

Θεῖοι ἄνδρες vs ‘Greek Shamans’ *The Case of Pythagoras and the Animals*

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1. Introduction

In the framework of this volume dedicated to the figure of the *theios aner*, I propose to study the figure of Pythagoras in the wonderful biographies of late antiquity and with special attention to his relationship with animals and the miracles that are told about him. In addition, I will also address above all the current rebirth of this conceptual juncture of the “divine man” as compared to another historiographic category, that of “Greek shamanism”, which used to be fashionable for a time and then fell into disuse. Both junctures are controversial and have aroused a very lively debate in the last 100 years. It is curious to see how the advances that have been made in the sciences of religions, in the history of philosophy, or in classical philology throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have often been made based on the review of sources, themes, motifs, or forms transmitted by Greek antiquity upon historiographic categories from other disciplines which offered a new standpoint. But fashionable concepts and categories turn very quickly to be outdated. This is what happened throughout the 20th century with these two mentioned junctures, “divine man” vs. “Greek shaman”. The first one rose, as is well known, from the realm of theology and was developed from Bieler’s monograph at the beginning of the 20th century. But there were serious criticisms against the “*theios aner*” paradigm, which arose as a conflationary construct in the wake of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.¹ The same happened to the idea of shamanism to explain several figures from the Greek world, but this time through the field of anthropology, ethnology, and folklore, with the use that was done by Meuli, Eliade and Dodds, among others. It was soon discredited as the school of Religious Studies questioned Eliade’s unorthodox work and labelled it as non-academic and literary.

¹ See e.g., Carl Holladay, *Theios aner in Hellenistic Judaism*; Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions*; M. David Litwa, *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God*, among other scholars).

Both categories have been applied with preference to certain characters of the philosophical and sapiential tradition, such as Pythagoras and specifically to some Late Antique sources. It is significant that the two categories flourished in the early and mid-20th century, then fell into disgrace at the end of the last century, and now they appear to be somewhat reborn. Therefore, in this contribution, the objective is, on the one hand, to review this conceptual juncture of “Greek shamanism” in parallel to that of “divine men”, following one of the purposes of this volume, which is to give an update to this notion. On the other hand, after reviewing some examples and problematizing how, to what extent and in what sense the idea of “Greek shamanism” has been rehabilitated lately by some scholars, we will then inquire whether it makes any sense to reuse any of them in the context of the divine man by analysing the case of Pythagoras. As a case study we will work on the relationship of the Samian sage with animals in miraculous legends. And then we will be able to ask ourselves if it makes any sense to use categories such as “divine man” or “shaman” to describe the activities of a figure such as Pythagoras. But let us take this in parts and start with antiquity.

In the Western world, the first figure of a divine man with political and sapiential charisma was undoubtedly Pythagoras of Samos. Wiseman, scientist, priest and politician, Pythagoras was considered already in antiquity “divine” (*theios*). The Greek vocabulary referring to this philosophical, religious, and political concept and its use in late antique literature can provide an overview of the characteristic features of the providential man.² This idea is expressed in all its fullness through the expression *aner theios* (“divine man”) which has traditionally been applied to Pythagoras and some so-called pre-Socratics such as Empedocles,³ and later to the pagan holy men during Hellenistic and Roman times.⁴

Intellectual inspiration was divine for the Greeks and the sages’ closeness to the gods is often underlined as, of course, was the case of the divine (*theios*) Homer and his work which was considered to be the “most divine” (*theiotaton*).⁵ It is also a concept applied to philosophy: in the Platonic tradition, the discourse also seems an independent and almost divine entity, a *logos theios*,⁶ inspired by a supernatural principle. The divine madness that inspires poets, priests, prophets, or philosophers, according to the famous classification of Plato’s *Phaedrus*,⁷ can be interpreted as a mystical alienation towards the divine whose maximum level is the final contemplation of the truth. By

2 Cf. Cornelli 2003, 59–80.

3 Kingsley 1995.

4 Bieler 1935–1936 is still a key reference.

5 Plutarch, *Cons. Apol.* 104.

6 Plato, *Phd.* 85b.

7 Plato, *Phdr.* 244a, 249d and 265b. Within divine madness: the first is poetic, due to the muses; the second, the mystical, to Dionysus; the third, the prophetic, to Apollo and the fourth, the amatory, to Aphrodite. According to the Platonic interpretation of love, this is, of course, philosophical.

such inspiration, the divine man differs from the normal one⁸ by participating platonically in the divine (*to theion*) or in divine things (*ta theia*).⁹ The derived adverb (*theiōs*) is also used in philosophy for divinely inspired speech.¹⁰

But in the Greek biographical tradition of exceptional characters, from Plutarch and his *Parallel Lives*,¹¹ to the lives of pagan saints (Porphyry, Philostratus, etc.) and Christians saints (Athanasius, the desert fathers, etc.), the idea of the man marked by divine signs is based on the adjective *theios* and some interesting derivatives. We cannot go into these interesting derivatives in detail, but several are covered in some chapters of this volume, such as the adjective *isotheos* ("similar to a god"),¹² the noun *theiotes* ("holiness") and the verbs *theiazō* ("to act as a god", "interact with a god", or "act in the name of a god") and its variant *theazo*.¹³ Nor can we address other ethics that refer to the soul or *daimon*.

In any case, these adjectives often appear in the context of biographies – or hagiographies – that are gestated, almost parallel to Christianity, in the context of the Neoplatonic Schools and around their charismatic teachers. Not only Plotinus, Iamblichus, or Proclus, in their well-known lives written by Porphyry, Eunapius or Marinus respectively, but also the ancient Pythagoras were taken as ideals. In addition to the biographical pages dedicated to the latter by Diogenes Laërtius, those who rescued Pythagoras were the Neoplatonists Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234–305) with his *Life of Pythagoras* and Iamblichus of Chalcis (c. 245–325), with *On the Pythagorean Life*. In these texts there is a thematic nucleus of ancient origin that refers to the religious doctrines of ancient Pythagoreanism combined with a new philosophical agenda at a time marked by the decline of paganism and by a transformation of classical traditions in the new context of an empire on its way to Christianization during Late Antiquity.¹⁴ The reader of the Neoplatonic lives of this sage of Samos will thus obtain a motley overview and a mixed vision of Pythagoras as a historical, forerunner, shamanic, and semi-divine figure¹⁵ that, in any case, produces an enormous revitalization of this philosopher and his school.

