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*Ingo Schaaf (Ed.)*

# ANIMAL KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

ANTHROPOZOOLOGICAL ASPECTS IN THE LATE  
ANTIQUE WORLD

**m** MILLENNIUM STUDIES

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## **Animal Kingdom of Heaven**

**Millennium-Studien**  
zu Kultur und Geschichte  
des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.

**Millennium Studies**  
in the culture and history  
of the first millennium C.E.

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Herausgegeben von / Edited by  
Wolfram Brandes, Alexander Demandt, Helmut Krasser,  
Peter von Möllendorff, Dennis Pausch, Rene Pfeilschifter,  
Karla Pollmann

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Anthropozoological Aspects in the Late Antique World

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Ingo Schaaf

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Ingo Schaaf

# Animal Kingdom of Heaven. Anthropozoological Aspects in the Late Antique World

## Introduction

In a much cited passage from the late Jacques Derrida the French philosopher states: “The animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps, begins there.”<sup>1</sup> An increased awareness towards animals as indicated by this programmatic statement certainly is a noteworthy yet still seldom explicitly addressed feature of our contemporary Western societies – although one does not have to stand literally naked in front of his or her cat as the French philosopher did, in order to approve of this general attitude: anyone who owns pets – although who owns whom in the end might be open to debate – knows the question of ‘What goes on in this furry head?’. It might be claimed without exaggeration that compared to previous centuries of the modern or even premodern era human-animal relationships have undergone a rather silent but significant, one could almost dare to say revolutionary, shift, as whose symptoms it might suffice to hint at the recent phenomena of veganism, meat-free day initiatives (although for various religions not really new), the animal rights movement, or pet cemeteries. Theoretically, one may also think of Kelly Oliver’s book with the telling title *Animal lessons: How they teach us to be human*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, more than only a few advocates of the so-called ‘animal turn’ seem to be claiming more than mere attentiveness towards one’s fellow creatures – what they not infrequently suggest could rather be labelled as an establishment of resemblance in service of ‘true’ humanness, inverting, as it were, a familiar call of Stoic and early Christian thinkers into an unheard-of concept of ‘όμοιώσις τῷ ζῷῳ’.<sup>3</sup>

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At the earliest stages of this project stood a conversation with Clemens Wischermann (Konstanz) whose suggestions encouraged me to develop it further. To the University of Konstanz I owe thanks for awarding me a substantial grant from the Young Scholar Fund as part of German Research Foundation’s Excellence Initiative. For additional financial support I should like to thank the Konstanz University Society, as well. I am grateful to the editors of the Millennium Studies series for generously accepting this work for publication and Karla Pollmann (Reading) in particular for her helpful comments and remarks.

<sup>1</sup> Derrida (2008) 29 for the original see Derrida (2006) 27: “L’animal nous regarde, et nous sommes nus devant lui. Et penser commence peut-être là.”

<sup>2</sup> Oliver (2009).

<sup>3</sup> For further orientation in the field see the contributions in Ferrari/Petrus (2015) and Borgards (2016).

This leads to religion, another hot topic of our post-9/11 period and in our context to the issue of what has been coined ‘Theological Zoology’. Bringing thus divinity into play, this recent line of research is driven by a feeling of unease concerning the idea of humanity’s God-given dominion over animals,<sup>4</sup> as a consequence of which contemporary theologians such as, for example, Rainer Hagencord can question customary interpretations of pertinent biblical narratives: according to such an exegetical approach, animals are not to be found beyond Eden – in fact, unlike the case of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from Paradise is nowhere mentioned in Scripture – but still on this side of the Garden, in other words closer to the transcendent Creator than man, the alleged summit of creation, himself.<sup>5</sup>

By mentioning only these few examples it should have become clear that current thinking on anthropozoological relationships is able to move quite far away from hierarchical concepts of old, redefining the traditionally inferior status of animals up to the point where they can be seen – formulated to the extreme – as ‘the better humans’ supposed to serve as a model which, in religious terms, never had any need for redemption at all.<sup>6</sup>

In order to be able to assess this (in a quite literal sense) bewildering cultural development adequately though, one is well-advised to lend his or her perspective the necessary historical depth and here, certainly, classical studies do have a lot to contribute to such an enterprise; for it is within the framework of even the most conventional form of *Altertumswissenschaft* that at least aspects of the relationship between man and animals have always mattered, be it in the shape of archeological representations or textual evidence, not only with regard to the everyday use of animals as livestock<sup>7</sup> or for entertainment<sup>8</sup> but also in the field of myth and symbolism, ritual and cult, where the degree of their ‘hybridity’ can be described as particularly high.<sup>9</sup>

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**4** Cf. Gen 1.28: καὶ ηὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς λέγων Αὐξάνεσθε καὶ πληθύνεσθε καὶ πληρώσατε τὴν γῆν καὶ κατακυριεύσατε αὐτῆς καὶ ἅρχετε τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ πάντων τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσῃς τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐρπετῶν τῶν ἐρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.’” (King James Version).

**5** See Hagencord (2005) and (2015); a handy overview on animals in the Bible is offered by Schroer (2010).

**6** But see the critical remarks made in Francis (2015) 66: “At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure.”

**7** For the period in question of the present volume (and beyond) it may suffice to cite Nitschke (1998) 227–233.

**8** For continuity and innovation in the Late Antique staging of *venationes*, for example, see Puk (2014) 264–288.

**9** Inasmuch as animals (in postmodern terms) can be understood as material and semiotic entities alike: see Borgards (2016) 225–244, esp. 236–238.

As a result of this interest, a variety of publications on animals in Antiquity is already on hand.<sup>10</sup> However, scholarly production in the field is not only still far from being exhaustive; its chronological focus tends to be rather unbalanced, since research on animals and man's attitude towards them – especially in the German-speaking countries – is seldom conducted in reference to the Late Antique period.<sup>11</sup> This is all the more striking, since the age of the third to the sixth century with its characteristic religious paradigm shifts, the rise of Christianity in particular, has become a well established yet ever growing field of enquiry. In fact, as in so many other respects, it is just that formative period of European history, which offers plentiful possibilities for fruitful research, also on human-animal relationships, in order to understand the genesis of the present and evaluate the arguments of its debates properly.

Before the conceptual backdrop as outlined above, that is, using the sphere of the divine as framework of relations, it has been the aim of an international workshop, held at the University of Konstanz, to look from different angles at human-animal relationships, as represented, negotiated and symbolically interpreted in various literary genres and iconography of Late Antique religious discourse.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective, the papers given at the occasion and published in the present volume are meant to shed light on so-far understudied aspects of an otherwise thriving research field without succumbing too readily to notions of modern disciplinarity.<sup>13</sup> To this end, 12–14 December 2013, younger and more advanced scholars from various institutions and research areas came together at Lake Constance for an exchange of ideas, whose open and interdisciplinary character provided ample opportunity for interaction and dialogue. Thus reflecting a multifaceted approach, it is hoped, that its fruits will stimulate future scholarly discussion and further help contextualizing contemporary thinking on human-animal relationships be it historical, philological or theological in character.

Roberta Franchi's contribution is entitled '*Ecco, io vi mando come agnelli in mezzo ai lupi*' (*Mt 10,16*): *eretici e animali nel cristianesimo antico*. It is based on the assumption that Christianity from the first centuries onwards had to tackle

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Kalof (2007), Alexandridis (2008), Newmyer (2011), Harden (2013), Campbell (2014), Kitchell (2014), Johnston/Mastrocinque/Papaioannou (2016), Korhonen/Ruonakoski (2017), Fögen/Thomas (2017), Lewis/Llewellyn-Jones (2018), Li Causi (2018) only to name a few; for a list of further publications see Fögen (2006) and (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Exceptions include Grant (1999), Ciccarese (2002), Zambon (2003), Leyerle (2005), Gilhus (2006) and (2014), Ciccarese (2007), Spittler (2008), Capomacchia (2009), Ullucci (2011), Franchi (2017), Clark (2017), and, appearing when these lines were already written, Cox Miller (2018).

<sup>12</sup> The term 'kingdom of heaven', obviously reflecting New Testament language (cf. e.g. Mt 3,2; 4,17 etc.), corresponds to the treatment of almost exclusively Christian sources in the present volume. This is of course not to say, that anthropozoological aspects were irrelevant regarding other religious groups of Late Antiquity – suffice to remind the reader of the discussion on the 'end of animal sacrifice' and all its implications, for which see Stroumsa (2005) and Petropoulou (2008).

<sup>13</sup> For a similar viewpoint see Boehrer (2010) 186.

and refute dissident systems and theories, developing itself a coherent and truth-based theology. According to such a unitarian concept of orthodoxy, heresy threatens to undermine the foundations of true religion itself. In order to effectively attack heterodox teachings, Early Christian authors, as Franchi shows, are not only using negatively connotated animals as a means of discrediting their representatives; in doing so they also betray cultural, symbolical, and behavioral characteristics of select animals.

