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VERMIN IN ANCIENT GREECE

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Only infrequent mention is made of vermin in Greek literature, naturally enough since most genres were so dignified as to avoid such prosaic topics. It is, however, in comedy — Old Comedy in particular — that one might expect to find more readily available references to vermin, for instance in the ridiculing of rival poets and of political personalities, the coining of new terms of abuse and the inventing of fresh similes. My study, therefore, starts with Aristophanes, who provides us with most material, and goes on to deal with those contemporaneous and later comic fragments that have come down to us, before commenting on Greek literature prior to comedy. In non-fictional prose, Aristotle's discussion of vermin in his History of Animals[1] is the only one that deserves special attention.

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The most frequent references to vermin in Aristophanes can be found in the Clouds. The parabasis of this play is followed by a scene which ends with Socrates turning Strepsiades out of the school as unteachable. In this scene, Aristophanes uses κόρις with a play on Κορίνθιοι. Told by Socrates to lie upon the wretched pallet to meditate and think up a stratagem, Strepsiades is apprehensive that there might be bugs infesting the bed: οἵαν δίκην τοῖς κόρεσι δώσω τήμερον (699). His fear turns out to be justified, but now, instead of complaining of the κόρεις , he makes a pun on the word: δάκνουσί μ' ἐξέροντες οἱ Κορ...ίνθιοι (710). van Daele follows Kock in interpreting Strepsiades' pun to mean a generally abusive allusion to the Corinthians as 'bugs'.[2] I think that the subsequent funny account of the fierce assault made by the bugs upon Strepsiades implies a more specific reference:

καὶ τὰς πλευρὰς δαρδάπτουσιν
καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐκπίνουσιν
καὶ τοὺς ὄρχεις ἐξέλκουσιν
καὶ τὸν πρωκτὸν διορύττουσιν
καί μ' ἀπολοῦσιν (711-715).

This vivid description of how the bugs attacked Strepsiades, with all its amusing minutiae of detail, seems to me to carry explicit associations with the notorious debauchery of the Corinthians.

1 H.A. 5,31-32 = 556 b 22 — 557 b 31.

2 See Coulon and van Daele, Aristophane I (Coll.Univ.Fr., 1967) 194 n. 1, and Kock's comment on ἵνα τόνδε κόριν κηφῆνα ποιήσω in a fragment of Diphilus (Com.Att.Fr. II 578; fr. 126, line 7).

It occurred to me that Aristophanes' use of κόρεις with a play on Κορίνθιοι constitutes grounds for another possibly intentional pun based on κόρις in the Clouds. The scene discussed above is introduced with Socrates telling Strepsiades to come out with his pallet. Referring to the bugs, Strepsiades replies: ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐῶσί μ' ἐξενεγκεῖν οἱ κόρεις (634). The dialogue on metrics[3] which then follows ends abruptly with Socrates' impatient exclamation: ἐς κόρακας, ὡς ἄγροικος εἶ καὶ δυσμαθής (646). Considering that Strepsiades had just been complaining of the biting bugs, it may not be too far-fetched to construe ἐς κόρ...ακας with a play on κόρεις. After the pun on κόρεις and Κορίνθιοι mentioned above there is one further reference to bugs in the same scene, Strepsiades gloomily remarking: ὑπὸ τῶν κόρεων εἴ μού τι περιλειφθήσεται (725). The ensuing dialogue, like the previous one on metrics, again ends with Socrates' imprecation, οὐκ ἐς κόρακας ἀποφθερεῖ (789). The distance between these two passages is considerable, but the necessary link is provided by Strepsiades' pitiful exclamation, οἴμοι τάλας (742), which is caused by the same biting bugs. Moreover, the actor who played the role of Strepsiades would certainly be scratching himself all the time and pretending to shoo away the bugs.[4]

