

Birds, heroes and toponyms*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on birds' names, some of which are undoubtedly used as personal names and others as toponyms. *Merops* (bee-eater) and *ortyx* (quail) belong to both categories and it is argued that the islands called Meropia and Ortygia were named not after the mythical persons but the human characters were invented only in the process of popular etymology as an explanation for the placenames. Finally, it is suggested that King Saron resulted in a similar way from the name of the Saronic Gulf and that the toponym originally derived from a bird's name, *psar/psaros* meaning starling.

Introduction

Onomastics is a complex discipline on its own and even if the present author is not trained as a linguist and cannot claim to be a specialist in this field, a very short introduction to proper names and naming is attempted here.¹ Individual names can be given and indeed are usually given not only to humans but to settlements, rivers, mountains, islands, smaller or larger regions, etc. The study of these placenames, toponomastics, can yield some interesting results, even if their exact interpretation is often ambiguous.² Geographical features can be named after humans (individuals or groups), animals, plants, or any characteristic feature (form, size, color),³ and it is

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¹ For more details see e.g., Hough 2016.

² See esp. the hydronyms studied intensively in many countries (e.g. Greule 2014), but with controversial results concerning especially their paleo-(Indo)-European origins.

³ For an overview of naming practices and the evolution of toponymic typology see Tent and Blair 2011. For the toponyms of the ancient Mediterranean see Risch 1965; García-Ramón 1998.

therefore not surprising to find that there are some toponyms all over the world which are named after birds. In this paper, I will try to show that a similar practice is discernible in antiquity as well; the only difference being that the relationship between toponyms and zoonyms is obscured by creating heroic personal names in order to account for the placenames.

Toponyms are used by many speakers often belonging to different language families and over a long period of time; since they can perfectly fulfil their primary function to identify certain localities without being correctly understood, they are often distorted. Their original meaning becomes obsolete and their form, resulting from the distortions, gives rise to misinterpretations. Some speakers, especially well-educated ones realize that they do not understand a certain word and try to make some sense of it. This process of altering otherwise incomprehensible words, in order to give them a semblance of meaning is usually called popular etymology or paretymology.⁴ It is perhaps important to add that before the emergence of modern linguistics, it was almost impossible to find out the real origins of a word, i.e., its etymology, since comparisons with other related languages were not practiced and the notion of language families did not exist either. In antiquity, incomprehensible toponyms were usually explained by aetiological tales and by creating mythical eponymous characters. As a typical example for both phenomena, the case of Mycenae might be cited here (Paus. 2.16.4-5):

⁴ Both terms denote linguistic misinterpretation of proper names or nouns in general. There is ample literature on popular etymology in general: Olschansky 1996 is a thorough monographic treatment; Liberman 2005, chapter 5 a good introduction for everyone with a few examples. Ashley 1985 has many more, but all are discussed very briefly. See also Mackensen 1927; Koch 1963; Bebermeyer 1974; Sanders 1975 for famous German examples. Paretymology is another term for denoting false etymology and in the context of place names, it is called ‘toponymic paretymology’, discussed at length by Perono Cacciafoco and Cavallaro 2023, 64-75 who distinguish between *bona fide* paretymology (which is generally unbiased, and is produced by the “local speakers in order to provide an explanation for their place names”) and scholarly paretymology, when the propagator or inventor of a given explanation has some other goal, e.g. would like “to ‘ennoble’ a place or to ‘belittle’ it by enhancing or decreasing local ‘prestige’, to provide false evidence for a genealogy”, etc.

Perseus ... founded Mycenae. For on its site the cap (mykes) fell from his scabbard, and he regarded this as a sign to found a city. I have also heard the following account. He was thirsty, and the thought occurred to him to pick up a mushroom (mykes) from the ground. Drinking with joy water that flowed from it, he gave to the place the name of Mycenae. Homer in the *Odyssey* mentions a woman Mycene in the following verse: “Tyro and Alcmene and the fair-crowned lady Mycene”. She is said to have been the daughter of Inachus and the wife of Arestor in the poem which the Greeks call the *Great Eoëae*. So they say that this lady has given her name to the city. But the account which is attributed to Acusilaus, that Myceneus was the son of Sparton, and Sparton of Phoroneus, I cannot accept, because the Lacedaemonians themselves do not accept it either. For the Lacedaemonians have at Amyclae a portrait statue of a woman named Sparte, but they would be amazed at the mere mention of a Sparton, son of Phoroneus. [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

As in many other cases, the toponym Mycenae actually derives from some earlier substrate language and the real, i.e., etymologically correct meaning cannot be recovered any more.⁵ But sometimes the meaning is clear even if this was apparently not realized in antiquity, or it can be argued that a toponym had a reasonable meaning which fell somehow into oblivion and/or became distorted and was explained afterwards only by popular etymology. A nice example is the small island called Sphairia (‘round’) near Troizen, described by Pausanias (2.33.1) and allegedly named after a charioteer of Pelops (called according to local Troizenian folklore Sphairos, who was said to be buried on the island), but well-known toponyms like the Peloponnese, the Hellespont and the Aegean may also belong to this group.⁶

⁵ Fick 1905, 131 and following him in every handbook containing some information on the etymology of the toponym (e.g., Karo, G. 1933. s.v. “Mykenai”, in *PWRE* Vol.16, 1015-1027). For details see Frisk 1960, 266-267 and Chantraine 1980, 720 s.v. Mykenai).

⁶ For the Peloponnese and the Hellespont see Patay-Horváth 2017 and 2024, for the Aegean Janda 2014, 448-459.