Thus, the two Pythagorean biographers mentioned above collect the traditions that seem most relevant to them about Pythagoras to make the legendary Samian philoso-

8 Plutarch, *Ad Colotem* 1119b.

9 Plato *Soph.* 232c.

10 Plato, *Tet.*, 154 d, Aristotle, *Met.* 1074.

11 Cf. for the origin of this tradition Gentili and Cerri 1983 on the birth of the subgenre of biography.

12 Homer, *Il.* II 565, *Od.* I 324, XX 124, Plato, *Phdr.* 255a, Isocrates II 5, 5,145, Antiphon I 47 2.

13 Thucydides, VIII 1, in the same way that *theiasmos* is also referred to as divination in VII 50. Cf. also Plutarch, Themistocles 126a, Camillo 137a, Damascius, *Vit. Isid.* 36. As *epitheazo* also, cf. Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* I 5 623c, Plato, *Leg.* 682a.

14 This field was reestablished in modern times since Peter Brown's 1971 classic book. See also the massive and thorough guide by Bowersock, Brown and Grabar, 1995.

15 Scharinger, 2017, 213–229.

pher the patron of the mystical and ascetic current that, progressively, Neoplatonic thought takes on certain issues. The figure of Pythagoras as mediator is a point of union for these two authors, who account for the various legends and teachings that were attributed to this wiseman some eight centuries after his death.¹⁶ The old Platonic idea of *theo homoiosis* is joined to the Pythagorean *akolouthein to theo* thanks to the idea of divine filiation of the wiseman, evident in the figure and concept of *theios aner*.¹⁷ Not only does Pythagoras appear as a model of a renewed type of pagan holy man, but it is also at the time of Septimius Severus when the key biography of Apollonius of Tyana¹⁸ appeared, which became the prototype of the neo-Pythagorean divine man. These texts will greatly influence later biographies of charismatic leaders of Neoplatonism, contemporary to the time or their precursors, in Rome, Syria, Athens or Alexandria: the Pythagorean heritage is very conscious and significantly vindicated in this golden chain.

Be that as it may, the concept and vocabulary around the divine man, that is to say that he acts as a god, will have a major revival in late antiquity, when Neoplatonism assumed and adapted the Pythagorean legacy: this combination of science, religion and philosophy, following a literary portrait such as the one outlined in this series of words, has suggested to modern scholars the idea to apply various categories – sometimes metaphorically or anachronistically – for the study of this type of figure, following diverse historiographic tendencies à la mode in each period, from the 19th century onwards. Thus, Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism witness, as Cornelli (2013) has studied, a long story of interpretations. For our purpose we can quote the description of the philosopher as a “divine man”, following a theological approach to the philological or philosophical sources, to the more anthropological approach of taxonomies such as “medicine-man”, “shaman”, “miracle-worker”, passing, of course, through categories more typical of the history of religious beliefs, such as “holy”, “deified”, “magician” or “sorcerer”. The debate on these notions in antiquity would surely need an in-depth survey in many sources, considering its *longue durée*: this is certainly not the scope of this contribution, although we will seek diverse examples throughout these centuries. But let us firstly focus on the idea of shamanism.

2. On the controversial juncture of “Greek shamanism”

The historian of religions Mircea Eliade once defined the concept of shamanism as a “technique of ecstasy” that can be used in various ways for the benefit of the human community and to obtain divine favours.¹⁹ Of course his controversial figure and theo-

16 O'Meara 1989 and Bonazzi, Lévy and Steel, 2007.

17 Lavecchia, 2006, Des Places, 1964, Alviz, 2016.

18 Bernabé, 2002, 14.

19 Eliade, 1968.

ries are now somewhat outdated, if we consider the current tendencies of anthropology and religious studies, and his manifold and personal approach to the sources. But some of his views on myth and religion were deeply influential in his time, from his chair of religious studies in Chicago, including his pioneering theories on shamanism, now outdated but still widely read. In the following section we will summarise some of Eliade's views on shamanism. Among men and gods, the shaman performs various mediation functions that range from medicine, poetry, religion, divination, as well as contact with the divine world and the collective and mystical memory of the tribe or the guidance of souls to the otherworld, which can involve a one-way or round-trip for the shaman. *Stricto sensu*, shamanism as a religious phenomenon can be located in the plains of Central Asia, although its interpretative schemes have been successfully applied by anthropologists to other groups of people, and it is characterised by the mediating role of this figure in the community, since he or she is in charge of exercising communication or connection between our world and the world beyond what is sensible, that is the world of gods, demons, or spirits of the dead. Spirit mediation, trance practice, hibernation, incubation, metamorphosis (into another being or the other sex), divine possession, and the ability to travel to the afterlife and return, rescuing in the process from the other side a particular spirit to come to communicate something or simply to live again, fall into this category.

One of the first characteristic points of the shaman, then, is this brief stay in the otherworld, of the soul alone or accompanied, according to which they come to assist in the cognitive and initiatory experience of undergoing a "death before death". Nevertheless, a second characteristic strongly associated with the shamam, is the power they have over animals, for example, the ability to understand, converse, and persuade animals and, finally, the possibility of transforming into an animal. These powers are related to the intermediate nature of the animal kingdom itself, between our world and the world of the gods: in Siberia, shamans perform their mediation dressed in clothing alluding to their transformation into the totemic animal of each clan,²⁰ being the most frequent typologies the bear, the bird, the deer, and the elk. In Asian shamanism, animals have access to intermediate structures and are a symbolic vehicle for divine will, both in epiphanies and in prophecies, so communication with them is a priority.

But there is something else: in a remote time, in a sort of Edenic paradise of the past, men and animals shared a primeval language. This is another key motif for Eliade's studies on compared religions: the myth of the golden age. Golden age or paradise, as a religious utopia, as a deep connection with the shamanic world: this myth refers to the past happiness of humanity in a primordial state, before the rupture that involved the separation of the human and divine spheres, which generated the current state of affairs. In this sense, the shaman appears as a mediating figure capable of restoring, even

20 Basilov, 1990, 31.

temporarily, that primitive and happy state, recovering the language of animals and re-establishing the, once simple, communication between men and gods.²¹ Precisely what concerns us today is that shamanic prerogative that involves talking to animals and access through transformation to their intermediate world, as applied to the ancient Greek world, using a comparative analysis that has been enormously productive in the history of classical studies throughout the 20th century.

