The Peacock as the Bird of Paradise: A Comparative Study

ABSTRACT. In India the peacock was domesticated and exported to Sumer as early as the era of the Indus Valley Civilization. Funerary urns of the “Late Harappan” Cemetery H culture reveal mythological ideas associated with peacocks: their role was to conduct souls to the other world. The peacock’s ability to kill and eat serpents and yet be immune to their poison gave rise to its link with immortality and rebirth. The pre-Aryan mythology of the peacock was passed down to the archaic worldview of early Indo-Aryans. The spread of soteriological religions that gave the highest value to the cessation of any rebirth relegated the image of the peacock as a psychopomp to India’s cultural margins. In Indian Classical poetry, the connection between peacocks and the rainy season comes to the fore, the peacock’s “dance” being associated with the renewal of life, fertility and the seasonal awakening of sexual desire. In Viṣṇuism, the peacock is a constant witness to Kṛiṣhṇa’s love games and it is present both in Gokula, the heavenly paradise, and in Vṛndāvana, the earthly one. In the middle of the 1st millennium BC, peacocks traveled to Greece via Persia and later to Rome. The mythology of the peacock that took shape in ancient Greece and Rome shared basic motifs with Indian archaic mythology. The peacock became a sacred bird linked with metempsychosis ideas and the soul’s immortality. In the Roman Empire, a peacock was the bird of the Empress, while the eagle was a symbol of the Emperor. After the Empress’ death a peacock was thought to carry her up to heaven. Christianity turned the image of the peacock into an important symbol linked with the immortality of the soul, resurrection, the mystery of communion and bliss in paradise. The article seeks to identify factors that might have contributed to forming similar peacock mythologies in distant world regions where direct borrowing can be ruled out.

KEYWORDS: peacock, Psychopomp, paradise, Indian mythology, comparative mythology

Павлин как райская птица: сравнительное исследование

АННОТАЦИЯ. В Индии павлин был одомашнен и экспортировался в Шумер еще в эпоху цивилизации долины Инда. Погребальные урны позднехараппской «культуры могильника эйч» раскрывают мифологические представления, связанные с павлинами: они изображены уносящими в иной мир души умерших. Способность павлина убивать и посещать змеи, будучи невосприимчивым к их яду, породила символическую связь павлина с бессмертием и возрождением. Доарийская мифология павлина перешла в архаическое мировоззрение ранних индоарийцев. Распространение сотериологических религий, утверждавших в качестве высшей ценности прекращение всяких рождений, отодвинуло образ павлина как психопомпа на периферию индийской культуры. В индийской классической поэзии на первый план выходит связь между павлинами и сезоном дождей и «танец» павлина ассоциируется с обновлением жизни, плодородием и «сезонным» пробуждением сексуального влечения. В вишнуизме павлин является постоянным свидетелем любовых игр Кришны и присутствует как в Гокуле, небесном рае, так и во Вриндаване, земном. В середине I тысячелетия до н. э. павлины попали в Грецию через Персию, а затем в Рим. Мифология павлина, сформировавшаяся в Древней Греции и Риме, имела общие мотивы с представлениями индийской архаики. Павлин стал священной птицей, связанной с идеями метемпсихоза и бессмертия души. В Римской империи павлин был птицей императрицы, а орел — символом императора. Считалось, что после смерти императрицы павлин возносит ее на небо. Христианство превратило образ павлина в важный символ, связанный с бессмертием души, воскресением, таинством причастия и блаженством в раю. В статье предпринята попытка выявить факторы, которые могли способствовать формированию аналогичных мифологий павлина в отдаленных регионах мира, где прямое заимствование можно считать исключенным.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: павлин, психопomp, рай, индийская мифология, сравнительная мифология

On February 1, 1963, the Government of India declared the peacock a national bird of the country. There was a precedent in early Indian history: the peacock was a symbol of the Maurya dynasty that established the first pan-Indian empire. The name of the dynasty itself — Maurya — derived from the Prakrit and Sanskrit word mora meaning “peacock.” The Indian peacock, Pavo cristatus (crested), originally inhabited forests, but it was in constant danger from predators (tigers, wild dogs, etc.), which is why peafowls now tend to live in the vicinity of villages where they can feed on grain, beans and young shoots in cultivated fields. Peasants usually tolerated the damage to the fields and even protected these birds from violence on the part of foreigners: Alexander the Great forbade his men to kill peacocks (Karttunen 1997: 207), and much later, “many troubles between villagers and English soldiers out shooting arose from the ignorance of the latter of the veneration in which peacocks are held” (Kipling 1904: 41).