The following contribution by Daniel Ogden bears the title *The function of dragon-episodes in early hagiography*. It deals with the frequent encounters between saints and dragons in earlier hagiography. These episodes have a number of functions, as Ogden explains: The dragon and its miasma-like sickening breath embody the unbelief of the community to which the saint comes. His subsequent mastery of the dragon accordingly both brings about and in itself embodies the mass-conversion of the local people. Appropriately, the cave vacated by the dragon can be transformed into a monastery or hermitage. The saint's mastery of the dragon, a paradigmatic testament of his own faith too, places him in the footsteps of God himself, who overcame Leviathan and humiliated the Serpent of Eden, and of the archangel Michael, who confined Satan to the abyss in the form of a multi-headed dragon. Hagiographical dragons are often compared to or even claim complete identity with the latter two creatures, and can accordingly suffer the fate of being confined to a new abyss. And, insofar as hagiographical dragons are assimilated to demons more generally, it is often too their fate to be expelled to the wilderness.

Horst Schneider in his contribution is concerned with *Tiere in symbolischer Deutung: Der Physiologus*, the latter being a small book originally written in Greek which focuses on animals, plants, stones and mixed beings. Their description, as Schneider shows, is related to a certain passage of the Bible in the first part of each chapter, followed in the second part by a Christian symbolical interpretation. The stories and descriptions told by the Physiologus are taken from many different sources and although some of the stories seem weird or strange they have to be taken seriously, because they are intended to show how the divine spirit can be found in nature.

Claudio Moreschini's contribution is entitled *Gregorio Magno e il mondo animale: tra curiositas e simbologia*. It is dedicated to Gregory the Great's interest in animals, as displayed especially in his most important work, the *Moralia in Job*. Although Gregory, following the habits of patristic exegesis, tends to treat animals allegorically, i.e. morally, from time to time he takes the liberty to take a look from a more concrete perspective betraying an attentiveness towards their physical characteristics, as well.

Françoise Lecocq offers a treatment of *The flight of the Phoenix to paradise in Ancient literature and iconography* dealing with an originally quite exotic animal, which, adopted by the Christians as an example and proof for the resurrection of the flesh, subsequently becomes not only a dogmatic matter, but also a poetic and iconographic topic, with a new abode, from earth to heaven. Lactantius, as Lecocq shows, places

it in a ‘locus felix’ looking like the landscape of the pagan Golden Age and like Paradise. Avitus and some versions of the Physiologus put it in the Garden of Eden during the Genesis, as do some Jewish rabbis, inventing new legends about the bird. As is additionally presented, mosaics in churches, from Italy to Syria, show the phoenix on the homonymous palm tree in the eschatological paradise or the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Last but not least comes Diego De Brasi with *Das Tier, der Mensch und Gott in Laktanzens De opificio Dei*. Subject of De Brasi’s contribution is to show how the Early Christian apologetic writer Lactantius aims at proving God’s existence and the power of his divine providence through an analysis of the human being as compositum of body and soul. However, this enquiry also includes observations on the human-animal relationship, which Lactantius introduces 1) polemically against Epicurean teachings and 2) in his treatment of human bodily organs. As is shown, the behaviour of man, despite his supremacy, does not, according to Lactantius, differ too much from that of an animal. Furthermore the Churchfather stresses that an animal’s physical structure may lead to the knowledge of God, since it is arranged according aesthetic principles, which point to divine creation.

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Roberta Franchi

## «Ecco, io vi mando come agnelli in mezzo ai lupi» (Mt 10,16): eretici e animali nel cristianesimo antico

Nell'Antico Testamento, nei libri mosaici la serie di norme alimentari codificate per mezzo di una precisa lista di animali volta a distinguere tra ciò che è puro e impuro, con la conseguente condanna da parte di Dio di certi animali come impuri per la dieta umana<sup>1</sup>, è una dichiarazione relativa a ciò che essi simbolizzano e non un'affermazione di quanto salutari siano o meno come cibo i vari animali chiamati in causa. Se a partire dalla cosiddetta *Epistola di Aristea a Filocrate* si cerca di dimostrare come questi animali rappresentino comportamenti viziosi e immorali da cui l'uomo deve imparare ad astenervisi, così che la distinzione tra puro e impuro diventa simbolo o dell'anima amante del piacere oppure di quella che aspira alla costanza e alla perfezione<sup>2</sup>, sulla stessa linea si pongono i cristiani, pronti ad interpretare allegoricamente gli animali<sup>3</sup>.

Quadrupedi e fiere sono raffigurazione di certi uomini che non conoscono Dio e non lo venerano, pensano alle cose terrene e non si convertono. Coloro che si allontanano dalle iniquità e vivono secondo giustizia si elevano con l'anima come uccelli, pensando alle cose celesti e compiacendosi della volontà di Dio. Invece quelli che non conoscono Dio e non lo venerano sono simili ad uccelli che hanno le ali, ma non possono sollevarsi e percorrere le altezze della divinità. Così anche costoro sono chiamati uomini, ma pensano alle cose terrene e mondane, appesantiti dai loro peccati<sup>4</sup>.

Il passo di Teofilo di Antiochia permette di ricollegare la differenziazione del mondo naturale osservata dall'uomo all'attuazione di altrettanto diversificate forme immaginative per descrivere la realtà umana, così che gli animali diventano specchio metaforico, capace di condurre ad una profonda visione dell'uomo stesso, della sua variegata umanità, giacché essi sono dotati di un potere simbolico riflettente, tale da oggettivare i molti volti di cui si compone lo *status* umano<sup>5</sup>. Il testo suggerisce una certa connaturalità tra uomo e animali, vista sia sotto l'aspetto negativo, per cui gli uomini possono essere bestiali come le fiere e i quadrupedi, rimanendo aderenti alle realtà immonde e materiali, sia sotto quello positivo, per cui come gli uccelli gli uomini possono tendere alla grazia divina. Se si parla di animali, si può stare certi che si parlerà anche di uomini. Non a caso, uno dei padri dell'antropologia moderna,

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1 Cfr. Lv 11,1–30; Dt 14,3–21.

2 Cfr. Ps. Aristea, Epistola 9,148 (SC 80, 174).

3 Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 20.

4 Teofilo di Antiochia, Ad Autolico 2,17 (SC 20, 142; trad. it. Ciccarese [2002], 21).

5 Cfr. Maspero (1997); Grant (1999).

Claude Lévi-Strauss, ha coniato a tale riguardo la fortunata formula dell'animale «buono per pensare»<sup>6</sup>, sorgente inesauribile di spunti e riflessioni per quell'essere umano che vi riconosce un altro da sé, eppure tanto simile<sup>7</sup>.

Ricorrendo ai moduli ermeneutici proposti dall'allegorismo alessandrino, non soltanto la legislazione mosaica concernente gli animali «puri» ed «impuri», non più comprensibile per pagani, cristiani e persino per i Giudei della diaspora, viene letta in chiave antropologica, ma gli animali stessi diventano nella letteratura cristiana antica simboli di modi e di costumi, in cui l'uomo può rispecchiarsi<sup>8</sup>. Così in Clemente di Alessandria si legge che il Logos è capace di ammansire le fiere più selvagge tra gli uomini: i rettili cioè gli ingannatori; i leoni ossia gli iracondi; i maiali cioè i voluttuosi, e i lupi ossia i rapaci<sup>9</sup>. Non solo l'uomo e il suo complesso statuto sono riflessi nel quadro multiplo dell'animale, ma la realtà stessa e la sua oggettività autonoma sono sovente rilette nel filtro di un'animalità detta «voce della natura»<sup>10</sup>. Ciò non toglie che nella prospettiva degli autori antichi la realtà oggettiva, di cui l'animale recherebbe testimonianza, sia intesa come un ordine a se stante, un universo articolato di regole ed equilibri rispetto al quale l'uomo si situa in una posizione diversa, eppure allo stesso tempo assai prossima<sup>11</sup>. Ma vi è dell'altro. Gli animali non indicano soltanto in maniera generica caratteri e comportamenti umani, in cui molti uomini possono ritrovare se stessi, ma iniziano ad assumere un valore specificamente religioso, impersonando i vari tipi di fedeli che fanno parte della Chiesa o che si oppongono ad essa<sup>12</sup>.

Ireneo di Lione non si limita più a distinguere tra quadrupedi e fiere, ma cerca di spiegare perché vengono considerati puri solo determinati quadrupedi:

Chi sono i puri? Coloro che procedono saldamente grazie alla fede nel Padre e nel Figlio (questa infatti è la stabilità di coloro che hanno l'unghia doppia) e meditano giorno e notte la parola di Dio per adornarsi di opere buone (è questa la qualità di ruminanti). Invece sono immondi coloro che non hanno l'unghia doppia e non ruminano, cioè non hanno la fede in Dio e non ne meditano le parole: è questo l'abominio dei pagani. Coloro che ruminano ma non hanno l'unghia doppia, sono immondi anche loro: è questa la raffigurazione dei Giudei, che hanno in bocca le parole di Dio ma non fondano nel Padre e nel Figlio la stabilità delle proprie radici: per questo la loro specie è caduca ... Sono ugualmente immondi coloro che hanno l'unghia doppia però non ruminano: è questa la figura di quasi tutti gli eretici ... dicono di credere nel Padre e nel

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**6** Cfr. Lévi-Strauss (1964) 126. Proprio dalla celebre definizione di Lévi-Strauss, ha tratto spunto un volume di studi antichistici: Gasti e Romano (2003).