In comparing these models of anthropology and the history of religions with the Greek world, certain studies, such as those done by E. R. Rohde (1891), those of the so-called “Cambridge Ritualists”, those by K. Meuli (1935), in line with the “Vienna School”, and, especially, the very influential book by E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), tended to speak of a possible “Greek shamanism”. According to these studies, the round trip to the other world, which in Greek mythology was carried out not only by gods such as Hephaestus or Dionysus, or heroes such as Orpheus, but also by characters of the sapiential tradition such as Epimenides or Pythagoras, would be characteristic of this shamanic activity.²² It would seem then, for the first time, that the cultural barriers that for so long had separated the study of the classical Greek world, considered by civilised Europeans the brilliant origin of civilization, and that of other peoples usually dubbed “primitive”, have finally been crossed. Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, or E. R. Dodds encouraged the comparison of religious phenomena of the Greek world such as Maenadism or ecstatic divination, with other similar manifestations of peoples from Africa or Asia. Something unthinkable a few years ago, when Greece seemed surrounded by that rationalistic halo that led, in an inexorable progression towards the light, from *mythos* to *logos*. In this sense, it is also possible to point out that certain mythical sages and Greek diviners were also capable of transforming themselves into animals, talk to the otherworld, gather spirits, and summon the dead to use their knowledge in their prophecies. However, Eliade himself was reluctant to speak of a “Greek shamanism”, although he did recognize in certain myths, such as Orpheus’, clear features of shamanic methods. Later, this type of approach to the figure of the Greek *theioi andres* as shamans fell into discredit and again the cultural differences were emphasised again. It was alleged that Greek society was not shamanic and a similar phenomenon was once again circumscribed to the realm of these “other peoples”, far from the “dawn of the Western Civilization”.²³ However, the comparison of the shaman continued to be used by the so-called “School of Paris” of scholars of Greek mythology, with a strong anthropological imprint, and specifically by some of them

21 Eliade 1953.

22 Classical studies are Meuli 1935 and Dodds 1951, somewhat outdated. For an up-to-date overview of so-called Greek shamanism, cf. Martin 2004.

23 Cf. Bremmer 1983, 48, with a wide critical apparatus of Eliade, and Graf 1987.

such as Marcel Detienne.²⁴ The comparison with these categories has been particularly successful in structuralist analysis.²⁵ Lately, the juncture between the Greek world and shamanism has been vindicated by some scholars, despite the resistance of many others, as a useful tool for the analysis of certain facets of ancient culture.²⁶

It is worth asking if we could reconsider nowadays the comparison of shamanism with those figures in which Eliade saw some potentially shamanic motifs, techniques or traces, such as miraculous cures, divination by sleep, ecstatic experiences, and, especially, transformations and conversations with animals, according to the subject of this volume. Without speaking strictly of the existence of a Greek shamanistic tradition, perhaps the following pages can demonstrate that rethinking that comparison is very useful for a greater understanding of the world of Archaic and Classical Greek religion and, above all, of potentially shamanic figures of myth and the history of thought like Orpheus or Pythagoras. We have already shown elsewhere how the models of modern sociology of religions and even of social work, from Weber, Schmitt, and others, illuminate little-known aspects of ancient Pythagoreanism.²⁷ The same can be attempted with the present topic, which can be approached from anthropology, the history of religions and other comparative disciplines.²⁸

Although some authors have proposed the existence of shamanic traces in Greece as a remnant of a pre-Olympic religious system,²⁹ most of the evidence points to an origin on the margins of the Greek world, on the shores of the Black Sea. There is no doubt that the Greeks of the Archaic period had already encountered peoples of clearly shamanic tradition such as the Thracians and the Scythians. These religious shamanic currents found in Thrace were reflected in the figures such as Orpheus, Zalmoxis, Aristaeus and Abaris, which are usually interpreted as a reflection of this tradition in the Greek world.³⁰ In Scythia, a religion was practised which included the cult of animals – as evidenced by the abundant iconographic representations found in the burial grounds – and a series of gods that the Greeks assimilated to their own thanks to the *interpretatio graeca*. There were rites of ecstasy and contact with the world of the dead, as is clear from the funeral customs that Herodotus refers to (IV 71–72) and which archaeology has confirmed. After this contact with death, there were purification rites that are described in part as a shamanic ecstatic technique, with scrubs, hemp

24 Detienne 1967. In the wake of Louis Gernet, some French Classical scholars discussed the shamanistic theory, cf. Bremmer 2016, 68–69.

25 Brisson 1976 is a good example.

26 See Kingsley 1995, Martin 2004, Culianu 1983 or Benoît 2001, 93–120. On the other hand, one of the most critical scholars with this approach does not “preclude the possibility of [...] influence from shamanistic cultures” (Bremmer 2016, 70).

27 Hernández de la Fuente 2011 (3rd ed 2020) and 2012.

28 Cf. the comparison with African animism in Esteva 1999.

29 Butterworth 1966.

30 Eliade 1970.

censers and ecstatic screams. In the Scythian world, priests and diviners were second in importance after warriors and of great importance in the life of the political community. But this prestigious profession entailed a high risk because “the prophets are executed for countless reasons”: among others, when they did not protect the king with their powers and the king fell ill (Herodotus IV 68).

But in addition to these historical-cultural traces, which were already examined in the classical description of the activities of shamans done by anthropologists – i. e. mediation with the divine, practice of trance, journeys to the afterlife and the recovery of souls – other mythical traits can be recognized connected to a series of legendary Greek heroes capable of rescuing souls, dominating animals, and reciting prophecies. In close relationship with these characters from the Scythian and Thracian north and especially with Orpheus and Zalmoxis, Pythagoras is configured as a historical and philosophical consolidation of those figures of myth, thanks to the elaboration of his theories on the immortality of the soul and reincarnations, as well as his use of divination, incubation, and other shamanic techniques.

The notion of the immortality of the soul and its journeys away from the body has been often analysed by the scholarship after observing the difference between the Homeric and the Platonic soul. From Rohde to the present, the idea of the upward ascension of the soul has also been seen as an influence of “shamanic” origin in the Greek world.³¹ For Dodds, following this line, the journey of the soul to the otherworld from a posthomeric state of Greek culture was susceptible of comparison with one of the essential traits of the shaman: a figure who has received spiritual training and who, after performing bodily asceticism and an doing an underground retreat or anywhere else away from society, is capable of taking flight to the other side.³²

The old hypothesis formulated by Meuli identified traces of shamanism in Scythia which could have caused, certain changes in Greek religion and the idea of the soul, which took place around the seventh century partly due, on the one hand, to the influence of the Scythian world, and, on the other hand, as the natural evolution of the Greek religious mentality. Other authors, such as E. R. Dodds and F. M. Cornford,³³ followed the path opened by Meuli and turned their inference into a more solid theory by relating (especially Dodds) shamanism to an “external” element with a historical-cultural note that was typical of archaic Greece such as the series of “divine men” (*theioi andres*) that populate the sources around this time, from the pre-Socratics to Herodotus. Particular cases in this context were that of mythical figures such as Aristaeas or that of the so-called *iatromanteis* that were studied as a peculiar type of holy men, prophetic as well as healers, about whom scholars such as W. Burkert pointed

31 See the well-known and pioneering study by Rohde 1890–1894. For an account of early comparisons of shamanism with classical culture see Bremmer 2016.

32 Dodds 1951 138 ff.

33 Cornford 1952.

out ecstatic characteristics that were shared with shamans.³⁴ In any case, and as the historian of religions and disciple of Eliade, I. P. Culianu said, “whether or not they are called shamans is a mere conventional question [...] Shamanic theory, although not very successful, has at least provided a very reasonable explanation of the origin of the Greek revelations [...] and seems to be the more neutral”, which he examined in his essay when studying the origins of the “ascension of the soul” in the Greek world.³⁵ But we will return later to the updated version of the juncture “Greek shamanism” in line with a mythical shaman: now let’s look at certain Greek figures in the light of their dominance of the animal world.