The peacock has enjoyed the status of a sacred bird over millennia of Indian history, but it has changed over time, becoming sometimes higher, sometimes lower. We shall try in this article to trace the evolution of the peacock’s significance and to describe changes in mythological associations connected with the bird. The earliest images of peacocks are found in the rock paintings of the Bhimbetka complex (Madhya Pradesh state, Central India). They demonstrate that in the Neolithic era and later periods, people used peacock feathers for decoration, arrow making, etc. The image of a man pulling a feather from a peacock’s tail (fig. 1) is particularly noteworthy. Elsewhere we see a hunter with his bow aiming at a peacock sitting on the branch of a tree (Mathpal 1984: 20).

There are no images of peacocks on seals from the Indus civilization. Still, there are several small terracotta figurines and almost incredibly, we can derive some information about peacocks in the Indus civilization from a written source. It is a Sumerian mythological epic, “Enki and the World Order,” written in 1800–1600 BC, but reflecting the reality of a much earlier period, around the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE, when Mesopotamia was engaged in intensive trade with the Indus civilization (Meluhha). In this text, the god Enki first addresses the countries of Mesopotamia, Sumer and Ur, then gives them his blessing and decrees their fate. Afterwards, he addresses the land of Meluhha, i.e., India, and decrees its fate, saying: “Black land, may your trees be great trees, may your forests be forests of highland mes trees! Chairs made from them will grace royal palaces! <…> May your bulls be great bulls, may they be bulls of the mountains! <…> May your birds all be peacocks [haya]! May their cries grace royal palaces!” (Enki and the World Order 1999; Maekawa and Mori 2011: 262; Parpola 2015: 217). Various kinds of wood from the foothills of the Himalayas, wooden furniture and Indian humped bulls (zebu) were among the main imports from Meluhha to Sumer; peacocks, as we shall discover, were also an important trade item. We may
also conclude that in the 3rd mill. BCE, the peacock adorned royal palaces and gardens in Sumer and probably in India.

The earliest information on mythological ideas connected with the peacock comes from paintings on mortuary urns from the “Late Harappan” Cemetery H Culture (1900–1300 BC). Here we find images of peacocks; in one case, they are depicted as flying among the stars (Vats 1940, plate LXII 2, 3, 6). Small human figures are lying inside their bodies in a horizontal position (fig. 2). Specialists agree that the peacocks represented here are psychopomps, i.e., conductors of souls to the other world (Vats 1975: 207; Kadgaonkar 1993: 96; Mallory, Adams 1997: 102; Parpola 2015: 119).

How did the peacock become linked with ideas of the heavenly world, new birth, or immortality? The peacock’s unique characteristic is that it can fight and eat snakes, and is believed to be immune to their poison. Ancient inhabitants of India were strongly impressed by this ability. On a ceramic vessel of the chalcolithic Navdatoli culture in Central India (Sankalia 1971: 183, fig. 7) a peacock is depicted holding a snake in its beak (fig. 3). The ability of peacocks to kill snakes was one reason why they were kept in royal gardens and parks over five millennia of Indian history.

