



A Little Bird Told Me: The Language of the Birds

*"'Finally,' said Ingolf, 'cut my arm and lick some of the blood.'
'I'd rather not,' said Malcolm, firmly.
'If you do, you'll be able to understand the language of the birds.'
'I don't particularly want to be able to understand the language of the birds,' said Malcolm."
-- Tom Holt, *Expecting Someone Taller**

As we learn more of the mystical grammar involved, we may come to agree with Malcolm's instinctive assessment. Or perhaps not. But before we can understand the Language of the Birds, we may have to puzzle out the language of the people who claim to understand the language of the birds. Avaunt!

*"Finally I would add that **argot** (cant) is one of the forms derived from **The Language of the Birds**, parent and doyen of all other languages -- the one spoken by philosophers and **diplomats**. It was knowledge of this language which Jesus revealed to his Apostles, by sending them his spirit, the Holy Ghost. This is the language which teaches the mystery of things and unveils the most hidden truths."
-- "Fulcanelli," *The Mystery of the Cathedrals**

The enigmatic alchemist Fulcanelli (who may or may not have been the artist Jean-Julien Champagne, and may or may not have died in 1932) begins his alchemical-architectural analysis of Gothic cathedrals by invoking the "phonetic Cabala" of punning allusions and hints that he finds throughout these stone palimpsests. He derives "Gothic" from "goetic" (meaning demonological or necromantic), and explains that the *art gothique*, or *argotique* for short, is the same as the *argot* or cant of the criminal, vagrant, or troubadour, and claims that it is the secret language Rabelais called the Dive-Bouteille or "holy bottle." He further derives both words from the *Argo*, the ship of Jason, implying that secret language serves as the vessel to carry the scholar to the goal of illumination. (In a fine Gallic aside, Fulcanelli notes that "People think that such things are merely a play on words. I agree." *C'est irrefutable*.) And for some odd reason, Fulcanelli names his notional occult pun-code the Language of the Birds.

Despite Fulcanelli's (and his disciples') claims for antiquity, the specific term "language of the birds" in this occult sense only goes back another fifty or so years. (It's not found, for example, anywhere in the major alchemical texts.) Fulcanelli probably lifted it from the writings of the magnificently-named occultist, antiquarian, and sometime archaeologist Claude-Sosthenes Grasset d'Orcet, who in the 1880s proposed similar "coded" rebus-interpretations of illuminated manuscripts and Renaissance paintings. Where *he* got the term, we may never know, since he never cited sources in his journal articles. (Notwithstanding, later art historians have discovered, to their surprise, that some of Grasset d'Orcet's interpretations are potentially valid -- even for paintings he would never have seen.) Nothing loth, Fulcanelli also termed it the [Green](#) Language, which is how his latter-day epigone David Ovason uses it in *The Secrets of Nostradamus Revealed*.

Ovason uses the Green Language to find that [Nostradamus](#) used the Language of the Birds in his prophecies. When Nostradamus referred to his obfuscations as *scabreux* ("scabrous"), he was secretly hiding the archaic word *cabré* ("rearing upward") inside it, hinting that his "scabrous" obfuscations hide words ascending toward the skies -- toward, in other words, the realm of the birds.

"Therewith Sigurd cut out the heart of the worm with the sword called Ridil; but Regin drank of Fafnir's blood, and spake, "Grant me a boon, and do a thing little for thee to do. Bear the heart to the fire, and roast it, and give me thereof to eat."

Then Sigurd went his ways and roasted it on a rod; and when the blood bubbled out he laid his finger thereon to essay it, if it were fully done; and then he set his finger in his mouth, and lo, when the heart-blood of the worm touched his tongue, straightway he knew the voice of all fowls, and heard withal how the wood-peckers chattered in the brake beside him."