3. From conversing with animals to becoming animals: divine man or shaman?

After the revision of the juncture “Greek shamanism”, as an alternative or complementary category to that of “divine man”, it is now necessary to deal with the intersection of this type of figures with the animal kingdom. There are several passages in Greek sources that especially highlight the privileged contact between these figures and the world of nature and animals, which is one of the defining characteristics of both “divine men” and “shamans”. In Eliade’s words, “it is significant that, to prepare for his trance, the shaman uses a *secret language* or, as it is called in other regions, the *language of animals*. The shaman imitates, on the one hand, the behaviour of animals and, on the other, tries to imitate their cries, especially those of birds”.³⁶

The animal often appears much closer to the world of the gods or the otherworld than normal men can ever be, so they frequently serve as mediators or transmitters of prophetic messages and signs of divine will. When talking about animals in the Archaic and Classical Greek world, it is necessary to underline first the enormous role that they played in religious worship. This was, without a doubt, the basis for their later use in the field of philosophy and in that of morality, from Pythagorean and Neoplatonic vegetarianism to Aristotelian or Stoic views on the typology and behaviour of animals.³⁷ In the field of religion, it must be remembered that animals were of great importance among the deities of the Greek pantheon, both in civic worship and in the world of mysteries. Each god had certain animals attributed to them, which were perhaps in principle venerated as gods themselves and which, in any case, played a crucial role in their epiphanies. The signs of these animals, in the origins of divination, were taken to be expressions of divine will.

34 Burkert 1972, 162–166.

35 Culianu 1983, 27. Regarding this expression, see Aguilar 1993.

36 M. Eliade 1953, 34. My translation.

37 Bodson 1994, 51–85, esp. 55 ff.

On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that the central act of Greek religion was the sacrifice of an animal-victim and the distribution of its flesh, as established by the myth of Prometheus (Hes., *Theog.* 535–557), between men and gods. When gods and men went their separate ways, their relationships were regulated by the institution of sacrifice, in which Prometheus outlined his famous deception as follows: after Prometheus divided the ox into two, he put the usable parts on one side, covering them with the viscera, and on the other, the bones covered in white fat, the useless bits that would end up being for the gods, after Zeus consciously chose them.

In addition, transformations into animals play a fundamental role in Greek mythology: animals become the vehicle of divine will, as in Zeus' multiple love conquests, or in the exemplification of legendary punishments (Arachne, Actaeon, etc.).³⁸ The theme of transformations from man to animal is a constant in the classical imaginary, both in literature and in the arts: methodologically one can distinguish, with Gilhus, the transformations of a single life (*metamorphosis*), when, for example, Actaeon is turned into a deer as his punishment from Artemis, and those that occur within a cycle of several lives (*metensomatosis*), according to the Pythagorean-inspired quote in Ovid (*omnia mutantur, nihil interit*, *Met.* 15, 165).³⁹ They are the transformations that are of most interest to the thesis of metempsychosis, which appears in the oldest Pythagoreanism, and which will later take up, transformed, Platonism. The idea of *metensomatosis* between men and animals is clear in the mocking quote from Xenophanes, so frequently referred to as testimony to this matter: "Once (Pythagoras) was walking near an abused dog and feeling sorry for it he said to its master: do not hit him for I have recognized the soul of a friend of mine when I heard the sound of his lamentations" (Diog. Laert. VIII 36). The idea that the soul transcends the boundaries between the bodies of men and animals in various evolutions, obviously in the Eastern tradition, places the animal again at an intermediate point in the transit of souls. This function of the animal as a "haven" where the soul lands is also especially relevant from the point of view of comparison with Central Asian shamanism.

One would say, in short, that between man and god, animals mediate as a continuous presence through various transfers, sacrifices, prophecies, or metamorphoses that involve breaking the barriers that contain the forms of rational order in pursuit of a primordial world. The animal is thus designated in the Greek mythical tradition almost as an intermediate being, straddling the world of the gods and of men, whose ascription is not clear and who can establish communication with both. There is, from the oldest philosophy, a position favourable to the intelligence of animals that brings them closer to humanity in a way that is far removed from modern postulates that will gradually change throughout the Hellenistic era and completely change with Christi-

38 Cf. v. gr. Frontisi-Ducroux 2003.

39 Gilhus 2006, 78–92.

anity, when animals and humans will remain in categorically opposite sides.⁴⁰ In the world of tragedy, for example, animals do not appear in opposition to human beings, but sometimes share common emotions and thoughts, which tragic poets strive to highlight.⁴¹ The connection with the divine is especially emphasised here, in the symbolism or epiphany of the god through the animal, or in the key moments of sacrifice and prophecy. These are moments of communication between two worlds in which we must pay special attention to what animals have to tell us, since the success of human affairs may depend on it.

For all these reasons, it was vitally important to know how to interpret the signs transmitted by animals, their arcane language so to speak, to exercise the noble art of divination, as is clear from the mythical stories of the first diviners of the Greek world. Of course, the matter of talking to animals is of paramount importance here. As A. Furlanetto says at the beginning of his essay on animals in the history of Greek divination, “understanding the language of animals and being able to communicate with them is one of the most universal utopias and tenaciously cultivated by men”.⁴² In some of the stories of the mythical golden age or “of Kronos”, when a race of happy men inhabited the world, according to the myth transmitted by Hesiod (*Erga* 109–201, cf. also Ovid, *Met.* I, 89–150), it seems that the ordinary human being was able to understand animals (Plato, *Pol.* 272 b). If the religious restoration of this situation was contemplated under the sign of Dionysus,⁴³ there will also be a philosophical restoration under the guidance of some *theioi andres*, which we will see later, that contemplates a recovered harmony with our animal brothers, who were not to be harmed and with whom we could again converse. “Friendship with animals” – says Eliade in *La nostalgie du paradis* – “and knowledge of their language represent a paradisiacal syndrome. In *illo tempore*, before the fall, this friendship was constitutive of the primordial human condition. The shaman partially recovered the paradisiacal situation of the primordial man and this due to the recovery of animal spontaneity (imitation of their behaviour) and the language of animals (imitation of their cries)”.⁴⁴ As can be seen, the theme of talking animals and human understanding of their language is key to the entire cultural history of Antiquity.⁴⁵ In what follows we shall briefly review the main mythical figures of this folk and religious motif in the Greek world, as precedents of the case of Pythagoras.

The god of prophecy himself, Apollo, obtained his divinatory powers according to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* after inheriting it from a primal animal. It is well-known that Apollo faced a huge serpent that guarded the oracle of the earth in mountain-

40 Gilhus 2006, 37–63.

41 Thumiger 2008, 4.

42 Furlanetto 2005, 155–163, esp. 155. My translation. This is obviously a theme in common with folk literature throughout the world.