This idea of the peacock as accompanying the souls of the dead survived among Dravidian-speaking tribes in India (Maria Gonds and Khonds) until

The concept of the peacock as a psychopomp was borrowed from the Dravidians by the archaic culture of the Indo-Aryans. However in the Rigveda, which was created by the social group of priests, the peacock is mentioned only twice, as a measure of beauty: the horses of the god Indra are *mayūra-roman* “whose hair is (like) a peacock’s” (RV 3. 45.1) and *mayūra-śepya* “those with peacock tails” (RV 8.1.25). The Vedic Aryans also took from the non-Aryan population the knowledge that peafowls can provide protection against snake venom. In a charm from the Atharvaveda (AV 7. 58.7) and in a hymn from a later section of the Rigveda that is also a charm against the poison of snakes and insects (RV 1. 191.14), requests for protection are addressed not to peacocks but to peahens:

The three-times-seven peahens,
The seven spinster sisters,
These have carried away your poison,
Like women with jugs (carrying) water
(Rigveda 2014: 398).

Ants eat you,
Peahens tear you to pieces.
Will you all say at last:
“Śarkoṭa’s poisoning is (now) sapless”
(Atharva-veda Sāṁhitā 1905: 426, modified).

In Vedic ritualistic texts (*sāṁhitās* of the Yajurveda), the peacock is mentioned in the list of animal victims killed in the *aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice). Later, in the Āpastamba-dharmasūtra, a peacock appears among valuable animals of more or less high status, such as the cow and the bull, a goose (*haṃsa*), a mongoose, a dog, and others; the punishment for killing one was the same as the punishment for the murder of a śūdra (man of the fourth or lowest estate). The penalty was the same for other animals if an ox-load of them had been killed (Āpastamba-dharmasūtra 1.9.25.14; 1.9.26.2). It seems that in the texts of the Vedic tradition, the peacock is never connected with the heavenly world or immortality.

However, in the Mahābhārata epic that originated in a warrior milieu, the archaic view of the peacock lived on. In this epic, the bird retained a sacred status. The practice of using peacocks and cows as sacrificial victims was here banned altogether, and the peacock was still considered a psychopomp. According to the epic, ordinary people after death were taken to the abode

---

1 Śarkoṭa — a snake or a scorpion.
Fig. 2. Images of peacocks on a mortuary urn of the Cemetery H culture. In M. S. Vats, Excavations at Harappā (Vats 1940)

Fig. 3. A peacock holding a snake in its beak. Painting on a ceramic vessel. Navdatoli culture. In H.D. Sankalia, Chalcolithic Navdatoli (Sankalia 1971)
of Yama, the god of death, by his terrible messengers. Still, those who practiced the popular, non-Vedic forms of asceticism, such as strict fasting or pilgrimages to sacred fords, were taken after death to the heavenly world by sacred birds: wild geese (*hamsa*) and peacocks (*Mbh 3.83.29; 13.110.14; see also: Hopkins 1915: 109).

In early Indian society peacocks had the status of sacred birds. However, in the same period kings enjoyed the unique privilege of being allowed to eat peacock meat. The motivation for this was twofold. In traditional Indian medicine peacock meat was used as a remedy or prophylactic against poison (Karttunen 1989: 169). Eating peacocks was also motivated by the ancient belief in some connection between the peacock and immortality. In one (no. 491) of the Jātakas, stories of previous incarnations of the Buddha, a king learns that a miraculous golden peacock inhabits a forest in his kingdom. He orders this peacock to be caught, and is about to eat it, because, as he says, whoever eats a peacock obtains eternal youth and immortality.

Buddhism and Jainism introduced and promoted the idea of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) in India. It is the Buddhist emperor Aśoka who deserves credit for restricting the slaughter of peacocks and its gradual abolition. His First Rock Edict (at Shahbazgarhi) declares: “Here not a single living creature should be slaughtered and sacrificed. <…> Formerly at the kitchen of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, many hundred thousands of living creatures were slaughtered daily <…> But now at the time this religious edict is being inscribed, only three creatures are slaughtered, two peacocks and one deer <…> Even these three living creatures afterwards should not be slaughtered” (Mookerji 1972: 130).

