

BIRD GODS

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Bird Gods by Charles de Kay

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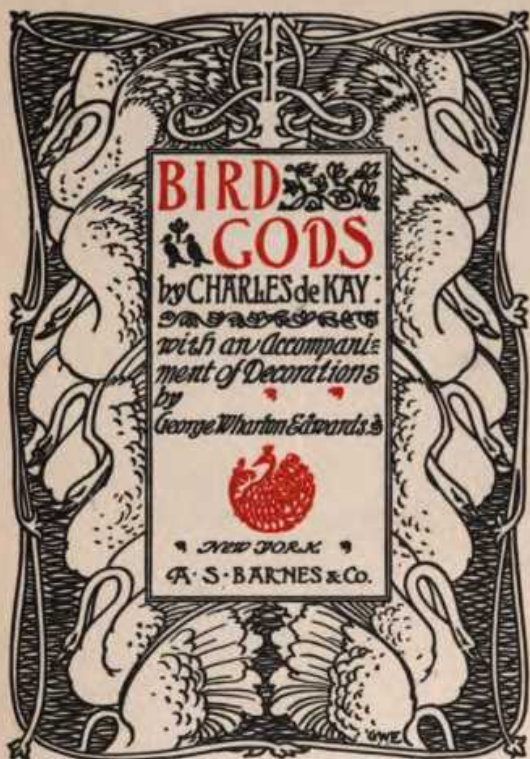
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H.O.



TO THE MEMORY OF
JAMES ELLSWORTH DE KAY
AUTHOR OF
"The Zoölogy of the State of New York"





PREFACE

EARLY men endowed with keen faculties of observation found the regular return of birds to their haunts mysterious. A closer watch on their habits revealed a forethought, a method, a genius for work, an industry that astound the naturalists of our day; certain actions of birds gave the men of old warrant to concede them powers of prophecy. To

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primitive men, and to men long after civilization was strong, such traits and powers suggested beings that need never die; they readily conceived of souls as birds and birds as supernatural creatures.

In the study of man's groping toward religious belief one factor has been much neglected: the influence of birds and beasts on what may be called prehistoric religion. Yet in the daily life of primitive men and savages these were and are as important as more striking objects in the sky, such as sun, moon and stars, rainbow and northern light, dawn and sunset, thunderstorm and the winds. Is it not a fair question to ask, whether the primitive mind did not first invest the world of animals with mystery, because they are objects near at hand, within their limited horizon, and only afterward rise to the point of grasping the heavenly bodies as beings endowed with supernatural power?

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In his work on the origin of mythology (Berlin, 1860) Dr. Schwartz contemplates the movement as one from heaven to earth, as if men worshipped the heavenly phenomena first, then brought them to earth and personified them in animals. His favorite example is the lightning, symbolized as dragon or snake. Might not the movement have been the other way?

The tracks of the worship of birds and beasts are much dimmer, more overlaid by worship of larger things. The spirits and gods perceived in celestial and atmospheric bodies are of a loftier, more civilized sort, more truly godlike; while those that retained their bird-like or animal characteristics have come down to us very often in the lower form of demi-gods or heroes. Adam of Bremen says that the Lithuanians sacrificed unblemished slaves to dragons and birds; under dragon we find the fire-breathing winged creature, a transition from

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the simple bird to a more complex creature representing lightning, tempest and the sun.

Odd enough to arrest the attention, at least, that many gods, goddesses, and demigods in Greek and Roman mythology have certain birds or beasts connected with them, without obvious reason for such association! And if one looks at the mythology and religious systems, the epics and legends of other peoples, not excepting the Judæo-Christian, one finds a similar condition of things, varying in degree of clearness. Even Christianity retains the dove associated with the Holy Ghost, the eagle, bull and lion, emblems of evangelists; other instances will occur to readers of the New Testament.

I wish to call attention to remains in the early lore of Europe of a very extensive connection of birds with gods, pointing to a worship of the bird itself as the living representative of a god, or else to such a position

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of the bird toward a deity as to fairly permit the inference that at a period still more remote the bird itself was worshipped. One may only guess how near the primitive Europeans of that period were to the condition of the savage to-day who worships the bird which is the totem of his clan, and never slays it save on certain occasions when its death is accompanied by religious rites.



I follow in mythology and epic poetry and legends the traces of certain birds, the eagle, the swan, the woodpecker, the cuckoo, the owl, the peacock, the dove, and try to show how their peculiarities and habits, observed by primitive man with the keenness of savages, have laid the foundation for certain elements in various religions and mythologies, and sometimes furnished through the peculiarities of the creature's habits or character the skele-