ANABASIS 10 (2019)
STUDIA CLASSICA ET ORIENTALIA

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# THE PEACOCK'S ARRIVAL IN GREECE AND ROME, OR HOW AN EXOTIC ANIMAL BECAME AN ESCHATOLOGICAL SYMBOL[1]

**Keywords:** peacock, symbol, eschatology, Iran-Greece cultural contacts

A symbol is a word, image, or object that represents something else due to association, resemblance, or, most importantly, social convention. Besides their customary meanings, symbols also have specific connotations that are socially accepted and widely known. The reasons why an element becomes a symbol are sometimes complex because they tend not to be explicit, and social convention often renders the processes involved in symbolization somewhat obscure.

In this paper I shall examine a spectacular exotic bird, the peacock, which was introduced into Greece around the sixth century BC and into Rome before the second century BC, and quickly became an eschatological symbol with multiple meanings. In general, it was associated with immortality, but this concept can be defined in two different ways, as a belief in bodily resurrection and as a belief in the transmigration of souls. As we shall see, the peacock was associated with both.

The peacock's introduction into everyday life in the Classical World had several connotations that the bird acquired over the course of a lengthy process with complex geographical ramifications. In particular, the peacock follows a historically complex road that goes from India to Iran to reach Greece by two routes of entry, Athens and Samos, to finally arrive at Rome.

The present paper is based on what Panofsky 1939 called iconographic analysis, in which the literary sources are studied in order to establish a relationship between the signifier and the signified of a symbol, and iconographic interpreta-

[1] This article is the result of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness, reference number FFI2017-82143-P. Email: japedros@ucm.es.

tion, the history of the cultural elements that transform something into a symbol[2]. In principle, we can expect that symbols in text and art overlap and reinforce one another. The problem with this approach is that the link between texts and images is not at all congruent: we are missing many images of the Ancient World and many times the texts give us confusing information[3]. In any case, although the psychological[4] or structuralist[5] interpretations of the symbol tend to interpret it in a unique way, the anthropology of religion emphasizes that understanding the meaning of religious symbols has a lot to do with social components and involves multiple facets[6]. Our knowledge of the creation of symbols in the Ancient World is, therefore, very limited to the analysis of texts. Thus, to better understand the entire process, I shall analyze texts in which peacocks appear in order to elucidate their connotations[7].

The Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) is native to the Indian subcontinent.[8] The peacock has multiple designations in Old Indian, all of which are periphrastic. Some make reference to its piercing call, as in the case of *mayū́ra-* "strident" and *kṛkavā́ku-* "strident throat", while others refer to the crest feathers (*śikhaṇḍín-*, *śikhín-* "with a crest") or the tail feathers, which resemble a sheaf (*kalāpin-*, *kalāpa-* "sheaf"). Another designation is the compound *barhabhāra-* "which bears feathers (in the tail)".

The symbolism of the peacock was positive in ancient India. Peacocks appear in the *Ṛgveda* 1.191.14 as birds that protect men from poison[9] by devouring insects harmful to health. Subsequently, the peacock became a symbol of kingship. Thus, a passage in the *Mahābhārata* compares the bird's colourful feathers with the knowledge and application of the law reserved for the king; just as the peacock stands watch over the water fountains, so too the king must be vigilant in situations of

[2] I shall not, therefore, conduct a pre-iconographic analysis, which would entail a detailed study and description of the material and formal elements of the symbol more appropriate to an art history paper.

[3] Jensen 2000, 3.

[4] Mainly / Freud 1933; Jacobi 1959.

[5] Leach 1976.

[6] Particularly, the so-called "Symbolic Anthropology": while Turner 1967 developed an approach to analysis of symbolism in ritual, Geertz 1973 explored symbols as vehicles of culture. However, symbolic approaches present some risk of misinterpretation. Religious beliefs involve complex combinations of personal and social values as well as embodied or visceral feelings that cannot always be appreciated or even recognized by an etic (outsider) explanation, but this is the only possibility that exists for scholars of the Ancient World, cf. Henninger-Rener 2017, 5.

[7] Major works on the peacock in the classical world include Steier 1938; Hünemörder 2000; Arnott 2007, 342-345.

[8] The peafowl is a common name for three bird species in the genera *Pavo* and *Afropavo* of the family Phasianidae including the pheasants and their allies.