The three great soteriological religions that emerged in India around the middle of the 1st millennium BC — Buddhism, Jainism, and early Hinduism — had one common ideal, one ultimate purpose: to attain salvation from this world, ending the cycle of birth and rebirth entirely. This was the main reason why the ancient image of the peacock as a psychopomp and bird of rebirth was ousted from the Great (Sanskritic) tradition of Hinduism and likewise from Buddhism and Jainism to the periphery of Indian culture. At this time, other aspects of peacock mythology started to gain ground. The peacock appears as the *vāhana* of several Hindu gods, particularly the new god of war, Skanda. This association probably arose in connection with the aggressiveness of the peacock, who often fights with other peacocks or birds of different species. A Vedic and early Hindu god of war, Indra, also had mythological links to the peacock; in particular, he granted the bird its “thousand eyes” (Mani 1975: 488–489). The Tamil god of war, youth and fertility, Murugan, and Jaina god Hariṇaigameṣin,
commander of the army of gods, both similar to Skanda in their function, have the peacock as their vāhana (Parpola 2015: 284). The militant form of the great goddess Durgā, and another divine female, Sarasvatī, goddess of wisdom and learning, also use peacocks as their vāhana. Both Hindus and Buddhists worship a goddess Mahāmayūrī, “Great Peahen.” In this image, the idea of peahens being able to save from poisoning is raised to the level of religious philosophy: Mahāmayūrī saves people from spiritual poisons, such as greediness, cowardice, and anger.

In the late layer of the Sanskrit epic, a new aspect of the peacock’s mythology begins its gradual development. This aspect is based on the most evocative feature of peacock behavior. Its nuptial period starts at the onset of the rainy season: it raises the “fan” of its tail feathers and starts to dance, trying to attract the attention of a peahen. In mythological consciousness, this dance produces a specific chain of associations. The peacock is now perceived as a messenger of the rainy season, symbolizing the seasonal awakening of sexual desire and love. It is no longer connected with an individual’s death and rebirth in this or any other world. The peacock is mythologically associated with the resurrection of nature after its temporary death during the dry season. In the late epic and in classical lyrical poetry, the dance ritual and the love game of peacock and peahen are a constant background for love relations between humans. For example, in the Rāmāyaṇa (Rām. 4. 1.17), the hero says he feels pangs of love while looking at dancing peacocks.

The most important development of the “peacock dance” theme came together with the spread in the Middle Ages of theistic forms of Hinduism, called bhakti — emotional worship of Shiva or the avatars of Vishnu – Krishna, and Rama. In Krishna’s mythology, a significant place belongs to his love games with the divine milkmaid Radha, who is understood theologically as a human soul in its relation to God. In the episodes with Radha, Krishna always appears with a peacock feather in his crown or diadem. The peacock is a constant companion of Krishna, and its dance is a model for Krishna’s dance with Radha. Krishna himself turns into a peacock to dance for Radha, she joins him, and together they perform the ecstatic “peacock dance” (fig. 4). During Krishna’s life on Earth, this dance took place at Vrindavan, which is now considered Krishna’s earthly paradise and is an important place of pilgrimage. Vrindavan is inhabited by multitudes of peacocks. The dance of the divine pair also continues eternally in Krishna’s heavenly Paradise, Goloka and there the peacock is present without fail.

Thus, the evolution of peacock mythology in India led to its symbolism as a bird of Paradise. Let us now have a look at the peacock’s spread towards the Mediterranean and the image of this bird in the cultures of Europe.