By κόρις Aristophanes undoubtedly meant the common bed bug, which seems to have been a serious pest in houses, hostelries (one example is given in the following paragraph) and other places of habitation, as is frequently the case nowadays in areas with low standards of hygiene.[5] Besides the three instances of κόρις, mention is made in the Clouds of ψύλλα (145), the flea, in an anecdote told by one of Socrates' disciples. This anecdote, to which Strepsiades refers later in the play with the words τὰ ψυλλῶν ἴχνη (831),[6] concerns Socrates' ingenious device of measuring how many times the length of its own legs a flea can jump (144-152).[7] The next anecdote told by the same disciple deals with the buzzing of ἐμπίς (156-164). Mosquitoes, like flies proper, are parasitic insects, although we do not usually regard them as ordinary vermin. In antiquity,

3 Humorously, in the two senses of this word.

4 The emphasis laid on Strepsiades' pallet infested with bugs is skilfully anticipated in the bedroom scene at the beginning of the play. Note esp. οὐ δύναμαι ... εὕδειν δακνόμενος (12), followed by the comically surprising ὑπὸ τῆς δαπάνης (13) — instead of which one would have expected something like ὑπὸ τῶν κόρεων — and, later again, δάκνει με δήμαρχός τις - ἐκ τῶν στρωμάτων (37).

5 The common bed bug (*Cimex lectularius*) is discussed by Borror and Delong, An Introduction to the Study of Insects (2nd ed., New York 1955) 222f.; on bugs in antiquity, see Aristotle, H.A. 556 b 22-27, Keller, Die antike Tierwelt II 399f., and Lenz, Zoologie der alten Griechen und Römer 546-548.

6 And to which Xenophon refers in Symp. 6,8.

7 On the human flea (*Pulex irritans*), consult Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 652, and L.O. Howard, House Fleas, U.S. Dep. of Agricult.: Entomol., Circ. 108, 1909. See also Aristotle, H.A. 556 b 22-26, Keller, Tierwelt II 400f., and Lenz, Zoologie 538f.

however, they were — or at any rate could be — considered as vermin, as is seen from the following passage in the Plutus, where Chremylus is enumerating all the evil things that accompany poverty:

φθειρῶν τ' ἀριθμὸν καὶ κωνώπων καὶ ψυλλῶν οὐδὲ λέγω σοι
ὑπὸ τοῦ πλήθους, αἳ βομβοῦσαι περὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀνιῶσιν,
ἐπεγείρουσαι καὶ φράζουσαι· ≪πεινήσεις· ἀλλ' ἐπανίστω.≫
(537-539)

In this description of the poor man's night of distress, mosquitoes (κώνωψ can be regarded as a synonym of ἐμπίς) are mentioned along with lice and fleas; that they even predominate in Chremylus' mind is clear from the verb in βομβοῦσαι περὶ τὴν κεφαλήν.[8] The above passage in the Plutus, where poverty is further characterized by means of bed bugs in the phrase στιβάδα σχοίνων κόρεων μεστήν (541), accounts for the relatively great number of vermin mentioned in the Clouds, for this was a play which gave Aristophanes the opportunity to mock Socrates' extraordinarily frugal habits as well as his other oddities.

Bed bugs are also mentioned in Aristophanes' Frogs, where the god Dionysus asks Heracles' opinion of those hostelries en route to the underworld ὅπου κόρεις ὀλίγιστοι (114f.). We may infer from Dionysus' question that the hostelries in Ancient Greece were notorious for their bugs. The Scythian archer in the Thesmophoriazusae compares the nimbleness of a female dancer to that of a flea. Since the flea is defined here as φύλλο κατὰ τὸ κῴδιο (1180), Aristophanes is likely to mean specifically a sheep flea. Philocleon's mock-sentimental description of Cleon in the Wasps includes a detail which conjures up the picture of a baby in its mother's lap (or in this case, in fact, on its father's knee): ἡμᾶς ... φυλάττει διὰ χειρὸς ἔχων καὶ τὰς μυίας ἀπαμύνει (596f.). This passage is reminiscent of the fly simile used by Homer to illustrate Athena warding off an arrow from Menelaus' body: ὡς ὅτε μήτηρ παιδὸς ἐέργῃ μυῖαν, ''οθ' ἡδέϊ λέξεται ὕπνῳ (Il. 4,130f.).[9] Another reference to flies is found in a fragment of Aristophanes' Banqueters (203 Kock), where somebody preparing gruel puts a fly in it as a practical joke. In an unknown play of Aristophanes there is an even funnier comment on two persons consuming σκώληκας καὶ μυλακρίδας (fr. 583,2). Both these dainties are insects, σκώληξ being

