

The Illyrian Pigeon: an Ancient Breed

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Translated:
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About the author

Josip Pekanovic, from Somber, is one of the highest regarded pigeon personalities in his country and has written several books on pigeons, his last one being in 1995. His research work on pigeons has covered the last thirty years with his early results being published in his book 'Golubovi Letaci' (Flying Pigeons).

Translator's notes...

In the now of this article I have used the term 'Gimpel' to describe the Archangel, as the word 'Archangel' is used in its literal sense in the original manuscript. I have decided to do this which I hope will be understood by readers. Other synonymous expressions used will be: 'Illyrian Pigeon' and 'Holy Pigeon'.



Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, is among the home regions of today's domestic pigeon breeding. Additionally, it is the original region of the Rock Dove (*Columba livia*), the ancestor of all domestic pigeon breeds we know today. The Sumerians lived there and it was their strong belief that the Gods used to live together with mankind. But later on the Gods became

angry about the greed and hatred of mankind and they rose up to the skies. Ever since mankind suffered from diseases, fights, wars and has to deal with other perils.

**Left: Babylon now – the city Ur.
Photo: Wikipedia.**



To achieve the remission of their sins from the Gods, the Sumerian people built the enormous Tower of Babylon, which should have reached to the skies.

But the skies were still far away and on top of the tower was built a temple and in the roof of this temple, pigeons were living. Some of these pigeons flew high up to the sky and the priests concluded that the pigeons were in contact with the Gods and could be used as



messengers. That was the birth of the legend of a holy pigeon but this was also the birth of the first Highflyer.

Left: The Kingdom of Illyria, in 318-379 AD.

After the end of the Babylonian Empire, a group of tribes came via Asia Minor and Thrakia, into the Balkans. From the Greeks and Romans later on, these people received a name, the Illyrians. The Illyrians had brought the old Babylonian holy breed with them to their new home.

The Illyrian state was quite large, stretching to the

Adriatic coast in the west, northwards to the northern borders of today's Slovenia and Croatia; in the east to the River Danube and Western Moldavia, and in the south to the Kosowo and Albania.

The Romans conquered the Illyrian territory in the year 9 AD and discovered the holy Illyrian pigeons. Already at that time they were a beautiful breed, crowned with a peak crest and coloured in impressive colours. The Romans carried on the breeding of this breed and gave it a new name, Columba Illyrica, Illyrian Pigeon. The Romans also gave a new name to the Illyrian state: Province of Dalmatia.

**Right: Gimpel (gold-blackwing).
Photo: Mick Bassett.**

In the 6th century the Southern Slavs migrated to this region and found there the Holy Pigeon with its lustrous and shiny plumage and were fascinated by this breed. The Slavs once again gave the breed a new name: the Archangel Pigeon. Centuries have passed and the Dalmatians, as great seafarers and traders, have spread their pigeons to the whole Mediterranean.





The German author, Edmund Zurth, writes: "Stored in Box 22 of the library of the cathedral of Toledo is a Spanish-Arabian document from 1350. This document speaks of red and yellow pigeons with black wings which are bred along the coast of the Mediterranean. Regarding the common colour of the plumage of the Gimpel and the Spanish Valencia Tumbler, both breeds may be traced back to a common origin".

Left: *Columba livia*, the ancestor of all domestic pigeon breeds. Photo: Aviculture Europe.

In the 13th and 14th centuries the Illyrian Pigeon was bred as Archangel Pigeon in Serbian monasteries. Today's Serbian Highflyer resembles the Gimpel somewhat in body, head with peak crest and also in the dark bronze (copper) colour.

Right: Serbian Highflyer. Photo: Josip Pekanovic.

Conrad Gessner published a book on pigeons in the year 1555. There he states that the Swiss pigeon breeds existed since the year 1330. Switzerland is home to approximately thirty breeds of pigeons. The resemblance of most breeds to the Gimpel, where the body, head and colour are concerned, is highly astonishing. Most of them show a peak crest and all of them have bull or orange eyes. Some of the Swiss breed bear the words 'Gold' or 'Copper' in their name. Now you can say that the Gimpel is the ancestor of today's Swiss breeds. The Gimpel has come to Switzerland via Dalmatia and Italy.

Zurth continues his writing: "In a travel description by Paktorovic about the harbor activities of Cataro (today's Kotor in Montenegro), from the year 1737, you can read that among the wine and oil-loading and



grain-clearing ships, pigeons of brown-red colour, with shiny black wing shields and tails, caught the attention of the spectator. These pigeons could be found among the common pigeons and were chasing for loose grain just like them. Indeed, pigeons with such a bi-coloured plumage could just not be ignored!"

This breed from Dalmatia came via Austria to Germany in 1822. At first they were named Illyrian Pigeons and this name was later on changed to Gimpel. The breed came to England via Belgium in the year 1834 and the name there was 'Archangel'. Throughout the whole of Europe, to England, the ancient legend from Babylon still was with this breed, an unbelievable fact! The German ornithologist, C.L. Brehm, mentions in his book from 1857, the Gimpels, and afterwards also the Swiss breeds. The English archeologist, A.J. Evans, visited the city of Pec in the Kosowo, in the year 1884. He says that the old irrigation system of Pec would bear certain similarities to those found around Babylon. In the Kosowo you can also find the Illyrian Shepherd dog and Illyrian cattle like buffaloes, donkeys and also little horses. Evans spoke to a pigeon fancier in Belgrade: "You are looking for the ancestors of your pigeons (Serbian Highflyers)? The ancestors are the pure, old holy pigeons from Illyria and you still can find them in the city of Pec". In a poultry and pigeon show in Somber (Batshka) in the year 1892 Gimpels were also present; and also in the 20th century you can see the Illyrian Pigeon at any show, but only in the original colours, light bronze (gold) and dark bronze (copper) with black wings. From this breed, one of the oldest pigeon breeds of the world, the different Tumbler breeds from the Middle East and South Eastern Europe and also some Toy pigeons have been developed.

Below: Archangel dark bronze (copper)-blackwing. Photo: Mick Bassett.



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