**7** Cfr. Turtone (2012) 14.

**8** Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 20; Ciccarese (1990).

**9** Cfr. Clemente di Alessandria, *Protrettico* 1,4,1 (GCS 12, 5).

**10** I filosofi antichi si sono spesso prefissi lo scopo di ascoltare la «voce della natura» attraverso l'immagine vivente degli animali, sebbene alla fine molto discordanti siano stati i verdetti esegetici emessi dopo tale ascolto. Cfr. Dierauer (1977) 194; Turtone (2012) 15.

**11** Tra gli studi in ambito antropologico cfr. Baker (1993); Ingold (1994); Willis (1994).

**12** Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 21.

Figlio, ma non meditano mai le parole di Dio, come bisogna fare, e non sono adorni delle opere di giustizia<sup>13</sup>.

Il testo di Ireneo ruota attorno a due caratteristiche degli animali: il ruminare e l'unghia doppia. L'immagine della ruminazione affonda le sue radici in un'interpretazione allegorica di Lv 11,3 e Dt 14,6 che ritroviamo nella *Lettera di Barnaba*, dove si spiega il preceitto di mangiare gli animali biforcuti e ruminanti<sup>14</sup>. I ruminanti sono simbolo di quelli che temono Dio e meditano incessantemente nel cuore la legge del Signore, a differenza degli immondi, ossia gli eretici, che non meditano correttamente la parola divina. Si tratta di una nuova simbologia non più applicabile a tutti gli esseri viventi, giacché le fiere diventano i persecutori dei cristiani, in particolare pagani e Giudei, ma anche gli eretici incapaci di leggere correttamente la Scrittura<sup>15</sup>, mentre gli uccelli connotano le anime che volano in alto, i contemplativi che meditano i sublimi misteri divini<sup>16</sup>. Lo studio e l'approfondimento del testo sacro, che non costituiscono un semplice esercizio intellettuale ma un momento fondante dell'esistenza e dell'ascesi per i ruminanti e i mondi, sono il mezzo adeguato per evitare di incorrere nell'errore in merito alle verità teologiche.

Mosso dal proposito di attuare un giusto equilibrio tra il letteralismo giudaizante e l'indiscriminata allegorizzazione di matrice gnostica, è Origene a preoccuparsi di attuare una corretta metodologia applicabile anche al simbolismo degli animali. Partendo dal presupposto che la Scrittura si spiega con la Scrittura, con il supporto di validi *testimonia*, l'Alessandrino si appoggia all'*auctoritas* del passo di At 10,9 – 28: quando a Pietro viene ordinato di mangiare i cibi offertigli senza precisare alcuna norma di purità, egli comprende che la visione non riguarda gli animali mondi e immondi, ma gli uomini, ovvero i Giudei e i pagani presso i quali dovrà diffondere il *kerygma* cristiano, senza alcuna discriminazione<sup>17</sup>. Proprio come ha fatto Pietro, quanto scritto in merito agli animali nel testo sacro deve essere trasceso, attribuendolo agli uomini e alla storia umana sulla base delle caratteristiche zoologiche fisiche e/o comportamentali che le scienze naturali e le tradizioni popolari attribuiscono agli animali. La polisemia dei simboli diventa un tratto distintivo dell'esegesi cristiana, così che non solo ad uno stesso animale vengono attribuite diverse simbologie, ma diversi animali possono significare lo stesso simbolo. Da Cristo al diavolo, dall'apostolo all'eretico il ventaglio esegetico copre ogni ambito del simbolismo animale, interpretabile *in bonam* o *in malam partem* a seconda che lo

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<sup>13</sup> Ireneo di Lione, Contro le eresie 5,8,3 (SC 153, 100 – 104; trad. it. Ciccarese [2002], 22 – 23).

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Ps. Barnaba, Lettera 10,1 – 9 (SC 172, 148 – 156).

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Cassiodoro, Commento ai Salmi 49,10 (CCL 97, 446); 103,11 (CCL 98, 929); Agostino, Esposizione ai Salmi 67,38 (CCL 39, 896).

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Eusebio di Cesarea, Commento a Isaia 2,9 (GCS 9, 229); Esichio di Gerusalemme, Commento al Levitico 1,2; 6,20 (PG 93, 801C – D; 1051B – C).

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Origene, Omelie sul Levitico 7,4 (GCS 29, 382 – 385).

suggerisca la natura stessa dell’animale o il contesto in cui si trova<sup>18</sup>. Non si tratta più soltanto di quantità, ma anche di qualità, tanto da approdare ad una dilatazione del paradigma antropologico: fra le vette della somma sapienza divina e le bassezze in culturali di un animale indefinibile, il mondo umano pone limiti nuovi alla distinzione tra natura e civiltà, limiti non più coincidenti con il tradizionale confine uomo-animale. Questo effetto di espansione sul piano simbolico e religioso si rivela, per esempio, nella messa a punto degli impuri o immondi: pagani, Giudei o eretici. Ecco allora che i concetti di purità e impurità sono legati all’ortodossia<sup>19</sup>.

## La nascita dell’eresia

I primi secoli del cristianesimo sono caratterizzati, oltre che dalle persecuzioni anticristiane poste in atto dai pagani, anche dal dilagare delle eresie. Movimenti eretici gnostici, dualistici, pseudogiudaici, apocalittici sorgono nelle province dell’Impero, seminando il loro veleno e quelle dottrine che si contrappongono alla dottrina delle origini. Così, fin dai primi secoli, il cristianesimo è chiamato a confutare i sistemi e le teorie professate dai movimenti dissidenti elaborando, diversamente da essi, una teologia fondata sulla coerenza, sulla verità di fede. L’eresia non può essere considerata un semplice errore, soprattutto quando nega il valore della Scrittura e i fondamenti della vera religione, quando non è altro che uno stratagemma di Satana per strappare a Cristo il suo gregge. Se nel greco classico il termine αἵρεσις non possiede un’accezione negativa, ma indica la «scelta» di un particolare pensiero, di una corrente filosofica o fazione politica, in alcuni testi del Nuovo Testamento il sostantivo inizia a caricarsi di un significato negativo: indica le divisioni nella comunità, qualifica le «opere della carne» contrapposte alle «opere dello spirito», fino ad assumere l’accezione tecnica negativa che avrà nel cristianesimo e nella teologia successiva, in piena corrispondenza con l’aggettivo «eretico»<sup>20</sup>. La figura dell’eretico, una realtà sempre più presente, prende allora corpo negli scritti e nei bestiari dei Padri della Chiesa, tanto da essere rappresentata attraverso animali, atti a restituirlne le principali caratteristiche negative. Eloquente è un passo di Cipriano di Cartagine:

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 22–24.

<sup>19</sup> Il concetto di eterodossia o eresia sotto il profilo storiografico si presenta problematico, poiché viene riferito a una persona o movimento religioso e alle sue dottrine in quanto «devianti» rispetto a un altro movimento o istituzione della medesima tradizione religiosa. Nel corso della trattazione il termine «ortodosso» oppure «eterodosso» è adottato in riferimento al substrato culturale, cercando di contestualizzare e differenziare il profilo dottrinale, astenendoci ovviamente da ogni giudizio di valore.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. At 5,17; 24,14; 26,5; 1 Cor 11,19; Gal 5,20; 2 Pt 2,1. Cfr. Schlier (1965); Le Boulluec (1985); Boyarin (2004) 3–4, 65.

Che ci sta a fare, in un cuore cristiano, la ferocia del lupo, la rabbia del cane, il veleno mortifero del serpente, la cruenta violenza della belva? C'è da rallegrarci che una tal genia si separi dalla Chiesa, affinché non vengano a soffrire il contagio di una simile compagnia, velenosa e crudele, le colombe e le pecore di Cristo<sup>21</sup>.

E non di meno, il prontuario di allegorie compilato da Eucherio di Lione a metà del V secolo, le *Formule dell'intelligenza spirituale*, costituito da un elenco di termini desunti dalle Scritture e accompagnati ciascuno da uno o più significati allegorici riconosciuti nei testi biblici, presenta al capitolo IV una sorta di bestiario, la cui ricchezza di simboli e interpretazioni non tralascia gli eretici. L'eretico è simile allo struzzo, perché è come se avesse le penne della sapienza, però non vola; al lupo per la sua rapacità, alla volpe per la sua astuzia, alla talpa perché non vede la verità, alla rana perché dimora nel fango dei vili sensi, senza smettere di blaterare con vuota loquacità<sup>22</sup>. La rapida costruzione dell'eretico fatta attraverso la simbologia animale (astuto, rapace, lontano dalla verità, insidioso), ricavabile dal bestiario di Eucherio, può essere ottenuta esaminando una più vasta gamma di animali in altri testi cristiani.