[9] Jamison / Brereton 2014, 398: "The tree-times-seven peahens (*mayūrías*), the seven spinster sisters, these have carried away your poison, like women with jugs (carriying water)".

crisis; just as the peacock is heedful of the rain water from springs, so too the king should accept advice from the priests and ascetics.[10]

The most plausible hypothesis is that the peacock arrived in the royal parks of the Achaemenid Empire as a gift from Indian ambassadors from satrapies in the north-eastern regions of India controlled by the Achaemenids since the 6th century BC. Communication between the Persian empire's capitals and India are widely attested in travel tablets from the Persepolis Fortification Archive.[11] The route from Susa to India is mentioned in tablets PF 1383, 1556, and 2057, and reference is also made in tablets PF 1397, 1548, 1529, and 1572 to ambassadors travelling to India with a sealed royal document. The return journey from India to Susa is attested in tablet PF 1318, and tablets PF 1529, 1548 and 1552 speak of Indian ambassadors travelling to Susa with a sealed document, in some cases even giving their personal names: Abbatema in PF 1558 and 1317, Bakdadda in PF 1410, Karabba in PF 1397, and Hapizis in PF 1437. Others, such as the ambassadors mentioned in PF 1425, 1525, and 1601, are not named.[12] Little is known about the designation given to them in the Achaemenid Empire. Hinz, Koch, and Tuplin[13] have interpreted the Elamite word *basbas* in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets as "peacock": however, it is more probable that *bas-bas* comes from the Akkadian word *paspasu*, meaning "duck". Recently, Lincoln and Stolper[14] identified the existence of peacocks in the *parádeisoi* and proposed that their name in Elamite was (MUŠEN) *pirrašam*, which could be translated as "(bird) exalted, marvellous", as deduced from two Persepolis Fortification Tablets[15]. If this were the case, we would have a testimony in one of the languages of the Achaemenid Empire administration of a designation by ellipsis, which presupposes a periphrasis similar to the first designations of the peacock in India.

Consequently, the peacock's possible elliptical designation in Elamite associates the bird with the sacred nature of the Achaemenid rulers, transforming the peacock into a symbol of the marvels performed by Ahura Mazdā in heaven and, by analogy, those carried out by the king of kings in the material world, the maximum expression of which was the *parádeisos* where peacocks were reared: an orderly and balanced creation. Related to this explanation, Lincoln has proposed the hypothesis that the name for the peacock in ancient Persian would be a compound **fraša-murw*.[16]

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[10] *Mbh.* 12.120.1-9; cf. Stoneman 2019, 206.

[11] Hallock 1969; Briant 1991, 69.

[12] Giovinazzo 2000-2001.

[13] Hinz / Koch 1987, 125; Tuplin 1996, 108 n. 93.

[14] Lincoln 2012, 211; Stolper 2015, 14-21.

[15] Without ellipsis: Fort. 0013-101, Ro. 1 and 9: MUŠEN$^{MEŠ}$ *pír-ra-šá-um*. With ellipsis: Fort. 1372-102, Ro. 5, Vo. 26 *pír-ra-šá-um*.

[16] The designation of the peacock in modern Persian provides no clues, because *ṭāwus* is borrowed from the Arabic *tā'ūs*/*ṭāwūš*, which in turn is borrowed from the Greek ταώς via Aramaic; see Fraenkel 1886, 118; Krauss 1899, 257; Spies 1956, 202.

Apparently, the peacock arrived in Greece without a specific name. The Attic orator Antiphon wrote an entire speech on the birds around 419–413 BC, transmitted via the testimony of Athenaeus, in which he never mentions them by name but instead calls them "spangled birds" throughout[17]. Aristophanes uses the periphrasis "Persian bird", clarified by the scholiast[18]: peacocks numbered among the luxuries enjoyed by the Persian king, and according to Aristophanes they served as prized – and irresistible – gifts for the ephebes. In the testimony of the Suda, "Median bird"[19] seems to indicate a circumlocution prior to the entry of the loanword ταῶς. Centuries later, this periphrasis becomes more explicit when Clement of Alexandria speaks of the "Median peacock"[20]. All of these expressions stemmed from the Persian origin that the Greeks prior to Alexander attributed to the peacock, as we shall see.

According to Athenaeus, the grammarian Tryphon explained that the Athenians pronounced the word ταῶς, "peacock", with a circumflex accent and an intermediate aspiration, as attested by the Comic dramatists Eupolis and Aristophanes[21] in passages that I shall discuss below. This same anomaly is also confirmed by the grammarian Seleucus[22]. The grammarians were aware that this aspiration in the middle of the word violated a basic linguistic rule in Attic Greek and that it only existed in the second half of the fifth century BC. The only explanation for such a gross violation of the phonetic rules of Attic is that it was a loanword.[23]

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[17] Antiph. F. 57 Talheim *apud* Ath. 9.397b. More references to Antiphon's speech *Pros Erasistraton Peri ton Taon* in Ps.-Plut. *Vitae decem Oratorum, Moralia* 833D. On the date of this speech, see Dover 1950. On the context of this speech, see Cartledge 1990.