After the downfall of the Indus civilization, there was no trade between India and countries lying to the West for a long time. However, from the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, peacocks appear sporadically in the
Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. Peacocks are mentioned several times in the Bible (1 Kings 10.22; 2 Chronicles 9.21; Job 39.13). According to Chronicles 9.21, they were brought to King Solomon by his ships from Tarshish, a country identified by some scholars with Tartessos in Southern Spain, with a district on the Malabar coast of India or in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). However, in 1 Kings 9.26–28 and 10.22 we read that in the port of Ezion-Geber (on the Red Sea, near present-day Eilat), Solomon had a fleet consisting of “ships of Tarshish” and Phoenician “ships of Hiram,” which “once in three years” brought “gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacocks” from the land of Ophir. It seems probable that in 2 Chronicles 9.21 the name “Tarshish” is mistakenly used instead of “Ophir.” The land of Ophir must be located somewhere on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The old theory of it being in India “can be definitely dismissed” (Karttunen 1989: 18). In my opinion, the identification of Ophir with Arabia (Struve 1941: 275; Wissmann 1975: 54) now seems most convincing. K. Karttunen threw doubt on it because, at the time his book was written, no information was available on the existence at the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE of any seaports engaged in international trade anywhere in Southern Arabia (Karttunen 1989: 19, 21). Current scholarship in South Arabian studies has demonstrated the opposite: the emergence of civilization of South Arabia in the end of the 2nd to the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE due to the international transit trade. Important entrepôts were located on the coasts of Ḥaḍramawt and Oman, through which Indian goods reached the Eastern Mediterranean mostly by sea (Frantsuzov 2014: 63).
At the end of the 6th century BCE, North-Western India became a part of the Achaemenian empire, and maritime traffic between India and the Persian Gulf resumed. The well-known “Bāveru jātaka” (The Jataka 1897: 83–84 [no. 339]) recounts how Indian merchants came by sea to Babylon (Bāveru), “where at that time were no birds at all”, and sold at a very good profit first their pilot bird (crow)3 and, on the next visit, a trained dancing peacock. Local people paid a thousand gold coins for the peacock and began to worship the bird as a god.

Through the mediation of, most probably, Persians, peacocks appeared on the Greek island of Samos, where they were kept at the temple of the goddess Hera as her sacred birds. In the year 440 BC, Athenians occupied Samos and brought the peacocks to Athens. Alexander the Great sent many peacocks from India to Egypt and Greece. From Greece peacocks came to Rome and their numbers there increased, as the merchants of Alexandria in the 1st century CE learned how to travel across the Indian Ocean using the monsoon winds, establishing regular trade with South India (Warmington 1974). After this, Romans became aware of India as the source of these birds, though the Greeks had previously called the peacock a “Persian” or “Median” bird. In contrast with Greece, where peacocks were protected by law, Emperors of Rome and wealthy Romans ate them (Jackson 2006: 91–93). Peacock meat is hard and not tasty, so the reason it was served at the royal table must be the same as in India: its association with immortality.

Since the earliest times, the peacock in the Classical world was linked with metempsychosis. For example, according to a legend, Pythagoras (born at Samos, incidentally) thought he had long ago been a peacock, then the soul of this peacock entered the body of Euphorbius (a hero from The Iliad), from Euphorbius it passed to Homer, and eventually entered the body of Pythagoras himself. Later a Roman poet, Quintus Ennius (239–169 BCE) in his epic poem “The Annales,” described how, in a dream, “Homer had appeared to inform Ennius that through a transmigration of souls, his own soul after an interim incarnation as a peacock had been born into Ennius” (Aicher 1989: 227). The goddess Hera was mythologically linked to the peacock4 and owned the paradisiacal garden at the western end of the Earth where three sisters, the Hesperides, nymphs of the West, guarded an apple tree with golden fruits. Herakles, the greatest hero, killed the serpent Ladon who guarded the tree and plucked the apples. The possession of them immediately brought him to the world of the gods on Mount Olympus where he obtained immortality and eternal bliss (West 2007: 159).

In Imperial Rome, the peacock was the sacred bird of the goddess Juno (= Hera) and a symbol of the Empress, while the eagle was the bird of the

---

3 On the pilot (‘shore-sighting’) birds in India see; (Vassilkov 2016: 166–171).
4 As Hera was “the queen of heaven” (Peck 1897: 796), the multitude of “eyes” on the peacock’s train was explained as symbolizing the starry sky.
Fig. 5. Two peacocks drinking from a cup. Marble relief in Santa Maria Assunta cathedral, Venice. Public domain

Fig. 6. Two peacocks and a vase with bread. Catacombs of Praetextatus, Rome. Public domain
god Jupiter and the Emperor. The mortuary rite marked the Emperor’s achieving a god’s status and the Empress’s that of a goddess. On their death, the Emperor was thought to be delivered to the heavenly world by an eagle, and the deceased Empress — by a peacock. In the course of the rite, a peacock or an eagle was released. The peacock appears in this context as a psychopomp, a conductor of the soul to another world. The peacock image was depicted on the walls of houses and sepulchral monuments, symbolizing the reawakening of life in Spring or bliss in the afterlife (Jensen 2011: 274).