8 In spite of the feminine gender: αἳ βομβοῦσαι goes with the nearest antecedent, ψυλλῶν. The complicated relations between the different species of mosquitoes and flies, and the ensuing terminological difficulties, are discussed by Keller, Tierwelt II 447-454. On *Anopheles*, *Aedes* and *Culex*, from man's point of view the most important genera of mosquitoes, see Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 596-602.

9 Or does Aristophanes rather allude to the Homeric description of Thetis warding off carrion-flies from creeping into Patroclus' wounds (Il. 19,24-39)? Blow flies, flesh flies and house flies are discussed by Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 637-640.

a general term for the wormlike larvae of various species of flies,[10] and μυλακρύς a general term for cockroaches. Liddell and Scott define μυλακρύς , in conformity with the word's etymology, as "cockroach found in mills and bakehouses", but cockroaches were undoubtedly found in dwelling houses as well. It is more difficult to say whether Aristophanes made any distinction between the dark-brown *Blatta orientalis* and the light-brown *Blatta germanica.* The latter species, according to Liddell and Scott, was called σύλφη, but the σύλφη mentioned by Aelian (N.A. 1,37) at least seems to designate a dipterous insect.[11]

Taking into account the great bulk of Aristophanes' extant plays and fragments, one may say that he speaks of vermin infrequently and, moreover, usually of the less obnoxious species. Only in the Plutus, to describe poverty, and in the Clouds, to deride Socrates' oversimplified way of life, does he refer to some of the more disgusting species; the most disgusting of them, lice,[12] are mentioned only in the description of poverty in the Plutus. In the parabasis of the Peace Aristophanes explicitly boasts of having avoided vulgar topics, such as vermin, found in the plays of his predecessors and rivals:

πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους μόνος ἀνθρώπων κατέπαυσεν
εἰς τὰ ῥάκια σκώπτοντας ἀεὶ καὶ τοῖς φθειρσὶν πολεμοῦντας
(739f.).

In the light of this explicit remark it is surprising to discover that there is practically nothing about vermin in the extant fragments of other Old Comedy poets — given that the anonymous one-word fragments, φθειροκομύδης and φθειροκτονεῖν, are attributable to Middle or New Comedy.[13] As we can hardly disbelieve Aristophanes, this is another proof of the power of chance interfering with conclusions drawn from a fragmentary field of literature.

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After depicting an ancient Roman world full of filth and vermin as reflected in Roman comedy prior to Terence, Birt continues

10 See Keller, Tierwelt II 503, and below, p. 64.

11 Identified with the *Stenopteryx hirundinis* by Scholfield, ed. Aelian: On the Characteristics of Animals I (Loeb Class. Libr., 1958) 56, footnote. On the different species of cockroaches, consult Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 139-141, and C.L. Marlatt, Cockroaches, U.S. Dep. of Agricult.: Entomol., N.S. Circ. 51, 1902.

12 The head and body lice in man (*Pediculus humanus*) are discussed by Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 189-191, and by S. Schöll, Kopf- und Kleiderlaus als taxonomisches Problem (Jena 1955). On the louse in antiquity, see Aristotle, H.A. 556 b 22 — 557 a 33, Birt, Aus dem Leben der Antike 83-98, Keller, Tierwelt II 395-399, Lenz, Zoologie 536-538, and H. Zinsser, Rats, Lice and History (New York 1960).