Birds and heroes

Bird names are often used as human personal names. This is perhaps well-known, but has rarely received any attention. The list of birds given here⁷ clearly demonstrates the point:

i) Mythological characters:

- aēdon (nightingale = *Luscinia megarhynchos*) – Aēdon⁸
- alkyon (Eurasian kingfisher = *Alceon atthis*) – Alkyone, Alkyoneus, Alkyonides⁹
- chloris (Greenfinch = *Carduelis chloris*) – Chloris nymph (loved by Zephyros; Ovid, *Fasti* 5.195ff.) and daughter of Amphion and Niobe, originally called Meliboia (Paus. 2.21.9; 5.16.4)
- dryops (woodpecker = *Picus*) – Dryops, Dryope, dryopes¹⁰
- keleos (green woodpecker = *Picus viridis*) – Keleos, king of Eleusis mentioned already in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. King Keleos has no explicit connection to the bird, but a Keleos of Crete was turned into the corresponding bird by Zeus (Ant. Lib. 19).
- kokalos (variety of domestic fowl according to Hesychius) – Kokalos, king of Kamikos in Sicily (Apollod. *Epit.* 1.13-15)
- korax (raven = *Corvus corax*) / korone (crow = *Corvus cornix*) – Korax / Koronis, Koronos¹¹

⁷ For ornithological information and ancient sources concerning the birds see the respective entries in Thompson 1936 and Arnott 2007.

⁸ The mythical character is often called Prokne, her sister Philomela or Chelidon (‘swallow’). Tereus, the husband of Prokne and lover of Philomela was transformed into a hoopoe, the sisters into the corresponding birds (Apollod. 3.14.8; Ovid, *Met.* 6.401-674).

⁹ Alkyone and Keyx: Apollod. 1.7.4, Ovid, *Met.* 11.410-748; Alkyoneus is the name of several giants, opponents of Herakles: Pindar, *Nem.* 4.44, *Isthm.* 6.45; Apollod. 1.6.1, Alkyonides were the seven (or nine or eleven) daughters of the giant Alkyon transformed into birds: Apost. 2.20. Alkyone was also the name of other mythological characters (e.g., a Pleiad nymph: Apollod. 3.10.1; daughter of Skiron: ps-Probus in Verg. *Georg.* 1.399; Argive priestess: Dion. Hal. 1.22.3) and a historical person, the mother of Diokles at Korinth: Aristot. *Pol.* 1247a.

¹⁰ The bird name occurs only once (Aristoph. *Birds* 404) otherwise the name *dryokolaptes* (vel sim.) is used. Dryops, a Trojan hero (son of Priam) is mentioned in Hom. *Il.* 20.456. The ancestor of the *dryopes* was obviously another character. He was venerated and had a temple in Messenian Asine (Paus. 4.34.11). For Dryope see Ant. Lib. 32 and Ovid, *Met.* 9.325ff where the nymph is transformed into a tree (black poplar).

¹¹ Koronis is the mother of Asklepios (Paus. 2.26.1-7, Ovid, *Met.* 2.596ff.). Korax and Koronos are reported as kings of Sikyon: Paus. 2.5.8-6.1. Another Koronos appears (near Koroneia) in Boiotia: Paus. 9.34.7, yet another one in Elis: Paus. 5.1.6. Hyginus (14.1) mentions a lapith king Koronos, son of Kaineus as one of the Argonauts. In Hom. *Od.* 13.408 a Korakos petra on Ithaka is mentioned along with the fountain Arethousa and the scholia explain that Korax was a local man who died there while hunting and his mother was Arethousa. Korax is also reported as the name of a horse: Paus. 6.10.7.

- kyknos (mute swan = *Cygnus olor*) – Kyknos¹²
- laios (blue rock thrush = *Monticola solitarius*) – Laios, king of Thebes, son of Labdakos and father of Oidipous without any connection to the bird, but a homonymous thief was turned into the bird (Ant. Lib. 19)
- meleagris (helmeted guineafowl = *Numida meleagris*) – Meleagros/ Meleagrides (Hyginus, *fab.* 174)¹³
- merops / aerops (bee-eater = *Merops apiaster*) – Merops (different heroes cf. below n. 18 and 25), Merope (Oceanid nymph, mother of Phaethon / name of several mythical queens / one of the Pleiads; see n. 28, 29), Meropis (grand-daughter of Merops on Kos, turned into an owl: Ant. Lib. 15), Eeropos (Hdt. 9.26: mythical king of Tegea) / Aeropos (Macedonian ruler: Hdt. 8.139), Aerope (Tegean princess, daughter of Kepheus or Cretan princess, wife of Atreus, lover of Aigisthos)
- ortyx (quail = *Coturnix coturnix*) – Ortygia nymph (Strab. 14.1.20 with the discussion below)
- penelops (wild duck / Eurasian wigeon = *Anas penelope*) – Penelope, wife of Odysseus; the homonymous mother of Pan (mentioned, e.g., by Hdt. 2.145) is another mythical character.
- perdix (grey partridge = *Perdix perdix*) – Perdix, Perdikkas¹⁴
- porphyrio (purple gallinule = *Porphyrio porphyrio*) – Porphyrio (giant)¹⁵
- phene (bearded vulture = *Gypaetus barbatus* and black vulture = *Aegypius monachus*) – Pheno (Paus. 2.6.5)

ii) Historical characters:

- iktinos (red kite = *Milvus milvus*) – Iktinos, Athenian architect (Plut. *Per.* 13), reported also to have built the temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae (Paus. 8.41.9)
- kypselos (sand martin = *Riparia riparia*) – Kypselos, tyrant of Corinth,¹⁶ but there was also a homonymous mythical king of Arkadia, father of Merope (Paus. 4.3.6)

¹² Son of Apollo in Aitolia, transformed into a swan: Ant. Lib. 12; Ovid, *Met.* 7.371ff. Other characters of the same name, e.g., a suitor of Penelope (Apollod. *Epit.* 7.27), a king of Kolonai (Strabo 13.1.19) or a son of Ares (Paus. 1.27.6) have nothing to do with the bird except for their name.