[18] Schol. Ar. *Av.* 707 D.: ὁ δὲ Περσικὸν ὄρνεον: Τὰ πολυτελῆ πάντα, οἷς μόνος βασιλεὺς ἐχρῆτο, ἐκαλεῖτο Περσικὰ, καὶ νῦν οὐκ ἰδίως τις ὄρνις Περσικός. τινὲς δὲ τὸν ἀλεκτρυόνα, οἱ δὲ τὸν ταῶ; see also Cratin. *PCG* 4, F 279. The reference in Ar. *Av.* 485 to a cock called the "Persian bird" that reigned over the Persians before Darius or Megabazus might also be a term for the peacock before consolidation of the loanword ταῶς. Cf. Bodson 2005, 455-456.

[19] Suda μ 884, τ 99: μηδικὸς ὄρνις· ὁ ταών.

[20] Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.4.30.1.

[21] Trypho grammaticus F. 5 Velsen *apud* Ath. 9.397e: ταῶς δὲ λέγουσιν Ἀθηναῖοι, ὥς φησι Τρύφων, τὴν τελευταίαν συλλαβὴν περισπῶντες καὶ δασύνοντες.

[22] Seleuc. F. 70 Müller *apud* Ath. 9.398a: Σέλευκος δ' ἐν τῷ πέμπτῳ περὶ Ἑλληνισμοῦ: «ταῶς: παραλόγως δ' οἱ Ἀττικοὶ καὶ δασύνουσι καὶ περισπῶσι. On the intermediate aspiration, cf. Schwyzer 1939, 219.

[23] From an unidentified oriental language, cf. Chantraine 1968-1980, 1098; Beekes 2010, 1457. Frisk 1960-1972, 862, has posited that the source of the Greek ταῶς is an unknown oriental language, but may have been borrowed from the Tamil **tōkai*, "peacock". The problem with this hypothesis is that the material and linguistic culture of India to the east of the Thar Desert was unknown to the inhabitants of the Achaemenid Empire, cf. Karttunen 1989, 7, and therefore to the Greeks, whose assimilation into their culture of material elements from India depended on the transmission of these from the Achaemenid Empire. Brust 2005, 646-648 has proposed two terms from ancient Indian as possible sources of the loan, via a semantic extension and the loss of either a medial yod: *tāyú-* "thief", or a medial waw: *tā́vant-* "so great", to explain the intermediate aspiration in Attic.

Aelian clearly states that the peacock was brought to Greece by the barbarian Medes and Persians, and resembles them in its colourful attire and presumptuous arrogance[24]. A series of testimonies suggests that the Greeks believed that the peacock's natural habitat was the parks of the Achaemenid kings[25]. In fact, Ctesias, who is a useful source since he saw the gifts that the Indian princes gave to the Achaemenid kings, knew of the peacock, which he compares to a large pheasant from India[26], the male Himalayan monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*), but says nothing about its Indian origin, suggesting that like his Greek peers, he assumed it was of Persian origin.

Since the peacock was a symbol of the Persian world and was associated with the Achaemenid monarchy, it arrived in Greece – and subsequently in Rome – laden with all kinds of connotations. The first and perhaps most obvious of these was that the peacock was a demonstration of wealth: rearing peacocks in captivity as the Achaemenids did in their royal parks required both guards and gardeners, as Aelian notes[27]. Furthermore, he continues, in fifth century BC Athens, each bird was worth ten thousand drachmas, according to Antiphon in his speech against Erasistratus. Many of the testimonies to its high price come from the fragments of Attic comedies transmitted by Athenaeus[28]; such is the case of Alexis, who hyperbolically compares the price of peacocks to the non-existent milk of the hare, or Anaxandrides, who says that the cost of raising peacocks at home is equivalent to that of buying two statues. However, their exorbitant price merely converted peacocks into an object of desire and as Antiphanes observed, their numbers steadily increased. They were even reared for the sole purpose of obtaining their feathers to make fans, a practice ridiculed by Strattis.

Besides its connotations of wealth, the peacock was also suspected – not without foundation – of being an indication of medism, because the first peacocks to arrive in Attica came as a very special gift from the Achaemenid kings to the Athenian ambassadors at the court of Susa,[29] prompting the populace to associate the birds with bribery by the Persian enemy. This association between the peacock and medism is clearly evident in Aristophanes' *Acharnians,* when Dikaiopolis, who

[24] Ael. *NA* 5.21.

[25] In particular Diod. 2.53.2. On the *parádeisoi* of the Achaemenid kings and satraps and the Greeks' knowledge of them, see Tuplin 1996, 80-131; Lincoln 2003; Álvarez-Pedrosa 2015; Panaino 2016.

[26] Ctes. fr. F45bβ *apud* Ael. *NA* 16.2. Ctesias was convinced that animals from India were larger than those from the rest of the world, as was Herodotus (Hdt. 3.106), cf. Lenfant 1995.

[27] Ael. *NA* 5.21.