-- William Morris (trans.), *Volsungasaga*

And intriguingly enough, the notion of the language of the birds and prophetic wisdom do connect up deep in the mists of antiquity. Sigurd gains knowledge and wisdom by learning the language of the birds, as does an anonymous merchant in the *Arabian Nights*. Chaucer's "The Squire's Tale" and the Arabian "Tale of Taj al-Muluk and the Princess Dunya" both refer to a magic ring that gives the wearer the power to understand the language of birds, with positive consequences. Apollonius of Tyana, the greatest magician of the Roman era, was reputed to gain his learning from listening to birds speak, as did the Irish prophet Saint Columcille (who like Sigurd slew, or at least rebuked, a dragon -- the Loch Ness Monster). Siberian shamans wear bird costumes, and communicate with their totems, says Joseph Campbell, "in a strange, squeaky voice" -- the language of the birds? (And is it similar to the high, squeaky voices used by those possessed by some loa in Voudun ceremonies?) The Greek seer Tiresias knew the languages of both birds and snakes, as did Orpheus, and the healer and seer Melampus. And, no doubt to the delight of Fulcanelli, the Argonaut Mopsus was recruited solely for his knowledge of the Language of Birds, which he learned from Apollo. Mopsus battled the [Amazons](#), and eventually died of snakebite (there's that opposition again) in Libya, where his temple served as an infallible oracle long after his death.

Some of these mythical figures eventually become (or begin as) birds. The litany includes not only the swan-mays of north European folklore, but the sorceress Circe (whose name means "falcon" in Greek), the Theban [Sphinx](#), the puissant [griffin](#), and (surprise) Sigurd again, who not only marries Brunhild, an avian Valkyrie, but is the son (in Danish legend) of the crow-goddess Krake. Fellow dragon-battler Saint Columcille, meanwhile, somehow received Columba, the Latin word for "dove," as his cognomen. As birds fly between earth and heaven, these and many other figures change from human to avian and back with eerie unpredictability. Another intriguingly transitional avian figure is the ibis-god Thoth. Thoth, of course, invented all languages, especially the magical one in which all things received their True Names. Being half-bird himself, perhaps the ur-language of Thoth is also the Language of the Birds, which would account for its magical power and puissance.

*"One day the birds of the world,
those we know and those that
nobody knows, all gathered
together for a great conference."*

-- Farideddin Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*

And if the Language of the Birds is so all-powerful, the birds themselves must have a certain degree of authority when they get together and utilize it amongst themselves. In *Teutonic Mythology*, the Grimms state that "in our legends, birds converse together on the destinies of men, and foretell the future." This parallels the legend of the "parliament of rooks," a collection of birds who judge the spirits of the dead, which is to say, other birds. Birds have long represented the souls of the dead, flickering between earth and heaven. Egyptian iconography represented the *ba* and

other portions of the soul as birdlike; the Babylonians had superstitious laws against killing birds (or bats, to be on the safe side) during the month of the dying god Tammuz. The Latin *aves* means both "birds" and "ancestral spirits." Even when they're not birds themselves, souls often travel to the afterlife courtesy of avian psychopomps such as ravens, hawks, cranes, whippoorwills, ibises -- or Valkyries, to bring Sigurd into this again.

The two notions of a parliament of birds and the voyage to the afterlife join in the famous poem *The Conference of the Birds*, (also translated, by the way, as "the language of the birds") by the Persian Sufi mystic Farideddin Attar (whose [head](#), in good [prophetic](#) form, continued speaking after a Mongol took it off in 1230). All the birds gather to seek out their god, the [Roc](#), or Simurgh. They pass through a series of initiatory valleys where various revelations and distractions carve off portions of the flock. Only thirty birds finally reach the seventh valley, the valley of the Simurgh -- where they realize that they, the initiate thirty birds (*si murgh* in Persian) are themselves the godhead.

"Solomon was David's heir. He said, 'O men, we have been endowed with understanding the language of the birds, and all favors have been bestowed upon us. This is indeed a real blessing.' Mobilized in the service of Solomon were his obedient soldiers of jinns and humans, as well as the birds; all at his disposal."