¹³ Arnott 2007, 206: “In antiquity the bird was linked with the myth of Meleager, but it appears more likely that the name echoed the female bird’s staccato call ‘melag’ (so Aelian, *NA* 4.42)”.

¹⁴ Perdix, the nephew of Daidalos: Ovid, *Met.* 8. 236-259. According to Tzetzes, *Chil.* 1.19. 493, Perdix was the sister of Daidalos and mother of Talos/Kalos. Perdikkas was the name of several Macedonian kings and also a general of Alexander the Great.

¹⁵ Aristoph. *Birds* 1249-52 clearly shows that both the bird and the mythical giant were well-known.

¹⁶ Ancient authors were convinced that the name derived from the noun *kypsele* (‘chest’), because Kypselos was said to have been hidden by his mother in a chest (Hdt. 5.92), which was believed to have been dedicated at Olympia (Paus. 5.17.5). The absurdity of the story strongly suggests that this is just a legend or a folk-etymological explanation of the personal name.

- psittakos / sittake / bittakos, etc. (parrot) – Pittakos, lawgiver of Mytilene, one of the seven sages
- phalaris (coot = *Fulica atra*) – Phalaris, tyrant of Akragas

Most characters belong to the realm of mythology, but historical ones are also attested; as it is natural, there are some overlaps (cf. Perdikkas, Alkyone, Kypselos). The reason for naming a person after the animal might be clear in some cases (as in the aetiological tales ending in a metamorphosis), but may be obscure or totally unknown in others (e.g., Iktinos, Keleos, Penelope, Phalaris). One may assume, e.g., that children were nicknamed in this fashion by their parents and these appellations were retained after reaching adulthood as sobriquets, but it is equally possible that there is no direct connection between the mythical character and the animal species, and that they were just named independently of each other (e.g., Chloris, Porphyron, Dryope, Keleos, Kokalos). The reverse process of naming an animal after a mythical character is much rarer; it can be suspected in the case of exotic and rare birds, like *meleagris* and *memnon*.¹⁷

Mythical heroes are, on the other hand, often connected to certain localities, explaining the otherwise senseless or just barely understandable toponyms. Most of them (e.g., Helle, Ikaros, Lichas, Aigina and other nymphs) have no other function, i.e., they simply die in a spectacular way and thus act as eponymous heroes. Others are more elaborate characters (e.g., Aigeus, Saron) and are therefore not easily recognized as such.

¹⁷ Ancient tradition (Ael. *HA* 5.1) held that in late autumn a flock of the *memnon(is)* birds would make for the tomb of the hero Memnon, who had fought for the Trojans and was slain by Achilles. When the birds reached the tomb, they would fight each other violently until half of them were killed; then the victorious survivors departed. Arnott 2007, 208-209: “Cuvier was the first to recognise that a substratum of ornithological truth appeared to underlie the mythical fictions. He linked the Memnon bird to a wader whose English name is Ruff for the male (29–32 cm), Reeve for the female (22–26 cm), now *Philomachus pugnax*. For most of the year it feeds mainly on seeds. The male’s breeding plumage is remarkably variable, but one common type is basically black (or purple-glossed dark brown) in colour, usually with a paler ruff. These birds spend the European winter in Sub-Saharan Africa (with large numbers in modern Ethiopia!), but breed in the north of Europe and Asia. On their spring migrations north, however, in order to attract females to coition, large flocks of males put on impressive displays in communal leks, where they make sham attacks on rival males, jumping, pecking with their bills, and fluttering their wings. These lead at times to genuine fights: hence the bird’s name chevalier combatant in France, Kampfläufer in Germany. Although now their main route north in spring passes through Italy, flocks of up to a hundred can still be seen travelling further east, through West Anatolia and across the Hellespont”.

And finally, there are some heroes which belong to both categories, i.e., their name is identical with or closely resembles that of a bird and that of a geographical feature as well. Merops (bee-eater), who was allegedly born from the earth and gave the name Meropis to the island of Kos, clearly belongs here. But the island of Siphnos was also called Meropia and there was another hero with the same name, who is attested much earlier and has absolutely no connection to Kos.¹⁸

The question arises, therefore, how did this strange situation come about? There are many possibilities to explain the relation of these names (either some kind of linear development or a matrix of connections) and there are many useful handbooks and corpora which enable different approaches to the problem, but I am not aware of any study addressing it.¹⁹

Animal names and toponyms

The relationship between animals and toponyms is usually quite straightforward. It was a widespread practice to name geographical features after certain animals. The reason is most often also quite clear: it was either the size (e.g., Myonnesos, ‘Mouse island’; Chelidoniae, ‘Swallow island’; Tauros, ‘Bull mountain’), the form (Elaphonesos, ‘Deer island’; Onougnathos, ‘Jaws of the ass’, modern Elaphonisi; Myrmex, ‘Ant’; Ichthys, ‘Fish’) or the distinctive colour of the animal species which was compared to that of the islands, mountains and promontories (Korakonesos, ‘Raven island’; Alopekonesos, ‘Fox island’).²⁰ The animals involved were widespread and widely known, this is plainly true for the birds as well. If the animal was a rare

¹⁸ For Kos, see Thuc. 8.41 and Steph. Byz. s.v. Kos, for Siphnos, Plin. *NH* 4.66. Merops of Percote is mentioned in Hom. *Il.* 2.831, 11.329.