[28] Alex. *PCG* 2, F. 128; Anaxandr. *PCG* 2, F. 29; Antiph. *PCG* 2, F. 203; Stratt. *PCG* 7, F. 28; all these citations *apud* Ath. 14.654d-655a.

[29] Miller 1997, 129. Although Medism was the accusation of collaborating with the Persian enemies and therefore committing treason, sometimes the mere imitation of Persian customs and practices was defined as Medism, for example, when Pausanias or Alcibiades were accused of dressing in the Persian way, it was understood that they collaborated with the Persians (Thuc. 1.130.1; Athen. 535e), cf. Graf 1984, Tuplin 1997.

represents the common sense of the average Athenian citizen, accuses the ambassadors arriving from Susa bearing gifts – including peacocks – from the King of Kings of being corrupted by Persian gold[30].

Aristophanes alludes to the association between the peacock and barbarism in *Birds* 102, when Euelpides asks the Hoopoe if it is a peacock and the Hoopoe replies that it is a bird, but the text is expanded in Athenaeus 9.397b with a second question for emphasis: "But what is it? Isn't it, in effect, a peacock?"[31]. Given that the Hoopoe is Tereus, a mythical king of Thrace and the archetype of a brutal barbarian and rapist, the double meaning of the question is clear.

Aristophanes' allusion to the Athenian ambassadors who bring peacocks as gifts from the Achaemenid royal court probably refers to Pyrilampes[32], Plato's stepfather, who served as ambassador to Artaxerxes I, together with Callias, and returned in 449 BC bearing gifts including peacocks from the Persian king. To deflect accusations of medism, his son Demus exhibited the home-reared peacocks for a fee on the first day of every month,[33] thereby distracting attention from the much more dangerous accusation by inviting less menacing social censure for his ostentatious display of wealth. Visitors came from as far afield as Thessaly and Sparta to view his peacocks.

Due to its connotations of wealth and connection with the Persians, the peacock rapidly became associated with the idea of corruption. Plutarch[34] records the rumour that Pyrilampes bribed women with peacocks to sleep with his close friend Pericles[35]. We have already seen that Aristophanes[36] describes the peacock as a gift that no ephebe could resist.

A Persian origin of the peacock would also explain the main psychological trait that the classical authors associated with these birds: vanity, comparable to that of their owners and the environment in which they were raised. Thus, Aristotle defines them as envious and presumptuous[37], while other authors

[30] Ar. *Ach*. 62-63.

[31] Ar. *Av*. 102 *apud* Ath. 9.397b: Τηρεὺς γὰρ εἶ σύ; πότερον ὄρνις ἢ ταῶς; καὶ πάλιν ὄρνις δῆτα. τίς ποτ᾽ ἐστίν; οὐ δήπου ταῶς.

[32] Davies 1971, 330; Hofstetter 1978, 159-60; Miller 1989; Miller 1997, 190; Bivar 1998, 69-71; Bodson 1998, 78-91. However, Steier 1938, 1415-1416 suggests that peacocks were introduced into Athens by Pericles following a trip to Samos, where they had also arrived as a gift from the Achaemenid kings, as we shall see later. Miller 1989, 2 argues that the peacock arrived first in Athens; however, it is possible that it arrived in both Samos and Athens as gifts from the Achaemenid kings independently and under different circumstances.

[33] Antiph. F. 57 Thalheim *apud* Ath. 9.397b. The monthly visit to Demus' house, which coincided with the new moon, a time dedicated to Hera, has served Roscher 1898; Hehn 1911, 357 and Steier 1938, 1416 as grounds to argue that the peacock came to Athens from Samos.

[34] Plut. *Per*. 13.9-10.

[35] Cartledge 1990.

[36] Ar. *Av.* 707.

[37] Arist. *Hist. An.* 488b23-4.

attribute the peacock's vanity to its awareness of its own beauty, for example in Aelian's chapter on the peacock[38], or Ovid's mention of it[39]: if it realizes it is being admired, it spreads its feathers, but if it is watched in silence, it folds them. Philostratus likened the peacock to Paris because they both shared the same self-love[40]. Hence, it is very probable that the characteristic psychological trait of vanity associated with the peacock's original owners, the Persian kings[41], was extended to the birds that formed the jewel in their parks. In his description of the scene of Themistocles before Artaxerxes I, the aforementioned Philostratus[42] explicitly compares the Achaemenid king's pride sat on his throne with the peacock spreading its feathers.

The above connotations all associate the peacock with political aspects: wealth, suspicions of medism, and bribery, and all have negative overtones, probably reflecting the widespread view of Persians and all things Persian in fifth century BC Athens. However, around the same time, in his play *Astrateutoi* (i.e. people exempt from military service), the Comic dramatist Eupolis[43] says the following: "Lest I ever keep a peacock of this kind in the house of Persephone, which wakes all the sleepers". Although brief, it is clear from this fragment that the peacock symbolizes the resurrection of the dead; however, the details of how such resurrection might occur remain obscure due to the absence of context. This is the first written testimony indicating that the peacock had already acquired a symbolic dimension of an eschatological nature.