13 Kock is uncertain as to the authorship of these fragments (1188 and 1189). Plato, the comic poet, mentions the relatively mild μυλαβρύς (fr. 73), which is another form of μυλακρύς discussed in the preceding paragraph. On σής in fr. 94 of Hermippus, see below, p. 65.

(Leben der Antike 94): "Ich bemerke noch, dass jene altrömischen Lustspieldichter, die ich erwähnte, zwar ihren Stoff vielfach von den griechischen Dichtern entlehnt haben; aber solche Einzelzüge trugen sie nach freiem Ermessen hinein. In den griechischen Vorlagen stand sicher davon nichts." This does not hold water, since vermin are mentioned quite a number of times in those Middle and New Comedy fragments that have come down to us. Aristophon's parody of the Pythagorean way of life culminates in φθεῖρας δὲ καὶ τρίβωνα τὴν τ' ἀλουσίαν (fr. 12-13,9 Kock); the title of this play, Pythagoristes, shows that Aristophon's object was to ridicule not the true disciples and followers of Pythagoras, but his imitators.[14] In an anonymous New Comedy fragment (280), φθειριῶσαν alludes to the wretched end of Callisthenes, one of Aristotle's disciples, in prison.[15] Eubulus has the proverbial πρὸς φθεῖρα κείρασθαι (fr. 32), which originally referred, as Pollux (Onom.2,29) says, to the conventional haircut as a token of mourning. The head louse is mentioned even by Menander, who describes a person's hair as μεστὰς τρίχας φθειρῶν τε καὶ ῥύπου (fr. 409,1) — if φθειρῶν, an emendation suggested by Jacoby, is right. In any case, lice seem to have been an everyday phenomenon in Menander's Athens: Athenaeus, for instance, mentions (Deipn.13,586 a) that an Athenian courtesan, Phanostrate, was nicknamed Φθειροπύλη, because she used to pick lice from her person as she stood at her door.

The other references to vermin found in the extant fragments of Middle and New Comedy are milder. Menander has the proverbial ὑγιέστερος κροτῶνος (fr. 318 Kock), which was later used by the epigrammatist Palladas in the form οἷα κρότων ὑγιής (AG 9,503,4). The κροτών (or κρότων) mentioned in this proverb is generally held to be the *Ixodes ricinus*, a hard tick which lives particularly on cattle and sheep.[16] The somewhat surprising simile is explained by Zenobius (Leutsch and Schneidewin, Paroem. Graeci I 169; 6,27) as follows: λεῖον γάρ ἐστιν ὅλον, καὶ χωρὶς ἀμυχῆς, καὶ μηδὲν ἔχων σίνος. Menander (fr. 540,4f.) further mentions the clothes moth and the wood-worm in a simile to illustrate that all evil exists inside oneself: οἷον ... τὸ δ' ἱμάτιον οἱ σῆτες, ὁ δὲ θρὶψ τὸ ξύλον (sc. λυμαίνεται). In an anonymous fragment (475), an Athenian courtesan is called Μυῖα, probably because the fly was a symbol of greed and shamelessness in antiquity. Anaxippus mentions μυιοσόβην (fr. 7), which was one of the ancient devices for getting rid of flies; the Persian fly-swatters praised by Menander (fr. 503,2) were special items of luxury.[17] Antiphanes refers to flies

14 See Kock's comment on fr. 160 of Antiphanes in Com.Att.Fr. II 76.

15 Callisthenes may have suffered from the *morbus pedicularis*. For details of this disease, consult Aristotle, H.A. 556 b 30 — 557 a 4, and Keller, Tierwelt II 397.

16 See Liddell and Scott, *s.v.* κροτών, Aristotle, H.A. 557 a 15-17, and G. Lapage, Veterinary Parasitology (2nd ed., Edinburgh 1968) 737.