¹⁹ Greek personal names and toponyms were studied for a long time: cf. Fick 1905; Fick and Bechtel 1894; ancient Greek and Roman birds are thoroughly discussed from different perspectives by Thompson 1936, Pollard 1977, Arnott 2007, Mynott 2018 and Green 2023.

²⁰ For detailed references see Patay-Horváth 2023, 164-165. The earliest extant testimony of a comparison drawn between animals and islands is Archilochus fr. 21, where the poet describes Thasos as resembling the backbone of an ass. The most widely used animal in toponyms (ancient and modern) seems to be the crow or the raven, obviously denoting the dark color of a geographical feature. Although the simple reason for naming e.g., a rock as ‘Korakos petra’ must have always been clear, there were some legends or folk-etymological explanations based on eponymous heroes obscuring the obvious truth (cf. above n. 11).

one, like monkeys in the case of Pithekousai, one has to assume that these animals were living there.

The toponym was gradually distorted or the original meaning faded out for some reason and usually a folk-etymological explanation was invented in order to account for the name. In this way, an eponymous hero was most often created and legends became attached to this character. A fine example for this process is the ridge Sauros (‘Lizard’) in the Peloponnese, with the wrongdoer Sauros, both mentioned only by Pausanias (6.21.3). The story of Italy and Italos (mentioned already by Thuc. 6.2.4) might have been similar, since the name of Italy likely derives from *vitulus*, meaning young calf.²¹ In both cases, the form of the geographical feature was most probably compared to, i.e., described by referring to the form of the animal (lizard and the horn of a calf).

The name Ortygia deriving from the bird’s name (*ortyx* = quail) is similar. The toponym was quite widespread, since there is not only the well-known Ortygia of Syracuse, but other islands were also called in this way; moreover, there was a grove next to Ephesos, where the eponymous nymph Ortygia is mentioned.²² The reason for giving this name to the islands was most probably

²¹ Wojtylak 2003 and most recently, with a thorough discussion of the entire research history, Manco 2009, 157-232. The correct etymology most probably inspired and is also reflected by the alternative ancient explanation for the toponym: cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.35: “Hellenicus of Lesbos says that when Hercules was driving Geryon’s cattle to Argos and came to Italy, a calf escaped from the herd and in its flight wandered the whole length of the coast and then, swimming across the intervening strait of the sea, came into Sicily. Hercules, following the calf, inquired of the inhabitants wherever he came if anyone had seen it anywhere, and when the people of the island, who understood but little Greek and used their own speech when indicating the animal, called it vitulus (the name by which it is still known), he, in memory of the calf, called all the country it had wandered over Vitulia”. [Transl. E. Cary.]

²² Strabo 10.5.5 mentioned that Rhenaia was formerly called Ortygia, Plin. *NH* 4.66 says the same of Delos referring to Aristoteles. The mythical island called Ortygia, where Orion died according to Hom. *Od.* 5.121-124, can be equated with any of them or may be seen as referring to another island of this name. The grove Ortygia is mentioned by Strabo 14.1.20: “On the same coast [near the city of Ephesos], slightly above the sea, is also Ortygia, which is a magnificent grove of all kinds of trees, of the cypress most of all. It is traversed by the Kenkhrios River, where Leto is said to have bathed herself after her travail. For here is the mythical scene of the birth, and of the nurse Ortygia, and of the holy place where the birth took place, and of the olive tree nearby, where the goddess is said first to have taken a rest after she was relieved from her travail”. [Transl. H. L. Jones]. For the different localities named Ortygia see Schmidt 1942 and Tréheux 1946.

their small size, comparable to that of the bird,²³ since other small islands were also called after similarly small-sized birds, such as swallows and pigeons: Chelidoniae (modern Gelidonya)²⁴ and Güvercinada (‘Pigeon island’ near Kuşadasi meaning ‘Bird island’ itself). Myonnesos (‘Mouse island’) and Myos Hormos (‘Mouse harbour’) are also clear examples with two modern parallels (Pontikonisi, ‘Mouse island’, a well-known islet near Corfu, and an uninhabited one with the same name to the west of Crete). In all these cases it is quite clear that mice cannot have been and are indeed not extraordinarily numerous on these islands, but they were called in this way only because of their small size.

In the case of birds, it could be perhaps assumed that the islands were named because of the frequent occurrence of the animals there. With migratory birds, one can test this hypothesis and by looking at a map showing the migration routes of quails and swallows, one can immediately recognize that this was clearly not the reason for naming these localities.²⁵ Animals around

²³ The only reason given by an ancient authority for naming the island of Delos/Ortygia after the bird cannot be accepted (see below fn. 25) and the problem is apparently not discussed by modern commentators. It was variously supposed that the name of the bird derived from the circumstance that they returned with the returning sun around the spring equinox and the localities were named because of some festivals celebrated on this occasion. This idea (mentioned perhaps for the last time by Thompson 1936, 219) derived from the supposed etymology of the name, i.e., that Ortygia and also the name of the bird would derive actually from an Indo-European root, ‘vert’, i.e., to turn. As already stated by Thompson, *ibid.* 215, this linguistic derivation is without any foundation and it is also irrelevant in the case of the toponyms (Schmidt 1942, 1521-22 who also translates the name as Wachtelinsel, i.e., Quail island). The mythical tales involving the transformations of human characters into a quail (e.g., Apollod. 1.4.1) are simply folk-etymological explanations or aetiologies obviously deriving from the toponym. For the etymology of the zoonym see Thompson 1936, 215 and Beekes 2010, 1112.