There is also an interesting iconographic testimony indicating this transformation of the bird into an eschatological symbol. The only image from Athens of a peacock dated to the fifth century BC (albeit with reservations) appears on a sardonyx seal from the Blacas collection held at the British Museum.[44] It depicts a peacock from the front with its tail feathers spread out over two coiled serpents, one of which is bearded. It is difficult to know whether the gem is of oriental origin, and if this were so, whether it was obtained through war, diplomacy, or trade; or if, conversely, it was made in Athens. Regardless of the above, it attests to an association between the peacock and chthonic animals, over which it is shown triumphant. Consequently, it could be interpreted as evidence that the peacock had become a symbol of victory over death in Athens.

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[38] Ael. *NA* 5.21.

[39] Ov. *Ars am*. 1.627-628.

[40] Philostr. *Her.* 724.

[41] The idea of the Persian kings as proud and arrogant had already appeared in Aeschylus' *The Persians* and is a commonplace in Herodotus, cf. Gammie 1986; Hutzfeld 1999; Harrison 2001.

[42] Philostr. *Imag.* 2.31.

[43] Eup. *PCG* 5 F. 41 *apud* Ath. 9.397b: Εὔπολις δ' ἐν Ἀστρατεύτοις φησὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ οὕτως· μή ποτε θρέψω παρὰ Φερσεφόνῃ τοιόνδε ταῶν, ὃς τοὺς εὕδοντας ἐγείρει.

[44] British Museum catalogue no. 1867,0507.20; cf. Miller 1989, 2-3, with bibliography.

**Fig. 1. Attic scaraboid, 5th century BC. British Museum; catalog no. 1867,0507.20.**

As with the political symbols, this process of symbolization is related to the Persian origin that the Athenians attributed to the peacock. Ever since their first contact with the Achaemenid Empire following the conquest of Ionia, the Greeks firmly believed that Iranian priests, the magi, had privileged knowledge about the afterlife. Such knowledge could be characterized negatively as unholy, as something that humans should not know: it is thus that one could interpret a fragment from Heraclitus[45] in which he states that the magi are initiated into the unholy mysteries of men. The magi's beliefs concerning the afterlife and more specifically, resurrection, became increasingly better known in Greece once contact between the cultures intensified, despite (or due to) wars and diplomatic missions. According to Diogenes Laertius[46], the eighth book of the fourth century BC historian Theopompus' *Philippica* summarized the Iranian eschatological doctrine of resurrection and eternal life for all creation thanks to the magi's ritual invocations. It seems that the subject also interested Aristotle's most important disciple, Eudemus of Rhodes, according to the same source. These sources indicate that to a greater or lesser extent, the Greeks knew about the Iranian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Nonetheless, what is important is the association between the signifier, in this case, the peacock, and the signified, the resurrection of the dead: a symbolic association that arose as a result of the Greeks' belief in the peacock's Persian provenance.

[45] Heraclit. F. B14 *apud* Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.22.2: τὰ γὰρ νομιζόμενα κατ᾽ ἀνθρώπους μυστήρια ἀνιερωστὶ μυεῖται.

[46] Diog. Laert. 1.8-9.

Peacocks were introduced into Greece not only via Athens, brought by the ambassadors to the court of Susa, but also, and relatively early on, via the island of Samos, probably as a result of the tyrant Polycrates' alliance with Cambyses, established in order to defeat Amasis with the help of the Samos fleet, although Polycrates suffered a tragic end, crucified by order of the satrap Oroetus[47]. Persia exerted a marked cultural influence on Samos during the tyranny of Polycrates. For example, we know that he ordered the construction of his own *parádeisos* in imitation of those of the Persian satrap on Sardis[48], and he also rebuilt the great temple for the tutelary goddess of Samos, the Heraion, as part of a massive programme to construct distinctly propagandistic public buildings[49]. It was possibly at this point in time when peacocks arrived as gifts from of the Achaemenid Empire[50]; what we know for certain, thanks to the testimony of Menodotus of Samos transmitted by Athenaeus[51], is that the peacocks were dedicated to Hera and that Samos was the first place in Greece where peacocks were raised and exported to other parts of the West. We also know from Varro that the peacocks were kept in captivity in the sacred park beside the Heraion[52], and according to Antiphanes, they were soon considered symbols of the goddess Hera[53], and by extension, of the entire island of Samos. Hence, as Athenaeus notes[54], they were depicted on the island's coins.

