

☞ ☞ *Birds in culture* ☞ ☞

Extract from *The Illustrated Bird* by Maggie Oster (ed.), published by Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1978.

Doves and pigeons

Beginning with biblical times, when Noah sent the dove from the Ark and it returned with an olive leaf indicating that the flood waters were receding and that tranquility would be restored, the dove has been a symbol of peace and gentleness.

Its soft cooing call and amatory inclinations have long associated the dove with love and fecundity, and it was regarded as sacred to the goddesses who bestowed these special blessings. The dove had great religious significance for many of the early peoples. It was held sacred by the Phoenicians and Philistines. Turtledoves were offered in the temple by women after childbirth as a thanksgiving. An early belief that the dove was of divine origin was given further support by the theory that Satan could change himself into any animal he wished, except the dove. All manner of portents were ascribed to the bird:

prolonged cooing of the mourning dove heralded an end to drought; a white dove flying overhead was a good-luck omen; to dream of doves signified good health. According to the *Odyssey*, the dove carried messages for Zeus.



Detail from *Venere e Cupido* by Allori (late 16th to early 17th century).

Even thousands of years ago, reverence for the dove did not interfere with widespread appreciation for the tasty morsel it provided when cooked. The Egyptians raised pigeons for food, and probably to carry messages, as early as 3000 B.C. At the original Olympic Games, homing pigeons were kept in readiness to be released to neighbouring cities with the names of the winners. No one knows when pigeons were first used as a means of communication in war, but

Julius Caesar employed them to send word of his victories back to Rome.