²⁴ These islands are already mentioned by Demosthenes (19.273) as part of the peace of Kallias. Strabo (14.3.8) neatly summarizes the relevant pieces of information: “Then one comes to the promontory Hieria and to the Chelidoniae, three rugged islands, which are about equal in size and are about five stadia distant from one another. They lie about six stadia off the shore, and one of them has a landing-place for vessels. Here it is, according to the majority of writers, that the Taurus takes its beginning, not only because of the loftiness of the promontory and because it extends down from the Pisidian mountains that lie above Pamphylia, but also because of the islands that lie off it, presenting, as they do, a sort of conspicuous sign in the sea, like outskirts of a mountain”.

²⁵ There is an ancient text (Athen. 9.47, 392D referring to Phanodemus) maintaining that the island of Delos was called by the ancients Ortygia, because of the numerous flocks of quails which came over the sea and settled in that island as one which afforded them good shelter. That this was plainly not true is shown by Aristotle (*HA* 597) not mentioning any such location and also by Varro (*RR* 3.5.7) mentioning the Pontine islands as frequented by these birds. For the actual migratory routes of quails see the map in Common Quail 2009 fig. 2.

Chelidoniae are explicitly recorded by Pliny (*NH* 9.85.1), but these are not swallows, rather a special kind of fish.

The relationship between toponyms, zoonyms and personal names can be, however, different. Merops (the bee-eater) is the name of various heroes;²⁶ it is used as an adjective already in Homer and is always associated with mankind or people in general.²⁷ In addition, Meropis is a toponym as well, usually referring to the island of Kos, but also reported as the name of Siphnos (Plin. *NH* 4.66).

Although it is quite clear that the eponymous hero of Kos originated, as usually, by way of folk-etymology, from the toponym Meropis, it is not sure that the toponym came from the name of the animal. Based on Aristotle (*HA* 9.13), Chantraine argued that the earth-born hero was named after the bird, since in antiquity, bee-eaters nesting in deep holes may have been thought to be born from the earth and mortal people were also occasionally called earth-born.²⁸ However, this explanation would hardly account for the other heroes and heroines²⁹ with the same name, especially for a star, Merope the Pleiad,³⁰ nor for the name of Siphnos. It is more likely that the adjective was applied to the bird and the islands of Kos and Siphnos independently. The heroes and heroines called Merops or Merope have generally nothing to do with bee-eaters nor are they

²⁶ For the eponymous hero of Kos and for Merops of Percote, see above n. 18. Another Merops was king of Aithiopia, by whose wife, Klymene, Helios became the father of Phaethon. (Strab. 1.2.27; Ovid, *Met.* 2. 178).

²⁷ Usually (nine times) it occurs in the genitive *μερόπων ἀνθρώπων*, but there is also *μερόπεσσι βροτοῖσιν* (*Il.* 2.285), and *μέροπες ἄνθρωποι* (*Il.* 18.288). Beekes 2010, 933 declares that the original meaning is unknown and the relation with aerops is unclear. For detailed discussions see Ramat 1960 and Koller 1968.

²⁸ Chantraine 1936. The formulation in Chantraine 1980, 687 s.v. *meropes* is a bit different: he thought it difficult to decide whether the hero was named after the bird or *vice versa*. Given that the animal is, contrary to the hero, widespread and well-known, the latter possibility would be strange. Other possibilities and the possible connections with the toponym were not considered by Chantraine.

²⁹ Merope was the name of an Athenian princess (daughter of Erechtheus and mother of Daedalus according to Plut. *Thes.* 19.5), a queen of Messenia, wife of Kresphontes (Paus. 4.3.6) and also a nymph, the mother of Phaethon (Hyginus, *fab.* 154).

³⁰ Already mentioned by Hesiod (*Astr.* fr. 1). There was a general agreement among the ancients as to the names of the seven Pleiades and it was also generally agreed that there were seven of them, but that one was invisible, or nearly so, to the human eye. One of the explanations was that Merope, who had married a mortal man, Sisyphus, was so ashamed of her humble lot by comparison with the splendour of her sisters, who were all of them paramours of gods, that she dared not show herself.

said to be born from earth, so they were most probably also named because of the original meaning of the adjective. Linguists are divided on the issue whether the adjective *merops* is of Indo-European or some other derivation, but I think the suggested Indo-European etymology, i.e., ‘glittering’ can be perfectly applied to both the animal and the islands, and in a figurative sense also to human beings.³¹ Merope, the Pleiad (a star on the sky), and Merops/Merope of Aithiopia intimately related to Helios and Phaethon might have been the first mythical characters to be named in this way.