A second association of ideas then emerged in the process of symbolization of the peacock. Besides becoming a symbol of the island of Samos, the peacock also began to be associated with the island's most famous son, Pythagoras. Since one of Pythagoras' most well-known doctrinal ideas was his theory of the transmigration of souls, a notion that the Greeks and Romans suspected he had encountered on his travels (real or legendary) in the East, the peacock acquired a new connotation, becoming a symbol of reincarnation.

Many years later, the Greeks discovered that peacocks came from India when Alexander the Great and his army saw them with their own eyes in their natural habitat. Quintus Curtius[55] gives a detailed account of how Alexander, on reaching the Hiarotis River (now the Ravi), saw a large number of wild peacocks. According to Aelian[56], Alexander was so impressed by the beauty of these birds in their native

[47] Hdt. 3.125; Str. 14.1.16 ; Cic. *Fin*. 5.92; Val. Max 6.9 extr. 5.

[48] Clearchus of Soli *DSA* 3 F. 44 Wehrli, *apud* Ath. 12.540f, cf. Miller 1997, 188.

[49] Hdt. 3.125, 7.121., cf. Morgan 2016, 104-105.

[50] On the importation of luxury items into Samos, see Clytus *FGH* 490 F. 2 *apud* Ath. 12.540c. and Shipley 1987, 82-83.

[51] Menodot. Sam. *FGH* 541 F 2, *apud* Ath. 14.655a.

[52] Varro *Rust.* 3.6.2.

[53] Antiph. *PCG* 2, F. 203, *apud* Ath. 14.655a.

[54] Ath. 14.655a: διόπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ νομίσματος τῶν Σαμίων ταῶς ἐστιν, cf. Barron 1966, 5, 6, 146-147.

[55] Curt. 9.1.13.

[56] Ael. *NA* 5.21.

woods that he forbade his soldiers to hunt them on pain of the most serious punishments. However, the peacock had already become an eschatological symbol by Alexander's time, and his prohibition was more probably due to a feeling of reverence.

Following Alexander's contact with India and the resultant better knowledge about the subcontinent, classical authors such as Lucian[57] correctly identified the Indian provenance of the peacock, while Aelian[58] notes that peacocks are bred in captivity in the trees of India's royal parks and cared for by the gardeners, and observes that peacocks are among the most highly valued adornments in these royal gardens, which are as good as any of the Persian kings' royal parks. The famous procession organized by Ptolemy II Philadelphus around 285 BC, which re-enacted scenes from Alexander's expedition to India, included a parade of peacocks, among other wonders[59]. Peacocks thus become another of the marvels from India, a place seen as an inexhaustible source of natural wonders.

The peacock was introduced into Rome fairly early on, since it is mentioned by Ennius in a fragment[60] that I shall discuss in detail below. Consequently, the peacock was already known in Rome at the beginning of the second century BC, and had a name: *pāuō*, an *-n* stem that alternated since antiquity with the thematic inflection *pāuus*[61]; since antiquity, the feminine was *pāua*.

The first historic testimony of the peacock's arrival in Rome is more interesting due to its religious implications. In a small fragment by Ennius[62], he says that he remembers a previous life in which his soul inhabited the body of a peacock. This memory almost certainly occurs during a dream in which Homer reveals to him all of his previous incarnations, as recounted by Tertullian[63], which has made it possible to include this fragment in the introduction of the *Annales*. The dream took place on Parnassus according to the scholiast on Persius[64]. This latter poet made much use of Ennius' dream, because he also recounts almost the entire sequence of reincarnations that occurred up until Ennius[65], only omitting his time as Euphorbus. As the scholi-

[57] Luc. *Nav*. 23.

[58] Ael. *NA* 13.18. Aelian's source may have been Megasthenes; see Stoneman 2019, 171; Megasthenes was probably describing the royal parks of King Ashoka, who consciously desired to imitate the luxury of the Achaemenid *paradeisoi*.

[59] Callixenus of Rhodes, who was probably an eye witness, gave a detailed account of the procession; the text has been lost but is transmitted in Ath. 5.197d-203b.; cf. Rice 1983. The reference to peacocks is in Ath. 5.201b.

[60] Enn. *Ann.* 1.13.

[61] Ernout / Meillet 2001, 490 have proposed an onomatopoeic origin related to *paupulō* "screech like the peacock", although the verb appears to be a derivative of *pāuō* rather than the other way round.

[62] Enn. *Ann.* 1.13 (Warmington): *memini me fiere pavum*.

[63] Tert. *De anim.* 33.8. Homer's appearance to Ennius in dreams is also recorded by Cic. *Ac.* 2.51 and Lucr. 1.124-126.

[64] Schol. Pers. prol. 2: *Tangit autem Ennium, qui dixit se vidisse per somnium in Parnaso Homerum sibi dicentem, quod eius anima in suo esset corpore*.