-- The Koran, Sura 27:16-17

Which gives another spin again to Solomon's armies of birds and jinns, as sanctified in the Koran. This may be the place to note that the Shihra people of Oman, who live near the ruins of [Irem](#), speak a version of Jibbali known to their neighbors as "the language of the birds." (Irem's towers, like the smoke of its frankincense and Nostradamus' allusions, rear toward heaven and flirt with demons.) Irem could thus provide not only wealth, frankincense, and jinn armies, but also linguistic instruction for the mighty Solomon. Note, again, the equation of knowing the language of the birds with wisdom -- and, in this instance, with power. Birds in the mass serve as the voice of the gods; the Roman Augurs examined the flights of flocks of birds before advising the Senate on the properly sanctified course of action. The flight of a large group of birds attains a high degree of complexity; could an emergent consciousness be "stored" in a flock of birds, to be accessed by proper auguries? Properly designed, could a single bird fractally "represent" the mass-mind of the Si Murgh, the inhuman entity represented in the bird-like sphinx? Odin's ravens, Thought and Memory, serve as his "distributed consciousness," just as the birds become the eyes of the Japanese [scarecrow](#) god Shohodo-na-kami. The Language of the Birds becomes a kind of "assembly language" for a collective consciousness embodied in the "airy spirits" warned against by medieval witch-hunters.

"The doctor, though, was chiefly disturbed by the chattering night birds outside; a seemingly limitless legion of whippoorwills that cried their endless message in repetitions timed diabolically to the wheezing gasps of the dying man."

-- H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror"

Which brings us to the angels, the "messengers" who may also be the "diplomats" Fulcanelli alludes to so energetically. Remember that the cherubim are represented, in the most ancient traditions, as nothing but a flurry of wings. (The descending dove, meanwhile, grants the power of tongues at Pentecost.) The alchemist Zosimos, who remains diplomatically silent on the Language of Birds, clearly refers to the Language of Angels as the language of true alchemical power. Solomon used the powers of the hoopoe (another psychopompic bird) to command the services of the Queen of Sheba; against her will, she (the daughter of demons, no less) subjects herself to his blandishments. This eerily follows the description (ostensibly of the sundew plant) of the "Lingua Avis" by the 17th-century alchemist Isaac Hollandus: "If anyone carries this . . . the enemy will not have power over the individual, but must, in fact surrender . . ."

So from whence comes the Language of the Birds? From an alien mass-mind both connected to and rival of the great subterranean reptiles, carrying on the schizophrenic war of Mithras (whose

servant was the Raven) and Tiamat, Roc and Leviathan, eagle and serpent. UFO contactee George Hunt Williamson maintained that the language of the (aquatic, serpentine) [Sirian](#) aliens was the same as the [Enochian](#) of the angels, and that the symbol of their linkage was the Eye of the Hawk-God, Horus. Could the primordial intelligences that linked birds and dinosaurs somehow have evolved outside time and dimension as we understand it? Imbibing the alien DNA of the Reptoids grants illumination, connection to the airy entities half-fallen from heaven. Is the blood of the dragon the key to the "Dive-Bouteille" of Rabelais, and perhaps the ecstatic wine of [Dionysos](#), which similarly exalts the soul on an astral, aerial journey? Where do human speakers fall -- satraps like Solomon, tools like Sigurd, or visionary warriors against both dragons and Amazons like Mopsus or Jason? Learn the Language of the Birds, and listen for instructions.

[Past Columns](#)

Article publication date: November 15, 2002

169 *Pyramid* subscribers rated this article **3.81** on a scale of 1 to 5. Visit the [ratings page](#) for more info.

Copyright © 2002 by [Steve Jackson Games](#). All rights reserved. Pyramid subscribers are permitted to read this article online, or download it and print out a single hardcopy for personal use. Copying this text to any other online system or BBS, or making more than one hardcopy, is *strictly prohibited*. So please don't. And if you encounter copies of this article elsewhere on the web, please report it to webmaster@sjgames.com.



[Home](#) - [Subscribe!](#) - [Current Issue](#) - [Playtesting](#) - [Chat](#) - - - [Feedback](#)