Finally, there were two settlements called Kenchreai in the Peloponnese and an eponymous hero Kenchrias was also recorded by Pausanias (2.24.7). Strabo (14.1.20) attested the stream Kenchrios near Ephesos in the grove Ortygia already mentioned above (n. 22). Two very different birds, i.e. *κεγχρίς* ‘ortolan bunting’ and *κέρχρη* ‘kestrel’ have a very similar name³², but none of them is likely to have furnished a reason for naming the localities. As one can easily recognize from the Liddell-Scott dictionary, another kind of animal, a snake was also named in this way, and most probably all the zoonyms derive from the common noun *κέγχρος* meaning ‘millet’.³³ In most cases, the reason for giving such a name was most obviously a dotted skin or plumage. The ortolan bunting is also dotted, but only on its craw and only the females, and the name was plausibly connected by Varro (*LL* 5.11) to the fact that they were regularly force-fed on millet.³⁴ The toponyms could perhaps derive from the plant³⁵ or from one of the animals named after the

³¹ Beekes (2010, 933) claims that the meaning of the word is unknown and most probably pre-Greek, and dismisses (Beekes 1996, 22 n. 6) the plausible Indo-European derivation briefly formulated for the last time by Pastor de Arozena 1993 (from *merH- ‘shine’ cf. Mallory and Adams 2006, 328-329; on the precise form of the verb see Mayrhofer 1996, 321 with refs.) as “semantically implausible”. For the other suggestions concerning the etymology of the word see Frisk 1960, 211-212 s.v. *meropes*.

³² Arnott 2007, 133 treats the different names as variants of one and the same bird, the falcon (actually two species: *Falco tinnunculus* = Common kestrel and *F. naumanni* = Lesser kestrel) and omits the other one, although it is clearly a different species, if they were eaten (as stated by Eubulus in Athen. 2.71) and fattened (Ael. *NA* 13.25). Thompson (1936, 136) most probably correctly identifies the small bird with Latin *miliaria* mentioned by Varro (*LL* 5.11) as a bunting or an ortolan.

³³ That the different animal names derive from the phytonym is also stated by Beekes 2010, 662, but *ibid.* 681 he does not accept the derivation of the name of the kestrel from that of the millet.

³⁴ Mynott 2018, 122.

³⁵ A toponym (Kerchneia) is considered by Beekes 2010, 662 as possibly related.

plant, but a settlement or a stream is unlikely to be dotted and the plant is not a rare one nor are the birds nesting only in special environments. It is more likely, therefore, that the toponyms are related to words like κερχνώδης ‘rough, hoarse’ and κέρχνω ‘make rough or hoarse’ because of the similarity resulting from the confusion of the consonants (also reflected by the different spelling of the bird names Kenchrē, Kenchrēis Kerchnē, Kerchnēis). In Hippocrates (*Aēr* 15) we find the description of a wind blowing near the river Phasis, which is “peculiar to the country, is violent and hot, and is called by them the *kenkbron*”. In a similar way, a violent stream and villages in a rough, rocky environment can be reasonably named after this characteristic and most probably there is no connection between the bird names and the toponyms.

Saron and the Saronian Gulf

And now we turn to the Saronian Gulf, where there is also a well-known eponymous hero, King Saron of Troizen (Paus. 2.30.7):

After Althepos, Saron became king. They said that this man built the sanctuary for Saronian Artemis by a sea which is marshy and shallow, so that for this reason it was called the Phoebaeon lagoon. Saron was very fond of hunting. As he was chasing a doe, it so chanced that it dashed into the sea and he dashed in after it. The doe swam further and further from the shore, and Saron kept close to his prey, until his ardor brought him to the open ocean. Here his strength failed, and he was drowned in the waves. The body was cast ashore at the grove of Artemis by the Phoebaeon lagoon and they buried it within the sacred enclosure and after him they named the sea in these parts the Saronic instead of the Phoebaeon lagoon. [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

I think the preceding examples have made it clear, that the mythical character most probably originated from popular etymology, i.e., he simply explains the toponym which is attested much earlier (already in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 305-307). This conclusion is all the more certain since the story is full of characteristic folktale motifs: the doe is a typical kind of leading or guiding animal (e.g., the miraculous stag for Hunor and Magor in the foundation legend of Hungarians or a similar animal guiding the Huns through the Maeotis: Iordanes, *Get.* 24. 123-124), the

submerging in water is a typical punishment for excess (e.g., Tantalos or in a different way for Ikaros) and the corpse washed ashore is known from foundation legends (e.g., Melikertes at Isthmia: Paus. 2.1.3). There are also two parallels for the entire story: King Euenos drowning himself in the homonymous river (Apollod. 1.7.8)³⁶ or the hunter chasing a deer and dying similarly in the lake of Stymphalos (Paus. 8. 22. 8-9).³⁷

The toponym ‘Saronian’ must have been quite old, since it is also attested as a cult epithet of Artemis (cf. Paus. 2.32.10) and as a hydronym for an otherwise unknown river near Troizen.³⁸ As such, it may be older than the cult epithet, but it is quite unlikely to name the gulf after a small stream. Finally, it is worth pointing out that there were different forms of the toponym like Saronios or Saronikos and simply Saron, as attested by the relevant entry in Stephanus of Byzantium.