43 Hernández de la Fuente 2009, 105–107, 114–115.

44 M. Eliade, 1953, 35. My translation.

45 Cf. Gilhus 2006, 245 ff.

ous Delphi, ruling the predictions of “the first prophetess, Gaia”, as Aeschylus calls her (*Eumenides* 2). The serpent, called Python or Delphine according to tradition, had the gift of prophecy and was the daughter of the earth, like all monsters of the ancient pre-Olympian order. Thus, Apollo killed Python, according to the founding myth of the oracle (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo Pythicus* 358 ss.) or received his power from him by inheritance.

In addition, the human diviner is connected to an inheritance, or a gift transmitted by animals, which grants them the possibility of that foreknowledge. There is a foundational history of Greek divination that relates to this ability of animals for prescience. The siblings, Cassandra and Helenus, descendants of Priam and Hecuba, are supposedly the founders of the Greek divination. After their birth, the myth tells us, their parents took them to the temple of Apollo and when night came, they left, leaving the children behind, either inadvertently or intentionally, to sleep in the sanctuary of the god of prophecy. When they came back the next morning, they found them still sleeping soundly, while two snakes, prophetic animals of the earth par excellence, licked their sense organs: specifically, it was their ears, which undoubtedly signified the ability to understand the diviner’s hidden language.⁴⁶ The frightened mother chased away the snakes but since then the children had the gift of divination in its two traditional variants: Cassandra was the patron of ecstatic divination, as she prophesied possessed by the god, like the Pythia, while Helenus acquired a different ability, that of interpreting by technical means the signs and wonders in nature to divine the future.

Undoubtedly, another important example of the relationship between animals, prophecy, is that of the Thracian Orpheus, son of Apollo, the traveller to the afterlife par excellence. The myth of his descent to retrieve the soul of his wife and the legend of his death, torn to pieces by the bacchantes, outline Orpheus as an exceptional guide on the paths to and from the afterlife. Nevertheless, he was also known for his special relationship with animals, which obeyed his voice, and for his extemporaneous dedication to divination, after the failed rescue of his beloved. There is a good summary of his qualities in this regard in Diodorus of Sicily (IV 25, 2–4).

As the son of Apollo, Orpheus is characterised by his mastery of music, poetry, and musical enchantments, which gave him control of nature and animals. In literature he is often remembered singing magically to dominate wild beasts and even to make trees and rocks move as he sang (Ps.-Apollodorus, *Bibl.* I 3 2; Eur., *Iphig. Aul.* 1212, *Bacch.* 562), in a motif that has had great fortune in the subsequent reception of the myth in European art. As Ovid (*Met.* X 142–3) evokes, Orpheus attracted “a forest and a council of beasts” and “even the rocks followed him” (*Met.* XI 1–2). In addition, Orpheus also came to master divination, perhaps by virtue of that voice that was so close to the

46 Regarding the siblings cf. Ps.-Apollodorus, *Bibl.* III 12 5. Regarding the snake episode, cf. Eustathius, *Comm. Hom.* 663.40.

animal kingdom, and so much so that after being torn to pieces by the Maenads, his severed head went to a cave on the island of Lesbos, where he achieved great fame for his prophecies, until Apollo himself, his purported father, told him to shut up.⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, Orpheus was the tutelary hero of certain historical oracles, such as the one of Antisa.

Another favourite son of Apollo, the healer Asclepius, is another mythical figure characterised by his close relationship with animals. Following his exceptional birth to the Thessalian princess Coronis, who was burned by Apollo in revenge for her infidelity, the young Asclepius was raised as a hero by the centaur Chiron in the art of medicine, advancing so much the knowledge in this field that he defied the laws of nature not only by curing diseases, but death itself (Ps.–Apollodorus, *Bibl.* III 10 3). It is said that Asclepius learned the art of resurrecting the dead thanks to the experience he had with a snake: when Asclepius was visiting a certain Glaucus, who was terminal and already dying, he saw a snake coming towards him that curled itself around his staff. Asclepius killed her with one blow, but soon another snake appeared carrying a magical herb with which he brought the first snake back to life. By imitating the animal, Asclepius was able to bring Glaucus back to life using this herb and the serpent became his consecrated animal (Hyginus, *Poet. Astr.* II 40 and *Fab.* 136; Aelianus, *NA* V 2). However, Zeus could not tolerate this daring behaviour and struck Asclepius with his thunderbolt. Later, Apollo would obtain a special dispensation for his son and Asclepius was promoted to Olympus as the god of medicine. There are a few Greek resurrection myths that are related to the serpent and its ability to change skin, such as that of the Lydian hero Tylus⁴⁸: this telluric animal, often related to healing and mystic rites, appears along other characters in the Greek myth of this category.

The diviner Melampus, whose antiquity is deduced from a Homeric reference (*Od.* XV 224–241), was a pioneer in healing through religious medicine and purifications, which were also related to the world of the serpent (Ps.–Apollodorus, *Bibl.*, II 2 2.). Herodotus recorded a tradition according to which this diviner acted as a pioneer in the Dionysian cult, without understanding very well how it worked, as later on other sages were in charge of completing his teachings (Herodotus II 49; VII 221; IX 34.).⁴⁹ Herodotus also thought that Melampus was surely the inventor of the art of divination, about whose origin it is said, that he obtained by the gift of a snake: after discovering a snake's nest, Melampus dreamed that the young licked his ears and when he woke up, he realised that he could understand the language of birds and was endowed with the gift of prophecy. After dreaming of this symbolic animal, Melampus obtained the gift of listening to the future, as if the serpent had modified his sensory perception, leading

47 Flavius Philostratus, *Vit. Apol. Tyan.*, IV 14. Cf. M. A. Santamaría 2008.

48 Herter 1965, Espinar and Hernández de la Fuente 2002.

49 Regarding Melampus and Dionysus, cf. Scarpi 1980.

him to contact the afterlife, with the ineffable and inaudible language that only certain animals and certain Greek mythical figures of this list were able to understand.