[65] Pers. 6.9-10.

ast notes[66], Pythagoras' soul transmigrated into a peacock, which was reincarnated as Euphorbus, this latter as Homer, and finally the soul of Homer was reborn in the poet Ennius. Thus, including the peacock there were five reincarnations, of which the poet Ennius, whose praenomen was Quintus, was the fifth. As a result, Horace[67] ironically calls Ennius the "second Homer", criticizing his frivolous Pythagoreanism. Consequently, when the peacock arrived in Rome in the early second century BC, it was already a symbol of the reincarnation of souls, associated with Pythagorean doctrines that were well known in Southern Italy, the birthplace of the poet Ennius[68].

In parallel, as in Athens, the peacock rapidly became associated with extravagant luxury, commanding extremely high prices in Rome: the plebeian magistrate, Aufidius Lurco, earnt as much as 60,000 sestertii a year from the sale of peacocks from his flock[69], a genuine fortune. According to Varro, eggs were sold at five denarii each, and each peacock could sell for up to fifty denarii[70]. It was also in Rome where peacocks were first served at dinner: to celebrate his appointment as augur, Quintus Hortensius Hortalus slaughtered a peacock to serve at the banquet[71]. According to Varro, this act was praised by lovers of luxury and censored by more austere people[72]. However, a possible religious meaning to this sacrifice of a peacock for Hortensius' feast should not be ruled out since the meal was held to celebrate his appointment to a religious role.

Representations of the peacock were numerous in Rome and the Roman Empire. Many depicted the bird in situations aimed at highlighting its beauty, but it was also shown in association with the Greek goddess Hera, the Roman goddess Juno and the Argus metamorphosis myth[73]. Juno was associated with the role of empress, as a reflection of the divine couple Jupiter and Juno, and consequently the peacock was depicted on the reverse side of coins during the reign of several empresses of the second and third centuries AD, specifically, Domitia, wife of Domitian; Faustina the Elder, wife of Antoninus Pius; Faustina the Younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius; and Egnatia Mariniana, wife of Valerian[74].

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[66] Schol. Pers. 6.10: *Sic Ennius ait in annalium suorum principio, ubi dicit se vidisse in somnis Homerum dicentem fuisse quondam pavonem, et ex eo translatam in se animam esse, secundum Pythagorae philosophi definitionem, qui dicet animas humanas per* παλιγγενεσίαν, *id est per iteratam generationem, exeuntes de corporibus in alia posse corpora introire. Ideo "quintus" dixit, propter eam opinionem quae dicit animam Pythagorae in pavonem translatam, de pavone vero ad Euphorbum, de Euphorbo ad Homerum, de Homero autem ad Ennium.*

[67] Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.50. Horace's passage is explained by Porph. Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.50.

[68] On the use of Pythagorean themes by Ennius, cf. Flores 2000, 511-512. On Ennius' southern Italian origins, cf. the famous quote by Gell. 17.17.1 on the poet with "three hearts", in allusion to Ennius' trilingual heritage.

[69] Varro *Rust.* 3.6.1; Plin. *HN* 10.24.

[70] Varro *Rust.* 3.6.6.

[71] Ael. *NA* 5.21; Plin. *HN* 10.24.

[72] Varro *Rust.* 3.6.6.

[73] Ov. *Met.* 1.719-721.

[74] *RIC* II, 179-180, Pl. XII, 212; *RIC* III, 66-77, 157-170, 190-194, Pl. III, 64; *RIC* V/1, 64-65, Pl. I, 11, 12, 13.

Interestingly, peacocks were also frequently depicted in funerary contexts, undoubtedly because they had become an eschatological symbol. However, we have seen that the peacock was associated with two distinct eschatological beliefs: reincarnation and the resurrection of the dead. Thus, for example, the two bronze peacocks that adorned the Mausoleum of Hadrian and were subsequently moved to the courtyard of the Pigna in the Vatican[75] have been decontextualized, and it is therefore not possible to determine which of the two beliefs they represented.

These ideas were accompanied by legends in which the peacock was a long-lived and mysterious animal. Although Aristotle[76] and Pliny the Elder[77] say that it lives for about twenty-five years (in fact, in the wild, it lives for about fifteen years), Aelian[78] recounts a legend in which a peacock kept at an Egyptian temple escaped from sacrilegious pursuit and subsequently lived for a hundred years before disappearing. The story is suspiciously similar to that of the phoenix[79], but illustrates the extent to which the peacock had already become associated with the notion of eternal life and immortality.