Surprisingly enough, there is a homonymous promontory in the Bosphorus as well, where the eponymous hero comes not from Troizen but from Megara,³⁹ obviously because Troizen had nothing to do with this region, contrary to Megara which founded Chalcedon. And further away from Greece, in Cilicia there was quite a large river also called Saros with a homonymous

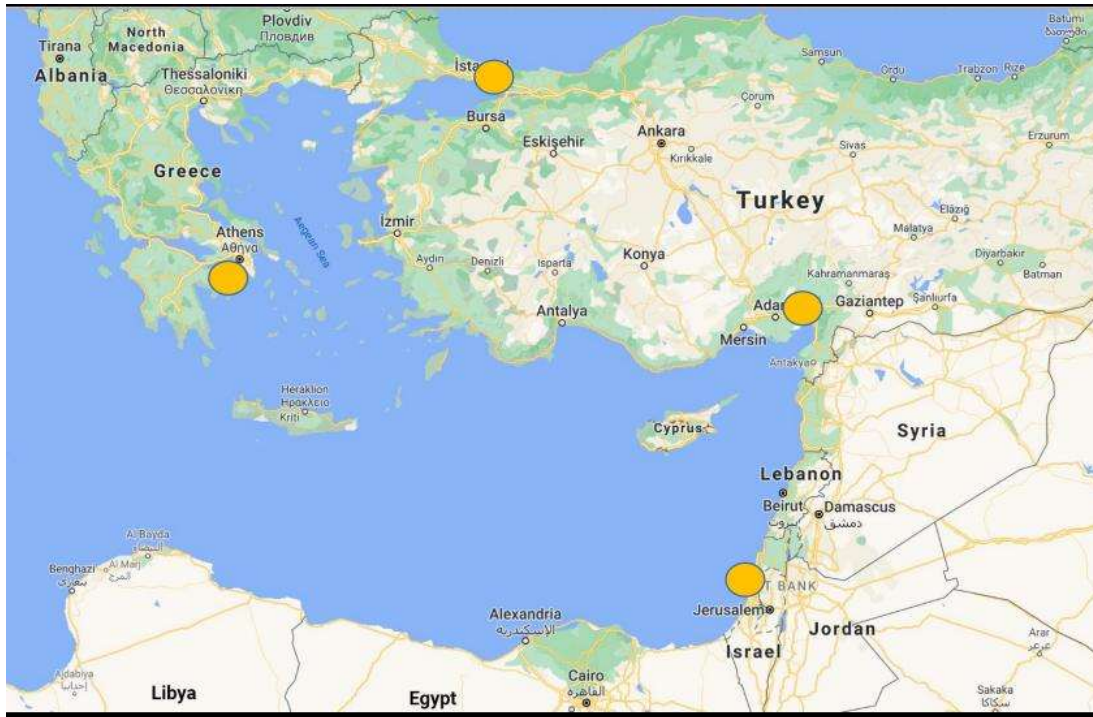
³⁶ “Euenus begat Marpessa, who was wooed by Apollo, but Idas, son of Aphareus, carried her off in a winged chariot which he received from Poseidon. Pursuing him in a chariot, Euenus came to the river Lykormas, but when he could not catch him, he slaughtered his horses and threw himself into the river, and the river is called Euenus after him”. [Transl. J.G. Frazer].

³⁷ “The festival of Stymphalian Artemis at Stymphalus was carelessly celebrated, and its established ritual in great part transgressed. Now a log fell into the mouth of the chasm into which the river descends, and so prevented the water from draining away, and (so it is said) the plain became a lake for a distance of four hundred stades. They also say that a hunter chased a deer, which fled and plunged into the marsh, followed by the hunter, who, in the excitement of the hunt, swam after the deer. So the chasm swallowed up both the deer and her pursuer. They are said to have been followed by the water of the river, so that by the next day the whole of the water that flooded the Stymphalian plain was dried up. Hereafter they put greater zeal into the festival in honor of Artemis”. [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

³⁸ Eustathius, *Commentarium in Dionysii periegetae orbis descriptionem* 420.9ff: Σαρωνικός δὲ κόλπος ἢ ἀπὸ Σάρωνος ποταμοῦ Τροϊζήνος ἐμβάλλοντος εἰς αὐτὸν, ἢ ἐπειδὴ Σάρων τις κυνηγὸς ἐπιδιώκων σὺν ἐκεῖθεν κατενεχθεὶς εἰς τὴν ὑποκειμένην κατέπεσε θάλασσαν καὶ ἀπεπνίγη.

³⁹ Dionysius of Byzantium, *Anaplous of the Bosphorus* 71-72: “Near Dikaia rock is the so-called Bathykolpos ... Here stands the altar of the Megarian hero Saron, and a net-casting place for fish, A little below the Saronic promontory is Kalos Agros, which has its name from nature by the commodiousness of land and sea”. (Greek original lost, transl. from the 16th century Latin transcript by Brady Kiesling on topostext.org [modified]. Last accessed on: 24.07.2025).

founder hero.⁴⁰ Finally, there was a commonly known sea-demon called Saron and a Saronian sea in the Levant and an otherwise unknown Saronian Syrtis, which is most probably just an error of an unknown author.⁴¹ (See the Map here below).



It is not surprising that no etymology has been proposed for the toponym. It is considered to be pre-Greek.⁴² Sweeping or the other Greek words with a similar sound would result in obviously absurd meanings. But looking at the earliest mention of the river usually called Saros, one can

⁴⁰ Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἀδανα and Ροῖζος. The first entry also shows that the name Saros was not a local toponym adopted by the Greeks, but a Greek hydronym replacing the older, native designation Koiranos.