Another case is that of the blind prophet Tiresias, who due to his special relationship with animals and other archetypal characteristics, is considerably closer to the idea of the shaman. As Delcourt observed, Tiresias is the only character in Greek mythology who retained traits of an androgynous shamanism.⁵⁰ He is most famously mentioned in the *Odyssey* (X 490–495), as the Theban sage who reveals Odysseus' path home, during his necromancy consultation in the *Nekyia*. The most characteristic thing about his story is, as in the case of Melampus, the way in which he acquired the gift of divination, which in this case is related to his blindness. According to the different versions that the mythical tradition collects, this was either a punishment for the violation of a taboo, as he got to see the goddess Pallas naked (Callimachus, *Hymn* V 77–136), or for revealing an ineffable secret (Hyginus, *fab.* 75, Ps. –Apollodorus, *Bibl.* III 6 7). Regarding his transformation into a woman, it is said that it took place after Tiresias saw snakes copulating on Mount Cyllene and killed them (Hesiod, *Frag.* 271).⁵¹ Already as a woman, Tiresias had a husband and children and gave birth to the prophetess Manto, founder of many oracles in Asia Minor and mother of the prophet Mopsus, who participated in the Argonauts saga. After Tiresias saw other snakes copulating, he returned to its masculine form. In addition, as a man, Tiresias served as a mediator in the dispute between Hera and Zeus about which of the two sexes enjoyed sex more: Hera, angry at hearing from Tiresias that the woman enjoyed it more, left him blind, but Zeus gave him in exchange the gift of prophecy (Ps.–Apollodorus, *Bibl.* III 6 7. Ovid, *Met.* III 87 ss.).⁵² In any case, the mysterious lore of the serpent is, again, crucial for this figure at the beginning of his prophetic activity. In fact, it is a common place in the legends about the childhood of the most famous prophets of ancient Greece, as we have seen in the case of Melampus, Tiresias, Cassandra and Helenus, the fact that they had a kind of initiation into the world of the divination due to the decisive intervention of some animal, either winged or meandering, which facilitated the first contact with the world of the divine.⁵³ As Eliade has put it:

“If one takes into account that, during his initiation, it is thought that the shaman has encountered an animal that has revealed certain secrets of his profession, that teaches him the *language of animals*, or that becomes his *auxiliary spirit* (familiar), one can understand even better the bonds of friendship and familiarity that are established between the animals and the shaman”.⁵⁴

50 Delcourt 1958 [1970, 61].

51 Cf. Ugolini 1995, 56 ff.

52 Cf. in general García Gual 1975.

53 Furlanetto 2005, 158.

54 Eliade, 1953, 35. My translation.

There are certain characters, such as the Thracian Zalmoxis or Aristeas of Proconnesus, who are situated on the margins of the Greek world and who could also be mentioned from this point of view. Zalmoxis appears as a religious reformer who introduced into his country the ideas about the survival of the soul separated from the body. According to Plato (*Charmides* 156d) he was a Thracian king for whom certain physicians who knew how to procure immortality and Herodotus (IV 93–96) refers the relationship of Zalmoxis with Pythagoras, who would have been his slave in Samos. His relationship with the animal world can be inferred by one of the etymologies proposed for his name in Diogenes Laertius, which relates it to the word for “bear” in Thracian, one of the totemic animals par excellence of Asian shamanism. Another mythical figure of the same style is that of the traveller and poet Aristeas of Proconnesus (Herodotus IV, 13), to whom an epic poem, the *Arimaspea*, was attributed, and who is supposed to have been capable of elevating his soul and leaving the body behind. There are euhemeristic interpretations of Aristeas’ journey, such as Bolton’s, which focuses on his actual journey, and others on his shamanic character, such as Dowden’s.⁵⁵ As for his relationship with animals, Aristeas said of himself that he had accompanied Apollo transformed into a raven, which adds to the list of figures with the ability to dominate nature or transform into animals. Piquero has recently drawn an in-depth analysis of this figure by taking into consideration the “shamanic” view in relation to Aristeas and framed it in the ancient geography. Piquero mentions that “it is possible that the Pythagoreans reinterpreted whatever Aristeas said as a journey of the soul”.⁵⁶ But he does not seem to favour this view as Scharinger (2017) does in the case of Pythagoras, as we will see in detail.

Special attention must be given, apart from snakes, to birds. Certain birds were also characteristic of Apollo, and therefore of the domain of divination, especially the swan, the kite, the vulture, and the raven. As a matter of fact, observing the flight of birds was one of the ancient procedures for interpreting the future by priests who appropriately unravelled the meaning of the song or flight of these birds. Among them, we must place special emphasis on the raven. The aforementioned Asclepius based his strange birth on an incident starring a raven. He was born, according to myth, precisely to Apollo and the Thessalian princess Coronis, a mortal. Pindar tells that Coronis loved Apollo and became pregnant with him, but during her pregnancy she became attached to another mortal. Apollo was warned of this by a raven – which before giving the bad news and being cursed was a white bird – and in revenge he burned the young woman alive (cf. Ovid *Met.* II 605 ff. and Hyginus *Poet. Astr.* II 40).

The raven was, in fact, a favourite animal for divination, said to be able to imitate the human voice and to have various shades of squawking (Pind., F. 297 Bowra), one of which was prophetic and could be recognized by prophets and people endowed with

55 Bolton 1962, Dowden 1980.

56 Piquero 2017, 101.

divining qualities. There was even a treatise, attributed to the mathematician Theon of Alexandria, the father of the famous Hypatia, dedicated to the voice of the raven (Περὶ σημείων καὶ σκοπῆς ὀρνέων καὶ τῆς κοράκων φωνῆς, cf. Suda s. v.). In classical sources, the great diviners, such as Melampus, Helenus and Mopsus, can directly understand the language of the raven, which is an interpreter of the language of the world and is widely related to Apollo.⁵⁷ Although, curiously, it seems that the bird itself does not know the meaning of what it prophetically announces (Pliny, HN X 33), since it works like a Pythia in ecstasy, as an instrument of the voice of the god.⁵⁸ In this the bird would be distinguished from the serpent, as the latter seems to have a prominent role in the initiations of prophets and divine men of the Greek religious tradition, while the bird appears as a mere bearer of divine will, a sign of the future, or a vehicle of prophecy. In any case, as we have seen in this brief list of Greek mythological figures related to the typical activities of the “shaman” or “divine man” (poetry, prophecy and healing), it is of the utmost importance to understand the language of the animals.

4. Animals and Pythagoras in his late antique biographies

The wonders regarding the animal world (the understanding of their language, the transformation into animals, animals as helpers, etc.) are key aspects of myths, folk tales and ritual traditions in diverse cultures. In the Greek world, after this list of exceptional figures of divine men who had special contact with the animal world, we can end this contribution by devoting special attention to the most influential and most controversial pre-Socratic philosopher, perhaps because of his role as a guru of a sect of strict and rigorous life, Pythagoras of Samos. We will not discuss the many facets of this *theios aner* of philosophy, whose legendary prodigies, very close to those already mentioned and that have been told in various biographies, included the separations of the body and the soul, incubations in caves, divination, bilocation, and other wonders.⁵⁹ But in a recent essay focused on his miracles, the importance of the category of “shaman” for studying him has been highlighted and this section will examine it in detail. Scharinger (2017) now justly reconsiders Pythagoras under the light of a potentially shamanic trace of his healing, divination, ecstatic, and especially animal-related *thaumata*. In any case, as the author rightly concludes “Pythagoras can truly be characterised as a shaman through some of his miraculous actions”.⁶⁰ He seems to favour this analogy, long outdated and old-fashioned, perhaps rehabilitating comparative trends among the Greeks and the “other peoples”. We will now focus on his relationship with

57 Patera 2012, 159, 175.

58 Furlanetto 2005, 160.

59 See for the list of miracles attributed to Pythagoras, Hernández de la Fuente, 2011, 62–65.

60 Scharinger 2017, 71.

the animal kingdom, since Pythagoras also appears outlined, in parallel to Orpheus, as an exceptional being capable of understanding, making himself understood, and being obeyed by animals. Our last question here is whether shamanism as a historiographical or anthropological category, in combination with the idea of *theios aner*, can be still used productively in the case of Pythagoras.