## La simbologia animale dell'eretico

Considerato simbolo di forza e di potere in virtù delle sue corna a spirale, l'ariete è il capo del gregge<sup>23</sup>. Se nella sua valenza positiva gli esegeti cristiani lo considerano figura dei capi della Chiesa – sia di quella delle origini, gli apostoli, sia di quella di ogni tempo, i sacerdoti, perché hanno ricevuto l'incarico di difendere il gregge di Cristo<sup>24</sup> – in quella negativa l'ariete può indicare gli avversari della Chiesa. Lo attesta un passo di Gregorio Magno che, nello spiegare un versetto in cui l'ariete compare insieme al toro, simbolo anch'esso della superbia e degli eretici, chiarisce che «per mezzo degli arieti si vuol significare il comando, che viene esercitato dagli eretici quando persuadono la gente quasi sviando un gregge»<sup>25</sup>. L'ariete rappresenta l'eretico per la capacità di comando con cui trascina il gregge dietro di sé, condandolo verso la rovina spirituale. Emerge allora un primo fattore: il controllo degli

<sup>21</sup> Cipriano, L'unità della Chiesa cattolica 9.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Eucherio di Lione, Formule dell'intelligenza spirituale 4 (CSEL 31, 22–30).

<sup>23</sup> *Aries dux gregis*: cfr. Origene, Omelie sui Numeri 27,11 (GCS 30, 271); Agostino, Esposizione sui Salmi 64,18 (CCL 39, 837); Esichio di Gerusalemme, Commento al Levitico 5,16 (PG 93, 986D). Sull'ariete cfr. Chevalier e Gheerbrant (1986) 320; Ciccarese (2002) 139–141.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Basilio di Cesarea, Omelie sui Salmi 28,2 (PG 29, 284 A–B); Cassiodoro, Commento ai Salmi 28,1 (CCL 97, 249); Origene, Omelie sui Numeri 27,11 (GCS 30, 271); Ilario, Trattati sui Salmi 64,17 (CSEL 22, 247).

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. Gregorio Magno, Commento morale a Giobbe 35,8,14 (CCL 143B, 1782–1783); su occorrenze varie di animali in Gregorio si veda il contributo di Claudio Moreschini in questo volume.



**Fig. 1.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, Aberdeen University Library, Univ. Lib. MS 24, folio 44v, *De vulturibus*.  
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aderenti che assume un carattere di minaccia per l'ortodossia cristiana, perché i fedeli sono guidati verso le tenebre della malvagità.

Dal canto suo, Filippo il Presbitero connota come «avvoltoi» i nemici della Chiesa, che, avendo l'intelletto accecato dalle tenebre della malvagità, non conoscono il sentiero della chiamata attraverso cui si ritorna a Dio camminando nella fede, né sanno quale sia l'eredità dell'eterna promessa in Cristo, che essi, stolti e immondi, hanno considerato vile e spregevole (fig. 1)<sup>26</sup>.

Se avvoltoi sono gli oppositori della Chiesa, la cui altezza nel volo coincide con quella stessa superbia che provocò la caduta degli angeli apostati, i fedeli sono coloro che rimangono al sicuro nel seno della Chiesa, edificando il loro nido sulla pietra che è Cristo<sup>27</sup>. La contrapposizione tra questi due diversi modi di vivere la dottrina è spesso restituita nei testi cristiani antichi tramite un altro uccello, colto nella sua dimensione positiva: l'airone (fig. 2).

Per conferire *auctoritas* all'interpretazione di questo volatile, gli esegeti cristiani possono avvalersi soltanto di un enigmatico versetto dei Salmi (cfr. Ps 103,17) che gli attribuisce la guida dei passeri; così l'airone può essere identificato con Pietro, il capo degli apostoli, che insegna ai cristiani come sfuggire le tentazioni<sup>28</sup>. E poiché il testo accenna alla casa dell'airone, si insiste sul suo attaccamento al nido, diven-

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<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Filippo il Presbitero, Commento a Giobbe 2,28 (ed. Sichard 1527, 117).

<sup>27</sup> Sull'avvoltoio cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 177–179.

<sup>28</sup> Sull'airone cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 77–79.



**Fig. 2.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 53v, *De ardea*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

tando modello del cristiano che resta fedele all'unica Chiesa di Dio. Significativo un passo del *Fisiologo*:

Ha detto il Salmista: «La dimora dell'airone li guida» (cfr. Ps 103,17). Il Fisiologo afferma: questo uccello è assennato molto più di molti uccelli. Ha una sola dimora (μίαν δὲ σκήνωσιν ἔχει) e un solo rifugio (μίαν μάνδραν), non cerca molti nidi (οὐ πολλὰς κοίτας ζητεῖ), ma dove trova dimora, là anche si nutre e dorme; non mangia corpi morti, né vola in molti luoghi: il suo nido e il suo nutrimento sono in un luogo solo (ἡ κοίτη αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ τροφὴ εἰς ἕνα τόπον ἐστίν). Dunque anche tu, uomo perbene, non cercare molti luoghi degli eretici: il tuo nido sia uno solo (μία σοι ἔστω κοίτη), la santa Chiesa di Dio, e uno soltanto il nutrimento (καὶ μία τροφή), il pane disceso dal cielo, il Signore nostro Gesù Cristo, e non toccare gli insegnamenti morti, per possedere ben cotto il pane celeste e non cercare molti luoghi degli eretici (καὶ μὴ ζήτει πολλοὺς τόπους τῶν ἑτερόδοξων)<sup>29</sup>.

Le tematiche sono chiare. Chi diffonde insegnamenti non ortodossi è riconoscibile grazie a due indizi: mette in crisi i fondamenti della fede e mina l'ordine della carità. Occorre notare il parallelismo ricreato sul piano concettuale e linguistico: come l'airone ha μία σκήνωσις, μία μάνδρα e οὐ πολλὰς κοίτας ζητεῖ, così l'uomo deve avere μία κοίτη (la santa Chiesa), μία τροφή (il pane di Cristo) e μὴ ζητεῖν πολλοὺς τόπους τῶν ἑτερόδοξων. L'anafora di μία mette a fuoco l'elemento al centro dell'interesse, ossia l'unità, e non senza motivo. Impegnata a difendere la propria dottrina come una dottrina che tende alla perfezione e all'universalità, la religione cristiana delle origini è costretta sul fronte interno a unificare errori e deviazioni in

**29** Fisiologo 47 (ed. Sbordone 1936, 142–143; trad. it. Ciccarese [2002], 81). Cfr. Zucker (2005).

funzione di un concetto di ortodossia che, anche in reazione alle accuse esterne di scismi o controversie, desidera essere unitario e garantito da un'unica autorità. Il concetto di eresia è generalmente inteso nel senso di «deviazione» dalla dottrina comunemente accettata dalla comunità ecclesiale nel suo insieme. Simonetti ha dimostrato che il processo di formazione dell'ortodossia va collocato sì nel II secolo, ma non come soppressione di pensieri legittimi all'interno della cristianità, bensì in risposta alle prime due «crisi» che quest'ultima dovette attraversare e che a ben vedere hanno entrambe radici nel I secolo: da una parte la volontà dei giudaizzanti, già stigmatizzata da Paolo, di inquadrare il cristianesimo come una semplice scuola di pensiero all'interno dell'ebraismo; dall'altra la nascita dello gnosticismo, che nega l'identificazione tra il Dio Creatore e il Dio Padre di Gesù Cristo<sup>30</sup>.

La distinzione tra «eresia» e «ortodossia» deve essere collocata all'interno di un più ampio processo di costruzione dell'identità cristiana. Cosa è l'eresia? Non una semplice deviazione dalla retta dottrina, dall'ortodossia, ma piuttosto l'espressione di una grande varietà e fluidità di opinioni, destinate a scomparire via via che la Chiesa di Roma prevale sulle altre<sup>31</sup>. Il cristianesimo unitario si sarebbe formato per reazione a questa pluralità, senza riuscire a imporre una sola forma di cristianesimo, in quanto la pluralità avrebbe comunque continuato ad esistere<sup>32</sup>. In materia di religione si è generalmente portati a credere che vi sia all'inizio un'unità o un consenso, e che solo in seguito coloro che vengono definiti «eretici» si sono allontanati da questa unità: al contrario, la diversità viene prima, l'unità dopo. All'inizio vi è la complessità, dove non vi sono né unanimità, né sinfonia o accordo di voci; solo in seguito si instaura una δόξα, un'opinione dominante. Tale concetto è restituito dal *Fisiologo* attraverso la figura dell'airone.

E per rimanere nell'ambito della simbologia dei volatili e del «restare dentro» la Chiesa, il corvo è tra quelle più immediate. Se nero è il colore dei peccati, tale è il piumaggio di questo uccello che personifica le oscure passioni nel cuore degli uomini, confermate dal suo «cra cra» (fig. 3).

