify the strong emotional attachments between humans and cranes. The first, a Chinese legend, involves Tsêng Ts'ang, a disciple of Confucius who spared the life of a wounded crane. The crane flew away, and later returned with its mate, each of them carrying a pearl in its mouth, which they then presented to Tsêng Ts'ang (Hattori, 1928).

In a Japanese legend, a nobleman who had lost his wealth and retired to the country once saw a hunter who had captured a crane and was about to kill it. The nobleman begged the hunter to spare its life, but the hunter would only do so in return for the nobleman's precious sword, his last possession of value. The

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following night a young lady appeared at the door of the nobleman and asked him for shelter, explaining that she had been driven from her home by a cruel stepmother and needed a place to stay. The nobleman admitted her, and soon the two fell in love and were married. One day, the feudal lord decided to have a hunting party, and the woman was then forced to confess that she was really the crane that the nobleman had saved, and that she must flee. Together they left, and went to live in the palace of her parents (Hattori, 1928).

Lastly, in the words of the Italian poet Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533), a brief poem on the majesty of cranes and their flight:

And as wee see strainge Crane are wont to doe  
First stalke a while ere they their wings can finde,  
Then soare from ground not past a yard or two,  
Till in their wings they gathered have the winde;  
At last they mount the very cloudes vnto,  
Trianglewise according to their kind.

(Topsell, 1972).