17 On other devices for getting rid of flies, see Keller, Tierwelt II 450. The fly as a symbol

when he wants to illustrate the importunate behaviour of the κόλακες, parasites: he uses the proverbial δειπνεῖν ἄκλητος μυῖα (fr. 195,7), and he compares them to the flies on Olympus (fr. 229-230,6). Anaxilas calls the parasites σκώληκες (fr. 33,1f.), maggots, on account of their voracity. The fact that the wormlike fly larvae are attracted by dung and other kinds of decayed organic matter intensifies the contemptuous nuance of the word when it is used, as by Anaxilas, as a term of abuse; this makes σκώληκας ἐσθίοντε in fr. 583 of Aristophanes (see above, p. 61) even more amusing.[18]

In view of the low standards of hygiene in antiquity — which were reflected, to take just one example, in the unbridled raging of the bubonic plague transmitted by fleas[19] — the existence of vermin in Ancient Greece is something to be expected. One might rather be surprised at discovering that, after all, comic poets mentioned vermin relatively seldom,[20] when one considers such inviting possibilities as the ridiculing of rival poets and of political personalities, the coining of terms of abuse and the invention of similes. Instead of explaining this fact solely as due to stylistic restraints, to which Aristophanes refers (see above, p. 62), I would suggest on second thought that the havoc caused by vermin need not have been very severe. While Birt (Leben der Antike 88-91) rightly emphasizes the importance of baths and gymnasia to the ancient Greeks and their custom of anointing their bodies, I should like to add that they had been fond of using strong odours in a variety of forms from the very earliest times. Insects are known to avoid particular smells disagreeable to them (though agreeable to human beings), and the fumigatory burning of brimstone and the like was, moreover, employed expressly for warding off vermin.[21]

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Since references to vermin in the other genres of Greek literature, apart from comedy, are scanty and relatively insignificant, a brief survey may suffice here.

The fly is mentioned in the Homeric epics as a symbol of ex-

of greed and shamelessness is discussed by Fränkel, Die homerischen Gleichnisse (Göttingen 1921) 71f.

18 Nicophon (fr. 1) mentions σκώληκας on a similar occasion. Note also the epigrammatic σκώληκες ὑπὲκ σοροῦ αὐγάζονται (AG 7,480,3), and σκώληκα λαβεῖν τύμβους τε ῥιφῆναι (AG 10,78,3). On the fly larvae living in carrion, excrement and similar substances, consult Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 638-640.

19 For details of this disease, see Borror and Delong, Introduction to Insects 646-648.

20 In Middle and New Comedy, however, more often than has been supposed, whereas in Old Comedy the capriciousness of chance in preserving fragments must be taken into account: see above, p. 62.

21 The fumigatory burning of odorous stuffs is discussed by Lilja, The Treatment of Odours in Antiquity (Helsinki 1972), esp. 52-54 and 203-205.

cessive boldness (Il. 17,570) and in similes to illustrate large numbers (Il. 2,469-471 and 16,641-643). Fly similes, which illustrate either a great number or the quality of speed, were also used by Tyrtaeus and Simonides and, later, by Apollonius Rhodius, who followed Homer in this as in so many other respects. But μυῖα never occurs in the Pindaric odes, and only once in tragedy, in an anonymous fragment (295 Nauck), which is reminiscent of the Homeric μυίης θάρσος (Il. 17,570).[22] The Homeric term for fly larvae, which feed on decaying human bodies, is not σκώληξ (see above, p. 61), but εὐλή (Il. 19,26; 22,509; 24,414), whereas σκώληξ in Homer designates 'earthworm' when used in a simile to illustrate a lifeless body (Il. 13,654). The only species of the more repulsive vermin mentioned by Homer is κυνοραιστής , an insect parasitic on dogs: the poet describes Odysseus' old hound, Argos, as teeming with that irritating pest (Od. 17,300). According to Liddell and Scott, the insect referred to by Homer is the *Ricinus communis*, but this is not a typical dog tick. Körner seems to be right in identifying κυνοραιστής with the *Rhipicephalus sanguineus*, which is "probably the most important species of ticks as far as . . . dog owners are concerned." [23]