Su di esso pesa il biasimo di un comportamento inaffidabile, allorché deluse le aspettative di Noè che lo aveva mandato fuori dall'arca a controllare se le acque si erano prosciugate, ma «uscito non fece ritorno» (Gen 8,7) concludono i Settanta<sup>33</sup>. L'essere fuoriuscito dall'arca, per non più ritornarvi, fa del corvo il simbolo degli artefici della malvagità stessa, ovvero del diavolo e dei suoi compagni, degli spiriti

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**30** Cfr. Simonetti (1994). Nella lotta contro queste dottrine vi è un vasto consenso fra esponenti di svariate aree: è sintomatico che due autori distanti fra loro, come Ireneo (che proviene dall'Asia Minore ed è vescovo di Lione in Gallia) e Origene (in Alessandria d'Egitto) usino per queste problematiche argomenti molto simili.

**31** Cfr. Cameron e Miller (2004); Destro e Pesce (2004); Pesce (2005).

**32** Per cogliere quanto sia stato arduo per il cristianesimo riuscire a compaginare l'unità nella diversità, basta ripercorrere la vicenda delle «eresie», leggere le «scelte» diverse che nella storia si sono date del messaggio evangelico e delle conseguenze nella vita dei cristiani.

**33** Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 357–359.



**Fig. 3.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 37r, *De corvo*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

immondi e malvagi, nonché dell'eretico, fra cui spicca Simon Mago, scacciato dagli apostoli, perché voleva comprare lo Spirito Santo<sup>34</sup>. Simon Mago è ben raffigurato attraverso il simbolismo del corvo in Cromazio di Aquileia. Nella Chiesa non c'è spazio per pagani ed eretici, finché rimangono tali, ossia neri corvi che rifiutano la grazia. Cromazio arriva ad istituire una sorta di gradazione: i più distanti di tutti dal Signore sono gli eretici, perché più pervicaci; seguono i Giudei, anch'essi colpevoli di perfidia, di infedeltà, di incredulità; infine, assai prossimi alla salvezza i pagani. Se l'arca nell'esegesi cristiana è intesa come simbolo della Chiesa, gli animali in essa racchiusi rappresentano i cristiani, mentre il corvo chi ne è fuori:

Preghiamo dunque il Signore Gesù che nessuno di noi sia trovato corvo nella Chiesa del Signore e, mandato fuori, perisca. Infatti è un corvo ogni impuro, ogni pagano, ogni eretico che non merita di stare nella Chiesa di Cristo. Se qualcuno di noi è ancora corvo nell'animo, preghi il Signore di diventare da corvo colomba, da impuro puro, da pagano fedele, da impudico casto, da eretico cattolico<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Su Simon Mago cfr. Ferreiro (2005) 9–26. Analoga sorte toccò anche a Giuda Iscariota, che pure era stato associato al numero degli apostoli ed era stato quindi accolto nell'arca, ossia nella Chiesa. Ma Giuda rifiutò di lasciarsi trasformare, rimanendo perciò un nero corvo, privo della possibilità di essere trattenuto dentro la Chiesa.

<sup>35</sup> Cromazio di Aquileia, Sermoni 2,5 (CCL 9 A, 10; trad. it. Ciccarese [2002], 358). Cromazio riflette a lungo sul significato simbolico della candida colomba e del nero corvo (cfr. Sermoni 2,6, CCL 9 A, 10–11).



**Fig. 4.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 35v, *De nicticorace*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

L'eresia è rappresentata come un male proveniente da «fuori», in netta opposizione con l'ortodosso che sta «dentro»; gli eretici non entrano, ma escono dalla Chiesa. Rifiutando la verità, introducono dottrine false e inutili, più adatte a suscitare questioni che a costruire la casa di Dio fondata sulla fede. Grazie alla capacità di persuasione, sviano la mente dei meno esperti e li fanno prigionieri, falsificando i detti del Signore, non potendo distinguere il falso dal vero: vivono nell'oscurità. E quale altro animale potrebbe testimoniare questa loro vita spesa all'insegna dell'ignoranza e dell'errore se non il gufo o la civetta? Signori della notte, la loro familiarità con le tenebre e la cecità diurna sono due caratteristiche trasferibili sul piano simbolico (fig. 4).

La sostituzione dell'antitesi luce-tenebra con il corrispettivo simbolico verità-errore, passaggio obbligato per ogni cristiano, fa sì che questi uccelli dotati di vista notturna indichino i *lucifugae veritatis*, coloro che vivono nell'ignoranza e nell'errore, incapaci di cogliere la luce della vita evangelica<sup>36</sup>. In Massimo di Torino la civetta, che odia lo splendore del sole, *haereticorum figura est atque gentilium*. Essi abbracciano le tenebre del diavolo, temono la luce del Salvatore e attraverso le loro dispute scorgono la vanità, non la verità:

Di loro dice il Signore: «Hanno occhi e non vedono; camminano nelle tenebre» (cfr. Ps 134,16; 81,5). Sono infatti acuti in ciò che è superstizioso, ottusi in ciò che è divino; mentre credono di volare con discorsi sottili, come civette sono confusi dallo splendore della vera luce<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 443–447.

<sup>37</sup> Massimo di Torino, Sermoni 73,5 (CCL 23, 307; trad. it. Ciccarese [2002], 449).

Ecco un altro elemento interessante. Alcune eresie pretendevano di definire e spiegare meglio, da un punto di vista teologico e dottrinale, certi aspetti incerti e oscuri della teologia trinitaria cristiana; altre, invece, erano dottrine che si occupavano non soltanto della corporeità del Cristo o della perenne verginità di Maria, ma anche della natura dello Spirito Santo, dell'anima umana e delle differenze esistenti fra le tre persone della Trinità. Su questi e altri argomenti, ogni fondatore di setta, ogni filosofo gnostico ed eretico diede la propria versione dei fatti, il più delle volte discordante tra loro, adducendo a sostegno della propria dottrina il fatto che tali «verità» erano state rivelate loro direttamente da Dio o dallo Spirito Santo<sup>38</sup>. L'eresia è il luogo della devianza, della molteplicità di teorie e credenze che dilaniano la Chiesa<sup>39</sup>. Bisogna allora scansare gli eretici come bestie feroci; sono cani idrofobi che mordono furtivamente<sup>40</sup>.

Sulla falsariga della Scrittura, il cane nell'esegesi cristiana qualifica *in malam partem* i nemici della vera fede, sia quelli che condannarono Cristo, sia quelli che perseguitano i cristiani<sup>41</sup>. Cani per la rabbia del latrare contro Dio sono i pagani, i Giudei che si aggirano randagi alla ricerca del nutrimento, ma anche gli eretici pronti a mordere e a dilaniare la Chiesa<sup>42</sup>. Allorché arriva a spiegare il versetto di Mt 7,6 («Non date ciò che è santo ai cani»), Cromazio annota che *canes enim hic inimicos veritatis et detractores nominis Christi significant*, alla stessa stregua di Fil 3,2 e di Ps 21,17 dove i cani sono gli eretici che non cessano di turbare il gregge del Signore quasi «latrando con le parole»<sup>43</sup> (fig. 5). Se nel vangelo i cani sono equiparati ai porci nella comune esclusione dalla santità (cfr. Mt 7,6), nell'esegesi cristiana si tende a distinguere le due bestie, riservando al cane la sorte peggiore, mentre al porco,

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**38** Esichio di Gerusalemme nel Commento al Levitico 3,11 (PG 93, 910B) dice che la civetta, dalla vista acuta solo di notte, è simile a coloro che si vantano della conoscenza, ma non sono capaci di cogliere la luce della vita evangelica.

**39** Nel cristianesimo antico sorgono diversità di vedute, le quali non si risolvono, anzi si acuiscono, generando divisioni che vedono da una parte la resistenza del gruppo maggioritario originario (ortodossia), e dall'altra la minoritaria reinterpretazione o rielaborazione del patrimonio culturale comune. La scelta e la conseguente presa di posizione del gruppo minoritario viene qualificata come «eterodossa» dal gruppo principale, che ormai la sente come estranea e distaccata dal nucleo originario. Cfr. Pesce (2005).

**40** Cfr. Ignazio di Antiochia, Lettera agli Efesini 7,1 (SC 10bis, 74).

**41** Il cane non è visto soltanto come il compagno fedele dell'uomo, ausilio del pastore nella custodia del gregge, ma anche come animale immondo in ragione del suo randagismo: cfr. Ps 21,17.21; Mt 7,6. Si veda anche Franco (2003).

**42** Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 239–243; Cassiodoro, Commento ai Salmi 21,21 (CCL 97, 202). La verità fondamentale, l'idea centrale del cristianesimo è l'unione del divino e dell'umano, realizzata individualmente in Cristo e socialmente nell'umanità cristiana, nella quale il divino è rappresentato dalla Chiesa e l'umano dallo Stato. L'eresia attacca appunto l'unità perfetta del divino e dell'umano in Gesù Cristo, per scalzare il legame organico della Chiesa con lo Stato.