Other instances, such as the numerous representations of the peacock in Christian catacombs, clearly indicate that it symbolized the resurrection of the body because this was the Christian teaching on the destiny of believers. A similar symbolic value can be assumed in the case of the Vigna Randanini Jewish catacombs, where a peacock also appears[80]. In both cases, there is no break with the pagan iconographic tradition but rather a specialization of meaning, although Christian iconography is frequently found in association with other symbolic elements of early Christian art, such as the *kantharoi* that symbolized the water of baptism, the unfading crown, or the chrismon. The iconographic context in which peacocks appear, with images of gardens, plants, and other birds, seems to suggest representations of paradise inhabited by the souls of the blessed. Such depictions are common in pagan, Christian, and Jewish representations, and it seems clear that these complex scenes with peacocks were intended to underscore the symbolic nature of the bird and provide a context that would facilitate interpretation by the beholder[81].

Until St. Augustine, Christian authors had little to say about the symbolic value of the peacock. Even then, the bishop of Hippo's explanation of the symbol was not entirely clear, because he explains that God endowed the peacock's flesh with

[75] Vatican Museums, Cat. 5117, 5120; cf. Mercalli1998, 149-150.

[76] Arist. *Hist. An.* 564a31.

[77] Plin. *NH* 10.22.

[78] Ael. *NA* 11.33.

[79] Hdt. 2.73; Tac. *Ann.* 6.28; Mart. *Epigr.* 5.7.1-14; Ov. *Met.* 15.392; Plin. *NH*. 10.2.2; Clem. Rom. *1Cor.* 1.25.

[80] On the symbolic value of the peacock in Jewish iconography in antiquity, see Goodenough 1959, 60-67. For its symbolic value in early Christianity, see Leclercq 1937; Ferguson 1971, 23; Anđelkovic / Rogic / Nikolic 2010.

[81] Keel 1992, 272.

the property of incorruptibility, and that he himself had personally confirmed this experimentally when, after a dinner in Carthage where he was offered a roast peacock, he saved a piece of breast that remained unaltered for one year[82]. This naturalistic explanation was an attempt to lend weight to the peacock's symbolic value, albeit incorruptibility is not the same as resurrection. Nevertheless, it establishes a point of connection - the incorruptible nature of the peacock's flesh - between the signifier, the peacock, and the signified, the resurrection of the dead, based on the natural sciences and experimentation.

There is an interesting iconographic element parallel in both time and space to St. Augustine's explanation: if the epitaph of the bishop Cresconius of Cuicul preserved in a spectacular mosaic held in the museum of Djemila (Algeria) refers to the bishop Cresconius who participated in the Council of Carthage in 411, then we would have an explicit iconographic context in which two peacocks, associated with the alpha and the omega and surrounded by other birds from the garden of Paradise, are flanked by a text which clearly mentions belief in the resurrection[83]. However, other more recent studies[84] have proposed a much later fifth or sixth century date for the mosaic.

In sum, I have tried to explain how the process of adaptation of an expensive and exotic animal was accompanied by varied symbolic connotations. The peacock arrived in Greece and Rome as a luxury item, so it is easy to explain that it was associated with the excessive desire to exhibit economic power by its owners. It is also easy to understand that its exorbitant price was quickly linked with political corruption. But it is not so easy to understand that he acquired a religious connotation so soon. Usually, explanations that can be read about the peacock's eschatological value use the cited St. Augustine passage in which he explains that his flesh is incorruptible. However, we have tried to show that the peacock's cultural journey through the Classic World was long and complex: St. Augustine is only the final step.

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[82] August. *De civ. D.* 21, 4.

[83] *AE* 1922, 25; a metrical and literary analysis in Rae 1991, 203-206. The first to identify the dedicant of the mosaic in the basilica of Cuicul as the bishop Cresconius who attended the council of 411 was Monceaux 1922, 406-407.

[84] Reported by Rae 1991, 292. These dates are based on the style of the mosaic, which conforms more to the sixth century, and a bishop Cresconius is attested to who participated in a Council of Constantinople in the sixth century.

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## Abstract

The Greeks knew of the peacock in the classical period from the Achaemenid Empire, a world in which it was associated with the monarchy and was reared in royal parks in the empire's capital cities. Peacocks were introduced into Greece via two routes, and this influenced the different symbolic values attributed to the bird. On the one hand, it arrived in Athens as a personal gift from Artaxerxes I to the ambassadors who had led a diplomatic mission to the Achaemenid courts. Here, due

to the price they commanded, peacocks rapidly became associated with ostentatious extravagance, political corruption, and the suspicion of medism. However, because the Athenians also attributed Iranian priests with privileged knowledge of the afterlife and the rituals associated with individual eschatology, the peacock also became associated with the destiny of man after death. The other place where the peacock was introduced was the island of Samos. Here, it quickly became associated with the island's most famous son, Pythagoras, and consequently with his doctrine of reincarnation. As a symbol of reincarnation the peacock arrived in Rome. Subsequently, in the Imperial Roman period, pagans, Jews, and Christians alike adopted the peacock as a symbol of belief in a life hereafter.