Archilochus, not unexpectedly, mentions the louse for the first time in Greek literature, but the words φθειρσὶ μοχθίζοντα (fr. 200 Lasserre-Bonnard) unfortunately lack a context. Heraclitus' anecdote about Homer and the lice (fr. 56 Diels-Kranz) concerns a riddle put to him by young boys: ὅσα εἴδομεν καὶ ἑλάβομεν, ταῦτα ἀπολείπομεν, ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἴδομεν οὔτ' ἑλάβομεν, ταῦτα φέρομεν. Birt (Leben der Antike 85) comments on this riddle, unsolved by the poet, that "ein Geist wie Homer . . . ist zu erhaben für solche Dinge." But the Egyptian priests, according to Herodotus (2,37), used to shave the whole body, ἵνα μήτε φθεὶρ μήτε ἄλλο μυσαρὸν μηδὲν ἐγγίνηται σφι. This shows that lice were a common pest in Ancient Egypt, as they were in Ancient Libya, for Herodotus relates (4,168) that the long-haired women there used to crunch the louse they had caught between their teeth, before throwing it away.[24] The only species of disgusting vermin that is found in the Aesopic fable is the flea (260 Hausrath). Pindar (fr. 209 Bowra) makes a mild reference to σής ,the clothes moth, and κίς , the weevil, when he praises the imperishability of gold.

The word σής was later, in the jesting epigrams contained in Book XI of the Greek Anthology, applied as a term of abuse to

22 For further instances of μυῖα in Homer, and on the fly as a symbol of shamelessness, see above, pp. 61 and 63.

23 See Körner, Die homerische Tierwelt 89f.; the quotation is from E.J. Catcott, ed. Canine Medicine (Santa Barbara 1968) 554. The *Ixodes ricinus* has been discussed above, p. 63.

24 In spite of this detail, I think that φθειροτραγέουσι applied by Herodotus to the Budini (4,109) comes from another φθεύρ meaning 'fir-cone'. See Liddell and Scott *s.v.* φθειροτραγέω , and cf. φθειροφάγοι , the name of a tribe in the Caucasus — which Strabo (11,2,19), however, ascribes to their filthiness.

grammarians by Philippus (321,1 and 347,2) and by Antiphanes (322,2). Epigram, like comedy, is a genre of poetry where vermin are mentioned with relative frequency. In addition to the numerous examples to which I have already referred, there are to be found great numbers of flies, wormlike fly larvae and mosquitoes. Parmenio based the following lexically complicated couplet on the paronomasia conjured up by κόρις , the bed bug:

οὐ κόρις ἄρχι κόρου κορέσαντό μου· ἀλλ' ἐκορέσθην
ἄρχι κόρου καὐτὸς τοὺς κόρις ἐκκορίσας (AG 9,113).

The other more repulsive species of vermin are mentioned only in the jesting epigrams contained in Book XI.[25] Calling a Cynic philosopher's beard μυιοσόβην, Ammian remarks that this device against flies will turn out to be φθειρῶν ποιητής, οὐχὶ φρενῶν (156,4); and Lucian ridicules a silly man, ψυλλῶν ὑπὸ πολλῶν δακνόμενος (432), who extinguishes the lamp so as not to get bitten.[26] The more famous namesake of Lucian — if the two are not identical, after all — has written a witty encomium in praise of the fly.