**43** Cfr. Cromazio di Aquileia, Trattati sul vangelo di Matteo 33,3 (CCL 9 A, 359).



**Fig. 5.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 19r, *De natura canum*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

*animal immundum* perché sguazza nel fango e nel sudiciume, viene attribuita l'immagine dell'eretico che conosce Dio, ma non sa ruminare la retta dottrina<sup>44</sup>.

È tipico degli eretici intraprendere discussioni, al fine di insinuare il dubbio sulla retta dottrina cristiana. Nell'accanimento della lotta stancano coloro che sono saldi nella fede, catturano quanti sono deboli, lasciando pieni di scrupoli e di perplessità coloro che si trovano in una situazione intermedia. Ora, nelle *animae seductibiles*, facili prede dei maestri ingannatori che riescono a plagarle e a condurle verso la perdizione, sono da riscontrare le vacche, bestie inferiori, docili e senza volontà. Scrive Agostino: «Io ritengo che vacche dei popoli siano da intendere le anime che si lasciano sedurre, perché facilmente seguono questi tori»<sup>45</sup>. Se le anime deboli sono le vacche, gli eretici sono i tori<sup>46</sup>. Del toro si mette in evidenza l'indomita fierezza, l'atteggiamento altero, forte e sprezzante verso la mandria, il temperamento ioso e

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**44** Ilario di Poitiers, se chiama cani i pagani per la rabbia del loro latrare contro Dio, connota gli eretici col nome di porci, perché, pur avendo l'unghia bifida, si occupano della conoscenza di Dio senza ruminarla (*Commento a Matteo* 6,1, SC 254, 170).

**45** Agostino, *Esposizione sui Salmi* 67,39 (CCL 39, 896–897).

**46** Il ruolo di capo mandria che spetta al toro ben si presta ad essere trasferito sul piano antropologico, assumendo una connotazione positiva o negativa in base ai rispettivi casi. Cfr. Ciccarese (2007) 285–289.

aggressivo, così che questo animale ben si presta ad essere simbolo di quella superbia, incarnatasi soprattutto negli eretici «dalla cervice indomabile, maestri di perfidia»<sup>47</sup>, i quali forti della loro attitudine al comando si trascinano dietro i più deboli e «ne corrompono la mente, persuadendoli al male»<sup>48</sup>. Gli eretici attaccano le anime deboli e indifese.

## Diavolo, eretici e animali

A seconda del cavaliere da cui l'anima si lascia montare, il cristiano può appartenere o alla cavalleria di Dio o a quella diabolica. Se nella cavalleria di Dio rientrano i santi, gli apostoli o i martiri su cui cavalca Cristo, i nemici della Chiesa, i persecutori e gli eretici sono cavalli sotto la sferza del diavolo<sup>49</sup>. E proprio l'immagine delle due diverse cavallerie, una di Cristo, l'altra del diavolo, evoca la raffigurazione degli eretici come servitori e ministri della bestia per eccellenza, il diavolo, pronti ad aggredire come lupi le colombe, le pecore di Dio: i cristiani. Il diavolo, svelato ed umiliato dalla venuta di Cristo, ha concepito un'astuzia scaltra: quella di ingannare insinuandosi all'interno della comunità cristiana. Ha escogitato eresie e scismi con cui abbattere la fede, corrompere la verità, spezzare l'unità<sup>50</sup>. Così, per il tramite degli eretici raggira coloro che non riesce più a trattenere nelle tenebre della vecchia via di menzogna e li strappa dal seno della Chiesa, spingendoli su una nuova via ingannevole: mentre costoro si illudono di essersi ormai avvicinati alla luce e di essere sfuggiti alla notte del mondo, di nuovo sono avvolti ignari in altre tenebre, sì da essere chiamati cristiani, pur non osservando il vangelo di Cristo e da ritenere di avere la luce, pur camminando nelle tenebre. Il nemico inganna con lusinghe e traveste i suoi falsi ministri in ministri di giustizia.

Gli eresiologi cristiani per descrivere questi ministri di Satana adottano la simbologia animale: dal lupo alla pernice, dal drago al serpente il ventaglio allegorico è ampio. Se è noto che la dicotomia natura/cultura, in termini generali, non è più postulata in senso statico e meramente oppositivo nell'impianto epistemologico dell'antropologia contemporanea, la realtà naturale e la costruzione culturale sembrano interagire vicendevolmente lungo l'asse della dialettica storica<sup>51</sup>. Demoni e animali dalle caratteristiche zoologiche negative sono ancora una volta chiavi, lenti proiettate sul palcoscenico della natura, oltre che specchi fedeli delle istanze naturali, per aprire uno spaccato sul *background* storico-culturale.

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<sup>47</sup> Cassiodoro, Commento ai Salmi 67,31 (CCL 97, 100; trad. it. Ciccarese [2007], 288).

<sup>48</sup> Gregorio Magno, Commento morale a Giobbe 35,8,14 (CCL 143B, 1782; trad. it. Ciccarese [2007], 288).

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 287–291.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. Monaci Castagno (1996); Monaci Castagno (1995).

<sup>51</sup> Si veda Tutrone (2012) 15 nota 9. Cfr. anche Rivera (1999).



**Fig. 6.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 16v, *De lupo*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

## Dal lupo alla volpe, dal drago al serpente

Già Ignazio di Antiochia esorta i figli della vera luce, cioè i cristiani, a seguire il pastore, non dando ascolto ai «molti lupi» che con lusinghe malvagie seducono chi corre nel Signore, perché chi marcia nella dottrina eretica non erediterà il regno di Dio<sup>52</sup>. Nei sermoni pastorali, il lupo diventa il nemico più temibile perché insidia il gregge del buon Pastore: quando «il mercenario vede venire il lupo, abbandona le pecore e fugge e il lupo le rapisce e le disperde»<sup>53</sup> (fig. 6).

L'appellativo di «lupi» non solo è riservato ai falsi profeti «che vengono in veste di pecore e dentro sono lupi rapaci»<sup>54</sup>, ma anche a pagani ed eretici pronti a perseguitare i cristiani. L'*auctoritas* scritturistica, che del lupo sottolinea la bramosia di preda e l'insaziabile voracità<sup>55</sup>, induce gli autori cristiani a utilizzare la stessa immagine per significare la sanguinaria crudeltà dei nemici della Chiesa; sulla falsariga evangelica, «il lupo rapace» è assunto come simbolo dell'eretico, maestro dell'errore, che cela la sua perfidia ingannando l'ingenuo fedele sotto la maschera della pietà<sup>56</sup>. Pronto a catturare le inermi pecore, il lupo è l'animale più adatto a rappresentare il

<sup>52</sup> Cfr. Ignazio di Antiochia, Lettera ai Filippesi 2–3 (SC 10bis, 142).

<sup>53</sup> Gv 10,12.

<sup>54</sup> Mt 7,15; cfr. anche At 20,29.

<sup>55</sup> Già nell'Antico Testamento il lupo condivide con il leone il ruolo di predatore: cfr. Ez 22,25.27.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. Ciccarese (2007) 83–85.

predatore spirituale, ministro del diavolo, sempre a caccia di anime pure e semplici: *Lupus diabolus uel heretici; in Euangelio: intrinsecus autem sunt lupi rapaces* scrive Eucherio di Lione<sup>57</sup>. Da Tertulliano a Origene, da Gerolamo a Prudenzio e oltre, connotare l'eretico come lupo diventa un *topos*. «Chi è il lupo?» si domandano Basilio di Cesarea e Agostino. Lupo è il diavolo, la bestia immane, il comune nemico di tutti. Il diavolo dispone di moltissimi lupi che invia contro le pecore di Cristo; sono lupi tutti gli eretici che con la loro perversa dottrina dilaniano il corpo innocente della Chiesa<sup>58</sup>.

Secondo Tertulliano nel versetto biblico: «Molti lupi rapaci verranno sotto le spoglie di pecore miti e innocenti» (Mt 7,15), con «sotto le spoglie di pecore» che altro si intende se non l'esterna e superficiale professione di fede del nome cristiano? E chi sono «i lupi rapaci» se non i sostenitori di certe interpretazioni subdole e capziose, che intimamente si nascondono e tentano di disgregare la compattezza della comunità cristiana<sup>59</sup>. Il lupo è dunque l'antitesi simbolica dell'agnello: «Cosa può avere in comune il lupo con l'agnello?» si chiede Sir 13,17 e conclude: «Lo stesso che il peccatore nei confronti del giusto». I buoni cristiani devono essere docili, mansueti e sottomessi alla volontà del suo Signore, tra i lupi persecutori «come pecore da macello» (Ps 43,12) si debbono offrire in sacrificio inermi e pazienti<sup>60</sup>.