⁴¹ Ioannes Philoponos (ca. 490-560) *De vocabulis quae diversum significatum exhibent secundum differentiam accentus*: <Σάρων>. δαίμων θαλάττιος; Apostolius Paroemiographus (15th cent.) 15.34.1: <Σάρωνος ναυτικώτερος> οὗτος ὁ Σάρων δαίμων ἦν ναυτικώτατος· ἐξ οὗ καὶ πέλαιγος Σαρωνικὸν ἐπικέκληται. ἔστι δὲ τῆς Παλαιστίνης· ὧ πρόκειται ἄλλαι τε πόλεις πολλαί, καὶ Ἰόπη καὶ Λύδα; Ps-Plut. *De Fluviiis* 1.1: ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὸν εἰς ποταμὸν Ἰνδὸν, δς ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ Ἰδάσπης μετωνομάσθη· ἔστι δὲ τῆς Ἰνδίας νεανικῶς καταφερόμενος εἰς τὴν Σαρωνικὴν Σύρτιν.

⁴² Fick 1905, 131.

recognize that originally it might have sounded differently, i.e., Psaros, because it is spelled in this way by Xenophon (*Anab.* 1.4.1).

The change from *psi* to *sigma* at the beginning of a word occurs, e.g., in psittakos/sittakos, Psappho/Sappho and assuming such an origin for the Saronian Gulf, we arrive at *psar* (‘starling’), a common bird name, which is also attested with an initial *sigma*.⁴³ Moreover, the same word was used to describe the colour of ash and that of dappled horses, so it could be used in a similar way to describe the colour of the sea. As the Red Sea, the Black Sea, or the *Melaina Kolpos* (Black Gulf) near the Thracian Chersonnese clearly show, it was always common to give names describing the dark colour of the sea.⁴⁴ In the designation of the Myrtoan Sea it was a plant, the myrtle, the colour of which was compared to that of the sea;⁴⁵ here it was presumably an animal.

That a zoonym and especially a bird name can be used to denote a bay is clearly shown by the Thalassa Alkyonidos on the other side of the Isthmus (Strabo 8.2.3; 9.1.8; 9.2.1) where a few islands are still called Alkyonides (I admit not to have found any ancient text mentioning them). Although there were many mythical heroines named Alkyone, and the giant Alkyoneus is mentioned by the scholia to Pindar (*Nemean* 4.43) as living near the Isthmus of Corinth, none of these characters is credited to have given the name of this sea, and there is no eponymous hero for the deep Alkyonian lake near Lerna mentioned by Pausanias (2.37.5) either. The obvious conclusion is that they were simply called after the bird, the kingfisher, which is similarly bright-coloured as the bee-eater and may therefore denote the glittering of the sea.

⁴³ For the change from *psi* to *sigma*, see Schwyzer 1939, 211.6 and 329 referring to the hydronym Psaros / Saros. Hesych. s.v. *σαρίν· ὀρνέου εἶδος, ἕμοιον ψάρω*. According to Arnott 2007, 305 it is best interpreted as an alternative spelling of (P)sari(o)n. Thompson (1936, 257) refers to a group of possibly related medieval Latin words (*serena*, *sirena*) meaning bee-eater.

⁴⁴ For the hydronyms mentioned here, see in general Burr 1932.

⁴⁵ It is symptomatic that there were two eponyms attached to the Myrtoan sea (Myrtilos, the charioteer of Pelops and an unknown local woman called Myrto: Paus. 8.14.12), even though the original, etymologically correct meaning could have been evident for native Greek speakers.

The starling might be also used for naming the Saronian Gulf especially because there were many small islands scattered there like dapples on the plumage of the bird or on a comparable animal skin. Admittedly, we cannot know when this process took place. It is conceivable that the name of the sea was coined by the Greeks, but it is equally possible that this happened already earlier. The name of the starling is of unknown origins,⁴⁶ and although its original meaning is unfamiliar, it is not impossible that such a word was used to denote something with a dark but shiny colour or a dotted surface, and that it was applied to some animals and various natural phenomena already before the arrival of the Greeks.

Conclusion

In general, toponomastic problems are not easily solved, but the above examples have clearly shown that there is much work to be done in this field. Even if etymology cannot yield absolutely solid results, human-animal studies can both contribute to and profit from this. Of course, the above suggestions may turn out to be scholarly paretymologies if some other, pre-Greek or pre-Indo-European etymologies for these toponyms can be argued more convincingly. Absolute certainty is beyond our reach, but one can confidently conclude what has already been observed in another case, that these names “do not owe their origins to a local personal name or a local event”.⁴⁷

Greek eponymous heroes were usually mere names or shadowy figures almost devoid of any kind of personality, and because human mythological characters in general were often named after animals and especially after birds, there was nothing unusual about the eponymous heroes or heroines who were named in this way (Merops and Ortygia). They emerged much later (if they appeared at all) than the respective placenames (Meropis and Ortygia), and this fact most

⁴⁶ Beekes 2010, 1661.

⁴⁷ Liberman 2024, 307 on the contested etymology of Rotten Row and after listing many fanciful folk-etymological explanations.

probably shows that they were only needed and created at certain locations where the real meaning of the toponyms was forgotten.

King Saron is no exception to this rule and, in this case, we can even suspect that his emergence was due to the evolution of the toponym. The tale of this king is so absurd and has so many parallels in folktales and legends that the toponym cannot have originated from it. If we accept the notion that the name was coined, similarly to the other hydronyms like the Aegean, the Hellespontos or the Myrtoan sea, after the arrival of the Greeks, then the derivation from the name of the starling is the only possibility which can claim some plausibility, I think; especially considering the other toponyms which clearly derive from the name of a bird or from that of some other animal. Alternatively, the name of the Saronian Sea and that of the starling may derive from a common root of unknown meaning in a pre-Greek language which was applied to both the bird and the bay already before the arrival of the Greeks who adopted both the toponym and the zoonym without considering their primary meaning.

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