This sage of Samos had a special relationship with nature and various stories are told about his mastery of the natural elements. It is said, for example, that a river greeted him by name when he crossed it (Porphyry *VP* 27, Iamblichus *VP* 134, Diogenes Laërtius VIII 11, Aelian, *VH* IV 17, Apollonius, *Hist. Mir.* 6) and that he was able to control violent hurricanes and to calm storms (Porphyry *VP* 29.) But among his legendary features we can mention above all, in this context, Pythagoras' special relationship with animals, whose language he understood and whose faculties he shared. He not only spoke with bears or oxen and could dominate a white eagle, which allowed him to caress it, but he also shared qualities of these animals and was able to act like one of them. Let us now review the best-known miracles by comparing the different versions that are transmitted about them in Porphyry and Iamblichus and that seem to come from the same tradition:

- 1) The bear of Daunia. Porphyry (*VP* 23) and Iamblichus (*VP* 60) narrate this passage on how Pythagoras dissuaded this wild animal from causing harm:
- 2) The ox of Taranto was convinced by Pythagoras to stay away from the beans (ἀποστῆσαι τοῦ κυμῶνος Porphyry *VP* 24, βούν δὲ ἐν Τάραντι Iamblichus *VP* 61)
- 3) The eagle of Olympia, who flew over him and then perched himself on Pythagoras' shoulder so he could caress it (Porphyry *VP* 25, αἰετὸν δ' ὑπεριπτάμενον Ὀλυμπίᾳσι προσομιλοῦντος ..., Iamblichus *VP* 62).

As seen above, Pythagoras seems to have been able to communicate with animals for various purposes, which follow the "shamanic" characteristics that have been previously discussed. In the scenario that biographers draw about the Pythagorean way of life, we must not forget the respect for animals that this sect preached. This obviously entailed abstinence from animal meat, a vegetarianism that tried to restore the blueprint of a previous golden age, when men and animals understood each other and conversed. In passages 1) and 2) this type of direct conversation takes place, which deals with ethical aspects related to the *bios* promoted by Pythagoras and his School, that is, with living a just life and following the nutritional rules of the sect. Thus, the old community that existed in that golden age and the ancient language of animals were restored.

The Pythagorean way of life prescribed a series of strict food taboos, including the abstinence from animal meat, which, as we will argue below, is related to that nostalgia for paradise that the ancient myth of the Golden Age and its temporary return to earth supposed under the guidance of certain divine and charismatic characters. It is known that diet or lifestyle was one of the great concerns in Greek antiquity, not only on a

philosophical level, of course, but also in a medical sense or even for sports, as seen in descriptions about the ideal diet of the Hippocratic corpus or in the rules for athletes.⁶¹

Although in this particular case there are hesitations in the sources, since sometimes it is stated that Pythagoras did not eat meat at all while other times it seems that the taboo only referred to certain animals or certain parts of their bodies (Porphyry, *VP* 7, 19. Diog. Laërtius *VIII*. 20.).⁶² For Diogenes Laërtius it was a matter of good health and physical shape (*VIII* 13. 5). Precisely this passage is preceded by a discussion about whether Pythagoras was the coach of a famous athlete. But in the case of Pythagoreanism, food had a much more relevant role to play due to its connection with the ideological aspects that were related to the core of the master's doctrines. These were significant in two respects: first, one that was related to reincarnation, which prevented eating meat, and second, because his doctrines advocated an ascetic way of life to meditate and meet the spiritual plane. Both doctrines focused on an adequate diet.⁶³ The authors who speak of a prohibition of all foods of animal origin (Aristotle, *Rhet* I 14 2, Sextus Empiricus *IX* 127) seem to point out this common precept to the Orphics and to the consideration of *metempsychosis* and the continuity of the soul in other bodies in the universe (Plutarch, *de Esu Carn.* 993, 996, 997). Nevertheless, not all the members of the school were subjected to this prohibition, except for those from the highest or most purified classes (Iamblichus *VP* 107, 109, 149):

“The most contemplative of the philosophers, who had reached especially the highest peaks, stripped them of superfluous and unfairly obtained foods, stating that they could neither eat anything animated nor drink wine at all nor sacrifice animals to the gods or harm them in any way [...] However, it allowed the ingestion of some animals to those whose life was not totally pure, sacred, and philosophical”.

In any case, abstinence from shedding animal blood is usually contrasted with a Pythagorean precept that asks, “what is the most fair?”, which answer was “sacrifice” (Iamblichus, *VP* 82). Animal sacrifice was one of the pillars of the Greek cult towards the gods, so the proverbial piety of Pythagoras should also involve this type of practice. The solutions that have been proposed for this contradiction are intermediate and there are authors who attribute only bloodless offerings to it, while others say that the sacrifice of consecrated animals did not pose problems to the idea of reincarnation because the souls of men did not enter these animals (Iamblichus, *VP* 85).

The Neoplatonist (and Pythagoras' biographer) Porphyry promoted in his work *De abstinentia* (*III* 27) a vegetarianism with ascetic roots, following the Pythagorean example. He thus intended to promote an asceticism in man through the abstinence

61 On food in the ancient world see Brothwell and Brothwell 1998 o Garnsey 1999.

62 Cf. García Gual 2000.

63 For the food prescriptions of Pythagoreanism, see the analysis offered by Riedweg 2002, 93 ff. or Huffman 2018. On its relationship to ideas about food in context, cf. Scarborough 1982.

from meat of his animal brothers. This was based on the idea that asceticism sought to separate the soul and the body, the return to the divine, and the departure from the sensible world. Therefore, this progressively divinized the person. To justify his vision and frame it within the history of humanity, Porphyry (*De abstinence* IV 2.1–9.) gathered a testimony of the Aristotelian Dicaearchus of Messana that was related to the discourse of the golden age. Dicaearchus spoke about this golden ancient human race, relating their happiness, justice, and eternal youth with their respect for animals and their abstinence from eating their meat, something that had already been preaching first the Pythagoreans:

“This is what Dicaearchus said, when he refers the antiquities of the Greeks and relates how blessed the life of the first humans was, which was due to abstinence from animal food, a contributing factor no less than other things. Thus, there was no war, and injustice had been expelled. But then, along with the injustice towards the animals, came war, and competition against each other; for this reason, I dare to say that the abstinence of animals is the mother of injustice.”⁶⁴

This ancient golden human race lived close to the gods in terms of food, as their diet was bloodless. This idea is close to the traditional myth of the ages, since, following Saunders, these were articulated “based on the three historical stages of food for the Greek race: the golden age, when men simply ate the spontaneous products of the land, without having to work for it; the pastoral age, characterised by the domination of animals and the ingestion of their meat, which I take as implicit by ‘they laid their hands on them’ (*epsanto*) and, the age of agriculture.”⁶⁵

There are also traces of this food from the golden age related to the myth of the age of Kronus and the vegetal exuberance characteristic of Dionysus,⁶⁶ and of the justice to the animals in the work of Plato, going so far as to sketch a utopian panorama of this golden age in which men and animals converse with each other. When it comes to the discovery of agriculture in *The Laws*, Plato also alludes to the food of that mythical age, which was provided without bloodshed:

“When these humans did not dare even to taste the ox and the divinities did not have animal offerings, but liquid mixtures of flour, honey and oil, fruits dipped in honey, and other such *pure* offerings, while turning away from the meat as if it were not pious to eat it or stain the altars of the gods with blood, but those of us who lived then came to have a kind of life called orphic” (Plato, *Leg.* VI 782c.).

In addition to this, the myth of Plato’s *Statesman*, told by the “Stranger from Elea”, presents a description of the golden age of great interest to Platonic political theory,

64 Cf. Fortenbaugh and Schütrumpf, n. 56A.

65 Saunders 2001, 242.

66 As I have discussed in Hernández de la Fuente 2009.

in which he asks if the men of that time lived a life fairer and happier than those of the present age. It is not the conditions of vegetal exuberance, a surplus of food and the absence of death or violence that are considered here, but rather the type of conversations to which men, gods, and animals were engaged in. Their happiness depended on whether those men were dedicated to philosophy or if, on the contrary, “gorging themselves on food and drink until they were satisfied, they talked with each other and with the animals about myths such as those now told about them” (Plato, *Statesman* 272 b).

Finally, it should be remembered that Pythagoras, according to the legendary traditions of his lives, not only established conversations with animals but, as can be inferred from some of the legends transmitted about his relationship with animals, he also imitated in a certain way their lifestyle and their qualities. Perhaps this was done in a conscious mimesis which tended to recover that golden state of the paradisiacal past and bring it to the present, while emphasising that temporary *metensomatosis* back and forth to the animal kingdom and its knowledge. There is a passage transmitted by paradoxography and by a part of the Pythagorean biographical tradition according to which Pythagoras faced a poisonous serpent with his same weapons, biting, and on an equal footing (Apolonius, *Hist. Mir.* 6⁶⁷. δάκνοντα θανάσιμον ὄφιν αὐτὸς δάκνων ἀπέκτεινεν; Iamblichus *VP* 141 τὸν μικρὸν ὄφιν, ὃς ἀπέκτεινε δάκνων).

5. Conclusion

To give a brief conclusion to this contribution, we have reviewed the possibility of combining the controversial historiographic category of Greek shamanism, which was no doubt outdated and old-fashioned, but has been recently taken up again, with the idea of the divine man, another very criticised juncture. Making a theoretical review of the fortunes of this historiographic conception, we can ascertain to which extent it is still possible to use it, at least to clarify in a comparative way some of the legends that are told about many of these charismatic and divine figures found in Greek literature and philosophy. Furthermore, in the case of Pythagoras, whose legendary trail in late-antique biographies is so remarkable and so fruitful in the context of studies of divine men, the special relationship with animals that we have exemplified through the preceding cases provides yet another reason to use a comparative analysis with anthropology and folklore. There are parallels in other cultural traditions, which go beyond the scope of this contribution, and which can illuminate some of these legendary aspects in the narrative cycles that refer to “shamans” or “divine men” of various geographical latitudes.

67 Ed. Giannini 1965.

Pythagoras not only imitated animals in terms of feeding and on certain behaviours, i.e. from speaking to acting like a snake, but he also followed his old tongue in communication with the afterlife, through cataleptic dreams in caves and hibernation in *katabaseis* that have been pointed out on various occasions. Acts that had both philosophical and prophetic motivations.⁶⁸ This semi-divine character thus embodies some typically shamanic characteristics that associate the flight of the soul and the privileged contact with the afterlife to the relationship of familiarity with the animal world. The recent study by Scharinger is correct in establishing that, however, the sage of Samos in his legendary dimension cannot be understood solely on the basis of the concept of shaman, even if it is useful, but in combination with other historiographic categories such as holiness, implicit in the concept of *theios aner*, "divine man".⁶⁹ Pythagoras has a well-attested ability to understand animals and make himself understood by them, to obtain a type of communication useful for his interests. Finally, we also believe that the possibility of becoming an animal is implicit in some passages, a "metensomatosi" as seen in the legend of the snake, which is surely only one of the stories that were transmitted on this subject. Coinciding with the studies on Asian shamanism, moreover, it could be said that, if this hypothesis is confirmed, the sage of Samos, as the head of a school that offered an alternative way of life, proposed to recapture in a certain pristine way those old times in which animals and men lived in a community without feeding on each other and with the ability to understand each other in the same ancient and prestigious language. The Edenic myth of the golden age is updated by the founder of these rules to live a just life, who intends to recover not only the *language of animals* but also the ancient communication with the divine.

Prophecy, utopia, shamanism, community of life with animals and communication with them seem related to Pythagoras, a fundamental figure of the Greek religious tradition. Scholars throughout the ages have tried to find the most convenient analogies: "divine man" or Ancient Greek "saint", for some, with theological terminology, "medicine-man" or "shaman" for others, in anthropological terms. All of these views have aroused sometimes strong opposition of an important part of the critics. But the very notion of Pythagoreanism or the figure of Pythagoras the sage as category, as Cornelli (2013) convincingly shows in an excellent monograph, is also a historiographic construction. As we have seen, Pythagoras shares with other similar figures, of mythical significance, many of these characteristic points. But that deserves a separate and more in-depth analysis. In any case, recent scholarship is returning to those old junctures of "Greek shamanism" and "divine man", which perhaps can be used in combination. I think both can be used today to some extent as a working tool for interpretation, by way of example, but always taking care of underlining the differences along with the

68 P. e. the classical work by Burkert 1969 or the analysis between divination and politics of the experience of the *katabasis* in Hernández de la Fuente 2013.

69 Scharinger 2017, 224.

analogies. The example of the special relation with the animal world, in the list of miracles of Pythagoras that Scharinger has studied is a good instance together with other parallel cases both in the Greek world and in other cultures. But we should always start with an inner comparison with the same culture.

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