Da parte sua, Ambrogio raffigura come lupi gli eretici, che tendono agguati agli ovili di Cristo e ululano intorno ai recinti di notte: è sempre notte per gli infidi eretici che con le nebbie di una sinistra interpretazione tentano di oscurare la luce di Cristo. Essi spiano l'assenza del pastore e solo allora attaccano le pecore di Cristo, tanto che il pastore deve vigilare in difesa degli *homines catholicos* e contro coloro che, pur riconosciuti come ortodossi, si sono macchiati in prima persona di eresia. Addirittura se gli eretici sorprendono qualcuno, abbindolandolo astutamente con le loro dispute – continua Ambrogio – lo fanno ammutolire. Un'accorata esortazione invita a stare attenti affinché l'eretico non «sottragga la voce»<sup>61</sup>. Si tratta di un elemento importante. Non è un caso che la dialettica e il metodo maieutico/dialogico si pongano nel cristianesimo antico quale strumento indispensabile alla base di un cammino filosofico<sup>62</sup>. L'adozione della tecnica dialogica nasce dall'esigenza di sottoporre a vaglio

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<sup>57</sup> Cfr. Eucherio di Lione, *Formule dell'intelligenza spirituale* 4 (CSEL 31, 25).

<sup>58</sup> Cfr. Basilio di Cesarea, *Omelie, Sul martire Mamante* 23,4 (PG 31, 596B); Agostino, *Commento al vangelo di Giovanni* 46,7 (CCL 36, 402).

<sup>59</sup> Cfr. Tertulliano, *La prescrizione contro gli eretici* 4 (SC 46, 92).

<sup>60</sup> Il pastore sta in guardia deciso a difendere le sue pecore dagli attacchi dei lupi. Egli ama le pecore e le nutre, mentre il lupo le divide introducendo falsi insegnamenti. Paolo ammonisce con le seguenti parole: «Io so che dopo la mia partenza si introdurranno fra di voi lupi rapaci, i quali non risparmieranno il gregge; e anche tra voi stessi sorgeranno uomini che insegnano cose perverse per trascinarsi dietro i discepoli. Perciò, vegliate» (At 20,29 – 31).

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. Ambrogio, *Esposizione del vangelo secondo Luca* 7,47 – 50 (CSEL 32/4, 301 – 302).

<sup>62</sup> Nei primi secoli del cristianesimo nasce il problema di comunicare la verità della dottrina cristiana a chi è «altro» e si colloca al di fuori della Chiesa. È la tradizione retorica del mondo antico che

critico le varie opinioni e di ricondurle, qualora si rivelino errate, alla verità; si crea un dialogo nella consapevolezza che qualunque uomo, grazie al contatto instaurato con il suo interlocutore, possa comprendere i suoi limiti e giungere alla verità. Lo scambio di idee e il dialogo rappresentano il dispiegarsi di un sentiero, laddove il soliloquio e le risposte, date a se stessi, costituiscono lo smarrimento. A questo mira l'eretico: a creare incertezza, senza avere uno scambio costruttivo di idee. Non meno interessante la parte conclusiva del passo di Ambrogio, dove il linguaggio utilizzato rimanda al campo semantico del contagio, del veleno e del mondo animale: l'eretico si insinua nascondendo la sua perfidia, dà luogo ai veleni di una disputa astuta, attacca l'anima, contagia le parti vitali. Terribili sono i morsi degli eretici, più feroci delle stesse belve<sup>63</sup>. E in effetti, in questi secoli del cristianesimo il veleno delle eresie continua a diffondersi nel seno delle comunità cristiane d'Oriente e d'Occidente, pullulando nel cuore stesso della Chiesa come un morbo immondo, capace di comprometterne in vario modo l'unità e la stabilità.

Ugualmente interessanti gli *Aenigmata Symphosii*, un'opera poetica epigrammatica, presente nell'*Anthologia Latina*. L'enigma *Lupus* di Simposio gioca sul valore simbolico del lupo, i cui tratti peculiari – i denti pericolosi, il carattere cruento e la capacità di togliere la voce – celano la rappresentazione dell'eretico<sup>64</sup>:

*Dentibus insanis ego sum qui uinco bidentes,  
sanguineas praedas quaerens uictusque cruentos.  
Multaque cum rapiam uocem quoque tollere possum*<sup>65</sup>.

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Non va dimenticato che, quantunque tutta la Scrittura metta continuamente in guardia dagli eretici, non tutti i nemici di Cristo si situano fuori della Chiesa. Spesso molti falsi dottori continuano ad operare nell'ombra, mescolati al gregge e nascosti all'interno della Chiesa: si tratta di lupi vestiti da pecore e di demoni mascherati da angeli di luce, come ricorda la Scrittura<sup>66</sup>.

Gli eretici non amano discutere, ma prevalere in qualunque modo per radunare quelli che non hanno partorito. Quale è l'animale più adatto a rendere l'idea? Il testo biblico di Ier 17,11 utilizza *in malam partem* l'esempio della pernice, che cova uova da lei non deposte. Essa si illude di avere una discendenza a spese degli altri uccelli a cui ha sottratto le uova, ma i piccoli, una volta cresciuti, sapranno riconoscere la loro vera madre, abbandonando quella che li ha allevati inutilmente (fig. 7)<sup>67</sup>.

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può offrire gli strumenti e le modalità per affrontare e superare l'ostacolo che si pone tra i cristiani e l'interlocutore pagano, così da favorire l'ascolto. Su questo tema cfr. Rizzi (1993).

**63** Cfr. Ambrogio, Esposizione del vangelo secondo Luca 7,51 (CSEL 32/4, 302).

**64** Cfr. Tertulliano, La prescrizione contro gli eretici 4 (SC 46, 92–93); Agostino, Commento al vangelo di Giovanni 46,7–8 (CCL 36, 402–403).

**65** Per il testo latino cfr. Riese (1894) 230. Si tratta del *carmen 33, cod. Salmasiani*, n. 286, vv. 114–116. Per un commento cfr. Bergamin (2005).

**66** Cfr. Mt 7,15; 13,41; 18,7; 2 Cor 11,13–15; 1 Tm 5,24.

**67** Cfr. Ciccarese (2007) 185–187.



**Fig. 7.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 54r, *De perdice*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

La pernice è furba, ingannatrice, litigiosa, astuta tanto da saper escogitare trucchi e funzioni per sfuggire ai suoi inseguitori: tutte caratteristiche adatte all'eretico amante delle dispute, maestro di finzione, che imita la voce di Cristo e raduna attorno a sé gli sciocchi abbindolati. Tuttavia, come la stolta pernice, faticherà invano «perché a tutti si manifesterà la sua follia»<sup>68</sup> e, come i perniciotti giunti alla pienezza dell'età, gli uomini sapranno riconoscere i loro veri genitori, Cristo e la Chiesa, abbandonando l'eretico<sup>69</sup>.

Le dottrine eretiche seppero essere così affascinanti, tanto da attrarre nelle loro fila intellettuali e valenti filosofi, i quali rimasero incantati dai miti della Pistis Sophia, del Pleroma, delle Ipostasi degli Arconti e del Demiurgo. A molti intellettuali dell'epoca sembrò di ritrovare in tali dottrine parte dell'antica sapienza greca, cioè, quella filosofia neoplatonica, stoica e aristotelica che ancora costituiva la colonna portante della cultura filosofica tardoantica. Il seducente veleno delle eresie si diffuse nel mondo cristiano anche a causa della mancanza, nella predicazione di Cristo e nei vangeli, di precise riflessioni su varie questioni teologiche<sup>70</sup>. A ciò vanno aggiunti, ovviamente, elementi di rivendicazioni politiche e sociali, attese millenaristiche ed utopistiche speranze di giustizia sociale di cui, sovente, tali sette si fecero portavoce. Così, le eresie trovarono terreno fertile in cui attecchire ed ebbero l'opportunità di diffondersi nelle province dell'Impero. Il veleno affascinante e letale delle eresie insidiò la religione cristiana, ne intaccò le fondamenta, ma offrì al tempo stesso l'occasione per combattere quelle «astute volpi». Arriviamo a un'altra interessante simbologia animale. Ambrogio non risparmia parole di condanna per la

<sup>68</sup> 2 Tm 3,9.

<sup>69</sup> Cfr. Agostino, *Contro Fausto manicheo* 13,12 (CSEL 25/1, 391–392).

<sup>70</sup> Cfr. Simonetti (2001) 27–30.



**Fig. 8.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 16r, *De vulpe*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

volpe, che si nasconde nelle profondità di buche e tane, che non pensa ad altro se non a cautelare se stessa mentre tende insidie agli altri (fig. 8)<sup>71</sup>.