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Aristophanes' use of κόρις with a play on Κορίνθιοι in the Clouds (699-710) led me to think of another possible pun in the Clouds based on κόρις and ἐς κόρακας (634-646).[27] As is well known, comedy abounds in such vivid phrases as τῶν κοράκων πονηρίᾳ (868), γέλωτα παρέχω τοῖς κόραξιν (942) and ἐκρέμασεν κόραξι δεῖπνον (1028) in the Thesmophoriazusae, to say nothing of the recurrent imprecation, ἐς κόρακας.[28] The raven, in fact, is the only animal mentioned by comic poets in maledictions which threaten one's corpse with a cruel fate, although the concept itself had been a familiar one from the very earliest times. It may be worth while giving a brief account of the scavenging animals mentioned in imprecatory threats in Greek literature prior to comedy.

The thought at the beginning of the Iliad in the formulaic phrase αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι (1,4f.) recurs repeatedly in the Homeric epics and is found mentioned throughout antiquity. The scavenger birds referred to in this formula, usually in conjunction with dogs, are not as a rule specified; οἰωνοί refers to large birds of prey generally.[29] Keller (Tierwelt II 98) alleges that the οἰωνοί in the Homeric set phrase are to be identified

25 It is entirely uncertain whether the solution of the enigma offered in the anonymous AG 14,19 is the louse.

26 The other instances of φθείρ (117,4) and ψύλλα (265,2) are more casual, being items in comically long lists.

27 For all details on these two passages, see above, pp. 59f.

28 For further examples, consult Liddell and Scott, *s.v.* κόραξ. They do not refer to the amusing passage in the Acharnians where Dicaeopolis, on hearing that the Persian is called King's Eye, exclaims: ἐκκόψειέ γε κόραξ πατάξας (92f.).

29 The relevant passages in the Homeric epics have been collected by M. Faust, Die künstlerische

mainly with ravens, but κόραξ does not occur in Homer at all, apart from the etymologically uncertain Κόρακος πέτρη (Od. 13,408), the name of a rock in Ithaca.[30] The only species of birds that Homer expressly mentions by name as scavengers is γύψ, the carrion-eating vulture.[31] The non-appearance of the raven in the Homeric epics is peculiar, because it was a well-known bird in the Mediterranean area from most ancient times onwards; Noah is said to have "sent out a raven, which went this way and that till the waters were gone from the earth" (Gen.8,7). Odysseus might have been expected to take a raven on board for the purpose of sending it out on reconnaissance flights, to know in which direction there was land — but that, of course, would have spoiled the story.

The earliest definite instance of κόραξ in Greek literature, in a passage where it is immediately characterized as a scavenging bird of prey, is from Theognis: πάντα τάδ' ἐν κοράκεσσι καὶ ἐν φθόρῳ (833).[32] In the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, after Clytaemnestra has committed her cold-blooded crime, the evil genius of the family broods over Agamemnon's dead body like a malicious raven: ἐπὶ δὲ σώματος δίκαν ... κόρακος ἐχθροῦ σταθείς (1472f.). In the Supplices, Aeschylus uses a raven simile in a more general way to illustrate the impious greed of the Egyptian cousins of the Danaids: κόρακες ὥστε, βωμῶν ἀλέγοντες οὐδέν (751f.).

In view of these sporadic instances of the raven, it is surprising to find this bird as the only scavenging animal in comedy. It is true that the raven was considered in antiquity as an evil omen, and frequently connected with diverse ideas relating to death. The uncanny ambience of this bird[33] is attributed by Keller to "das unheimliche Krächzen, seine kohlschwarze Farbe und seine Neigung, Aas und Leichen zu fressen" (Tierwelt II 96). The last-mentioned reason can be connected with the assumption that the Sirens, demons of death, were originally imagined as birds, inhabited by the souls of the dead, the idea behind this fiction being "dass der verderbliche Dämon als Raubvogel sich auf sein Opfer stürzt."[34] These reflections, however, do not explain why the raven was the only scavenger in comedy, since similar thoughts were associated

Verwendung von κύων 'Hund' in den homerischen Epen, Glotta 48 (1970) 11-21. On scavenger dogs, see Lilja, Dogs in Ancient Greek Poetry (Helsinki 1976), esp. 17-19.