Early Christianity adopted and developed the mythology of the peacock that took shape in the Classical world. The peacock became associated with fundamental notions such as the soul’s immortality, resurrection, the mystery of Communion, and bliss in Paradise. The first images of peacocks or peacock feathers appear on the walls of Christian catacombs and numerous stone coffins (sarcophagi). Two peacocks are often represented on either side of the Communion chalice, a vase, or a mortuary urn. Sometimes grapes or loaves of bread are seen lying in the vase, both symbols of Communion and, simultaneously, of the bread and wine shared by souls in Paradise (Matthew 26.29; Luke 14.15; 22. 29–30). Sometimes two peacocks are seen drinking from the cup as on the marble relief in Santa Maria Assunta cathedral on the island of Torcello in Venice (fig. 5), or eating bread from a vase as on a slab from the Catacombs of Praetextatus in Rome (fig. 6). Peacock, vine and grapes were constant elements of the Early Christian image of Paradise. All these symbols combine in the famous red porphyry sarcophagus of Constantina (or Constantia), daughter of Constantine the Great (circa 354 CE), now in the Museo Pio-Clementino in the Vatican. One can see winged cherubs harvesting grapes on its front side (a theme inherited from pre-Cristian Bacchic art and Christianized). Below are Constantina as a lamb (agnus) and two peacocks as harbingers of her future resurrection (fig. 7). A peacock en face with a fan of

Fig. 7. Detail of Sarcophagus of Constantina, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican. Public domain
its tail behind appears as the central and most important figure in the picture of the heavenly garden of Paradise in a fresco from the 4ᵗʰ century CE in the Catacombs of San Gennaro, Naples (fig. 8).

In the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we sometimes see images of peacocks used to suggest a future resurrection. For example, in a miniature from the ‘Book of Hours’ of Charles de France (1473), peacocks form a kind of living frame or “a guard of honor” for the scene of the Nativity (Jackson 2006: 42–43, 56). In ‘The Annunciation with St. Emidius’ by Carlo Crivelli (1486), we can see a peacock with its tail just above the image of the Virgin Mary; here it undoubtedly has the same meaning (fig. 9).

As it seems, no canonical Christian text mentions the peacock as an inhabitant of Paradise. However, in Christian art, peacocks were sometimes represented flanking the Tree of Knowledge (Jackson 2006: 56). Even in later European art up to the modern period, the peacock appeared from time to time in images of Paradise, close to the Tree of Knowledge or as a companion of Adam and Eve in the same way it accompanies Krishna and Radha in Indian Paradise. In particular, the peacock is a constant element in images of Paradise by artists of the Breughel family, Jan the Elder and Jan the Younger (fig. 10).
Fig. 9. Detail of ‘The Annunciation, with St. Emidius’ by Carlo Crivelli (1486). Public domain
The peacock is an inhabitant of Paradise in some traditions of the Middle East. According to apocryphal Muslim texts, the peacock facilitated the penetration of Iblis, the devil, into Paradise, where the latter deceived Adam, escorting him to the prohibited food (wheat). They all, including the peacock, were expelled from paradise by the chief angel, Jibril (Christian Gabriel), who is known in the Muslim tradition as Tāwūs al-malā'īka, “The Peacock of the Angels.” In the religion of the Yezidis, Malak Tawus, “The Peacock Angel” is the main object of worship. With his help, the God (Xwade) created the world but later became inactive, and many of his features and functions were transferred to Malak Tawus as his main representative. Sometimes Malak Tawus displays characteristics of the fallen angel expelled from heaven for violating divine command and misleading Adam. However, he later repented,
becoming once more the greatest of angels and the most loyal servant of God. In the tradition of the Shi’as, the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, hidden in a secret place and whose advent is expected, is called Tāwūs ahli-l’ājanna or "Peacock, the Dweller of Paradise." In the religion of the Mandeans the peacock plays an important role as a messenger of God. In the opinion of specialists, all these Middle Eastern concepts of the peacock as the chief angel in paradise may have a common source in the tradition of Gnosticism (Asatrian, Arakelova 2014: 9–16, 24–26). Probably, the image of the peacock as a bird of Paradise also entered the art of Christendom via a Christian Gnostic apocryphon.

