

In one "Calvin and Hobbes" episode, the youthful hero begins his research paper on bats with the misguided assumption, "Bats are Bugs". Calvin is not alone in his failure to recognize that bats are mammals: the early Greeks thought they were birds. A bat appears in a list of birds in Aristophanes, *Birds* 1296. Among the humans transformed into birds in Greek myth were the daughters of King Minyas, turned into bats for refusing to worship Dionysus. One of the zoological advances of the fourth century BC was Aristotle's classification of bats as flying mammals that bear live young. Even so, popular confusion persisted. In Aesop's fable "The Bat and the Weasels", a bat is caught by a weasel who hates birds, but escapes by explaining that it is not a bird but a mouse. On being captured by a second weasel who hates mice, the bat explains that it is not really a mouse either.

Bats had a practical application on the farm. The *Geoponica*, a Greek agricultural compilation, says you can destroy caterpillars with the smoke from burning bat faeces and garlic stems. You can also keep locusts away by catching bats and hanging them in the treetops. If bats are your problem, you can keep them away by hanging leaves of the plane-tree in their way — storks were said to line their nests with plane leaves for the same purpose — or you can kill them with a fumigation of ivy. Bats also played a role in love charms. An ancient recipe says to remove the eyes from a bat and place them on an image of dough in the shape of a puppy. The eyes are then pierced with a needle and magic words are recited to make the object of your love unable to sleep. Modern Greek love spells involve placing the ashes or pulverized spine of a bat in a person's drink to make them fall in love with you; don't try this at home! Bats had protective uses, too. Herodotus claims that bats guard the cinnamon crop in the East. The Elder Pliny reports a Persian belief that a bat carried alive three times around a house or sheepfold will ward off harm, and that its blood is an excellent antidote for snakebite.

Bats also had a connection with the dead. Homer (*Odyssey* 24.6-9) says that the voices of the dead in their procession to the underworld are like the chirping of bats fluttering in a cave. While Homer is referring only to the sound, the simile is especially apt because bats, as creatures of the

night, are easily associated with darkness and death. Lucian claims that on the island of dreams, where Sleep reigns, the only "bird" is the bat; sleep and death were widely regarded as twins by the Greeks. A Mycenaean *larnax* (coffin) of uncertain provenance is painted with the image of a female figure with unnaturally pale skin, and arms that curve upward and fan out into small, leathery wings (Figure 1). This creature, whose wings have been described as "bat-like" by the art historian Emily Vermeule, appears to be the soul of the deceased, hovering in the vicinity of the tomb. An association of bats with the soul or afterlife is paralleled in various cultures: the Chinese linked the bat with immortality; the Maya considered it an underworld spirit; Australian tribes believed that the death of a bat would shorten a man's life.

In Greek thought, the soul was often thought to fly. Plato (*Phaedo* 81c-d) describes the dead as "hovering" over

their graves, and Attic oil flasks portray souls as miniature winged figures flying above the tomb. Other literary references describe souls flying into the upper air, though those souls burdened by worldly pleasures flutter close to the earth. In 1902, a German scholar even wrote a book whose title may be translated, *The Soul-bird in Ancient Literature and Art*, based on the bird-like image of the winged soul. But is there evidence to link souls to the bat? Socrates had a disciple Chaerephon, who was nicknamed "the Bat" because of his nocturnal habits, unhealthy complexion and squeaky voice. In Aristophanes' *Birds* (lines 1556-64), Peisander slaughters an animal and, like Odysseus, summons the dead to drink its blood; but the only soul that comes is Chaerephon the Bat. A bat drinking blood may evoke images of Count Dracula, but it must be

remembered that Chacrophon's shade is only a spirit, whereas vampires are physical bodies that return from the coffin. Another association of the bat with death is seen on a Roman tombstone from Montalbo in Spain (Figure 2), erected by Arruntia Caria for her sister, A(rruntia) Phileite. The bat surmounting the stele may represent Phileite's winged soul, or it may be an echo of the bat simile in the *Odyssey*.