30 Derived by the Scholiast from Corax, Arethusa's son, who had fallen from the rock when out hunting. The rock (still Coraca Petra) is situated close to Arethusa's fountain.

31 One instance is: τῶν ἤτοι αὐτῶν τέρενα χρόα γῦπες ἔδονται (Il. 4,237). On the identification of γύψ, see Boraston, The Birds of Homer, JHS 31 (1911), 216 and 239.

32 A fragment of the Catalogue of Women (60 Merkelbach-West) where the raven is mentioned in connection with Coronis dates from about the same time. The Hesiodic fragment (304) which deals with the raven's age cannot be ascribed to any particular work.

33 Which has remained the same up to present times, one impressive specimen being Edgar Allan Poe's poem, The Raven.

34 Quoted from Malten, Das Pferd im Totenglauben, Jb.D.Arch.Inst. 29 (1914) 241. The Sirens were, accordingly, represented in ancient art as half women, half birds.

with a number of birds, such as the Homeric γύψ , the carrion-eating vulture.[35] The fact that comic poets never referred to dogs as scavengers is entirely unexpected, when one considers their many and varied comments on the dog's repulsive characteristics.[36] Dogs, of course, did not have much opportunity for touching human bodies in the everyday life at Athens depicted in comedy, but Thucydides' remark on the Athenian plague, which raged during the Peloponnesian War, shows that they (in this case presumably pariah dogs) were still generally regarded as scavengers feeding on corpses.[37]

Why was it, then, expressly the raven alone that in comedy assumed the function of devouring carcasses, in preference to other animals, notably the Homeric dogs and vultures? Did the Homeric formula through its adoption by tragic poets sound too dignified for use in comedy? But comic poets were fond of using tragic words and phrases for comic purposes. Was the raven for some reason consciously avoided in the Homeric epics and, later, in diction of an elevated kind? If so, what was that reason and might it not account for the raven's monopoly of scavenging in comedy? In view of the predilection of Aristophanes and the other Old Comedy poets for making puns of various kinds, the similarity between κόραξ and κόρυς might be a possible answer to the question. The scarcity of available material is only to be regretted: Aristophanes deliberately avoided such vulgar topics as vermin, dear to his rivals, and the power of chance is responsible for the loss of those passages where vermin were dealt with by other Old Comedy poets.[38] In any case, both κόραξ and κόρυς were an open invitation to the making of puns. Alluding to Alcibiades' habit of pronouncing *l* instead of *r*, Aristophanes plays on the slight difference between κόραξ and κόλαξ in the Wasps (45-51), and Palladas later (about 400 A.D.) composed an epigram (AG 11,323) on the same resemblance, whereas Parmenio (about the time of Christ's birth) based a couplet on the paronomasia conjured up by κόρυς (cited above, p. 66).

The association of κόραξ with κόρυς , which I propose as a possible explanation of why in comedy the raven monopolized the devouring of carcasses, cannot be regarded as convincing because of the scarcity of material, but it may be a move in the right direction.

35 See above, p. 67. The raven was so closely connected with the crow that they are treated together by Keller, Tierwelt II 92-109. The owl was — and is — another bird of ill omen: νυκτικόραξ ᾄδει θανατηφόρον (AG 11,186,1). Note the derivation of the horned owl's name from κόραξ.

36 For details see Lilja, Dogs in Ancient Greek Poetry 69-88.

37 After pointing out that birds of prey and other animals which were accustomed to feeding on human flesh gave the plague-defiled corpses a wide berth, Thucydides (2,50) singles out the dogs: οἱ δὲ κύνες μᾶλλον αἴσθησιν παρεῖχον τοῦ ἀποβαίνοντος διὰ τὸ ξυνδιαιτᾶσθαι.

38 For details see above, p. 62.