However, how did it happen that the Indian peacock, having arrived in Europe or the Middle East, became connected with the same mythological ideas as in India (peacock as a psychopomp, the symbol of new birth or resurrection, a bird of Paradise)? Some scholars think that Europeans received from India both peacocks and the mythological ideas associated with them. The author of an encyclopedia article enumerating birds considered psychopomps or symbolizing immortality in various cultures remarks: “The peacock, which in the Greco-Roman world may have symbolized man’s hope for immortality, is of Indian origin” (Waida 2005: 948–949). This, it seems, implies that the mythology of the peacock traveled from country to country with the exotic bird itself. There are many reasons why this hypothesis must be rejected. In my opinion, the striking similarity of peacock mythologies in India and Europe can be explained in a different way.

Since the earliest times in various cultures the peacock has been a constant inhabitant of gardens and parks. But what was the symbolic meaning of the garden itself? The earliest gardens known in human history were perceived as the abodes of gods. In the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, Egyptian queen Hatshepsut sent a naval expedition to the “God’s Land,” the distant earthly paradise of Ammon, Punt (located, most likely, in present-day Somalia). After the expedition’s return bearing myrrh trees and various items of luxury, Hatshepsut, as it is said in her inscription at Deir el-Bahri, “established for him a Punt in his house (i. e., in his temple. — Y. V), planted the trees of God’s Land beside his temple in his garden... I have made for him a Punt in his garden, just as he commanded me ... It is large for him, he walks abroad” (Breasted 1906: 121–122, no. 295). In later years, there were many instances when a Pharaoh established a garden for a particular god (see, e. g., Breasted 1906: 254, no. 568). In ancient Babylonia and Assyria, a garden as re-creation of Paradise belonged either to a god, or to the king as god on Earth (Dalley 1993: 12). The culture of Ancient Iran then inherited this Mesopotamian symbolism of gardens and parks. The old Persian term pairidaēza, Median paridaisa — literally: ‘enclosed, walled-around (garden)’, but meaning royal garden or park, earthly Paradise for the king, was borrowed by the Greeks. Originally, Greek paradeisos meant any garden, but the translators of the New Testament into Greek used it in the sense of both earthly and heavenly
Paradise, so we may suggest that this ancient shade of meaning was still alive in the Greek world. Gardens in the Ancient Persian Empire later served as a model for royal gardens and parks in the Muslim world. A branch of this tradition was represented by the magnificent gardens of the Great Mughal dynasty in India, where Persian-Muslim ideas were closely interwoven with Central Asian and Hindu perceptions of earthly paradise (Moynihan 1980). In Christian and Muslim cultures, the garden was always perceived as a Paradise on Earth. In the art of gardening, this perception survived up to the 19th century. Royal gardens in Europe were often called “paradises” (Germ. paradies, Niderl. paradijs, Ital. paradiso, Russ. парадиз, etc.).

Peacocks were imported to Europe predominantly to use them to adorn temples or royal gardens and parks, such as the park laid out in the 18th century by Friedrich Wilhelm the Second, King of Prussia, near Berlin. It is called “Peacocks’ Island” (Pfaueninsel), but also has another name — Paradiesisches Eiland, “Paradise Island”. This gives some grounds to the suggestion that as soon as the peacock was imported to the royal gardens of Europe, the context itself — the perception of the garden as a paradise — began to build particular mythology around this bird. It seems to be a plausible explanation for the European mythology of the peacock being so similar to the Indian one.

REFERENCES


Struve V. V. Istorinya Drevnego Vostoka [History of the Ancient East]. Leningrad: Ogiz; Gospolitizdat Publ., 1941. (In Russian),


Submitted: 20.11.2022
Accepted: 10.01.2023
Article published: 01.07.2023