Il simbolismo demonologico della volpe affianca quello più genericamente antropologico in uno dei frammenti attribuiti a Origene a proposito di Ez 13,4, dove si ricorda che questo animale è astuto, feroce e selvatico, caratteristiche attribuibili non solo all'uomo malvagio, ma anche agli spiriti consimili<sup>72</sup>. L'Alessandrino, notando che nella Scrittura vi sono animali addotti come esempio dei vizi peggiori, cita il lupo e la volpe, per concludere che ciascuna specie di demoni sembra avere qualcosa in comune con ciascuna specie di animali. Tenendo presente un simile ritratto, ogni tipo di falsità e frode diventa appannaggio degli eretici, il cui subdolo atteggiamento trova un valido appoggio in un avvertimento che la Scrittura scaglia contro i falsi maestri: «Come volpi nel deserto i tuoi profeti, Israele» (Ez 13,4). Prende così avvio la simbologia *vulpis haereticus*<sup>73</sup>, applicata ai passi biblici che nominano questo animale<sup>74</sup>. Commentando Ct 2,15, Origene raduna un corposo *dossier* di *testimonia* sulla

<sup>71</sup> Cfr. Ambrogio, Esamerone 6, s. 9,3,12 (CSEL 32/1, 211).

<sup>72</sup> Origene, Omelie su Ezechiele 2,4 (GCS 33, 345–346).

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. Ambrogio, Esposizione del vangelo secondo Luca 7,31 (CSEL 32/4, 295); Cromazio di Aquileia, Commento al vangelo di Matteo 41,2 (CCL 9 A, 390); Gregorio di Elvira, Commento al Cantico dei Cantici 4,24 (CCL 69, 205); Prudenzio, Il doppio Testamento 18,71–72 (CSEL 61, 439).

<sup>74</sup> Cfr. Ippolito, Commento al Cantico dei Cantici 20 (CSCO 264, 40–41); Filone di Carpasia, Commento al Cantico dei Cantici 65 (CP 6, 104). Sulla volpe cfr. Ciccarese (2007) 393–395.

volpe<sup>75</sup>. Oltre i noti passi evangelici (Mt 8,20; Lc 13,32) cita e commenta Ps 62,11 «diventeranno parte delle volpi»; 2 Esd 13,35 LXX «non salirà la volpe e distruggerà il muro delle loro pietre?»; e il testo di Idc 15,3–5<sup>76</sup>. Il nutrito corpo di passi scritturistici è creato da Origene allo scopo di suffragare la presenza delle «piccole volpi» nella vigna del Signore, pronte a non far fiorire la retta fede:

Come volpi possiamo intendere i perversi dottori delle dottrine eretiche, che con l'astuzia delle argomentazioni seducono i cuori degli innocenti e distruggono la vigna del Signore, perché non fiorisca nella retta fede. E dunque ai dottori ortodossi si ordina, finché queste volpi sono ancora piccole e non hanno ancora ingannato molte anime ma la loro empia dottrina è agli inizi, che si affrettino a confutarli, a superarli in contraddittorio con la parola di verità e a catturarli con affermazioni veritieri<sup>77</sup>.

Se lo stesso *dossier* scritturistico è offerto da Gerolamo allorché arriva a trattare Ez 13,4<sup>78</sup>, è significativo che in Ambrogio, Massimo di Torino e Cromazio di Aquileia il ritratto dell'eretico, «astuta volpe», diventa *topico* e si conserva pressoché inalterato, permettendo di cogliere alcune caratteristiche:

Ambrogio di Milano	Massimo di Torino	Cromazio di Aquileia
Esposizione del vangelo secondo Luca 7,30–31 (CCL 14, 225)	Sermoni 41,4–5 (CCL 23, 166–167)	Commento al vangelo di Matteo 41 (CCL 9 A, 390–392)
<i>Fallax quippe animal et insidiis semper intentum rapinam frau- dis exercet. Nihil tutum, nihil otiosum, nihil patitur esse secu- rum, quod inter ipsa hospitia hominum praedam requirat.</i>	<i>Est enim hoc genus animalis fal- lax et insidiis semper intentum rapinam fraudis exercens, quod pseudoprophetis uel haereticis nihil tutum nihil otiosum nihil patiatur esse securum, quod inter ipsa quoque hominum domicilia praedam requirat.</i>	<i>Sunt autem diuersa naturaliter in ulpe calliditatis ingenia, quae rapinam fraudis exercens, quod pseudoprophetis uel haereticis nihil tutum nihil otiosum nihil iure ac merito comparantur. Insi- rum, quod inter ipsa hospitia hominum domicilia praedam requirat.</i>

*Sunt autem diuersa naturaliter in ulpe calliditatis ingenia, quae  
rapinam fraudis exercens, quod pseudoprophetis uel haereticis  
nihil tutum nihil otiosum nihil iure ac merito comparantur. Insi-  
rum, quod inter ipsa hospitia hominum domicilia  
praedam requirat.*

*Sunt autem diuersa naturaliter in ulpe calliditatis ingenia, quae  
rapinam fraudis exercens, quod pseudoprophetis uel haereticis  
nihil tutum nihil otiosum nihil iure ac merito comparantur. Insi-  
rum, quod inter ipsa hospitia hominum domicilia  
praedam requirat.*

*Sunt autem diuersa naturaliter in ulpe calliditatis ingenia, quae  
rapinam fraudis exercens, quod pseudoprophetis uel haereticis  
nihil tutum nihil otiosum nihil iure ac merito comparantur. Insi-  
rum, quod inter ipsa hospitia hominum domicilia  
praedam requirat.*

75 Origene, Commento al Cantico dei Cantici 4 (GCS 33, 236).

76 Si tratta dell'episodio in cui Sansone cattura trecento volpi, lega tra loro le code, vi mette una fiaccola accesa e le invia ad incendiare i campi di grano dei Filistei.

77 Cfr. Origene, Commento al Cantico dei Cantici 4 (GCS 33, 236; trad. it. Ciccarese [2007], 395).

78 Cfr. Gerolamo, Commento a Ezechiele 4,13 (CCL 75, 139).

*Haereticis autem vulpes conparat Haereticos etiam omnes arbitror Vulpes hic pseudoprophetas significat qui eo tempore erant in populo Israhel, et nunc sunt haeretici.*

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*Vulpes enim plenum fraudis est qui cum in domo domini habitare animal foveam parans et in non possint, conuenticula sibi habent, id est collectiones impias fovea semper latere desiderans. quaedam uelut foveas praepanaciter latentes insidiatur quorum cordibus per doctrinam Ita sunt haeretici, qui domum tenebrosas, in quibus pertinetnae infidelitatis demersas, in sibi parare non norunt, sed circumscripti suis alios de ecclesiae, ut si qua innocens suam uelut in quibusdam foveis cipere conantur. Iacob domum anima forte processerit, uelut habitat, haereticus in fovea est, pullum gallinae matris absorbe- ut fraudulenta vulpis gallinae illi ant. evangelicae dolum semper intendens.*

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*Et ideo Samson ad caudas vitemus mortiferas nequissimae earum faces ligavit et dimisit in rum animantium captiones, ne Capite nobis vulpes pusillas ex messes alienigenarum, eo quod sicut uulps quondam, quas terminantes uineam et uineae haeretici fructus incendere co- Samson ille fortissimus in agros nostrae florent, id est pseudonent alienos latratibus magis sonori quam vocibus expoliti Philistinorum armatas facibus prophetas atque omnes haeretimisit, quae omnia ambussere cos, uulps significans qui uiflammis quae contigere uestigiis, neam Domini more uulpium ita fructus nostrarum segetum exterminare conantur. peruersorum dogmatum uulps aut insidiarum deceptione capiant aut flamarum adustione consumant!*

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La volpe personifica l'eretico che combatte le anime cristiane, e con frodi e raggiri tenta di ingannare, di sottrarre, di depredare coloro che non sono ancora saldi nella fede. Con la persuasione dei suoi discorsi, con le trappole e gli artefizi delle argomentazioni inganna i più semplici, mina dal di dentro la retta fede cristiana, rimanendo nascosta al suo interno, strappando dal gregge di Cristo le menti più deboli. Interno/esterno, nascosto/evidente, dentro/fuori: le *oppositiones* implicano un senso di pericolo legato all'eresia e soprattutto un senso di volerla emarginare o escluderla dal resto delle comunità urbane. L'analisi dei testi e dei materiali antichi dimostra che gli eretici non sono gruppi emarginati: spesso i membri di queste comunità fanno parte dell'aristocrazia senatoria o dei proprietari terrieri, così che la rappresentazione negativa sembra diventare un mezzo per ottenerne l'emarginazione sociale. L'eretico si cela all'interno della comunità.

Quali simboli demoniaci, il serpente, la vipera e il drago non potevano mancare all'appello. Per chiunque legga la Bibbia, il serpente è legato al racconto genesiaco del peccato originale, dove dall'essere «la più astuta delle bestie sulla terra» (Gen 3,1) passa ad essere la bestia maledetta, condannata a strisciare (Gen 3,14–15). Da qui scaturisce l'identificazione con il diavolo che, su base neotestamentaria, sarà



**Fig. 9.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 68v, *De scitali serpente*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

ripresa dagli autori cristiani antichi: *serpens diabolus*, il serpente è il diavolo<sup>79</sup>. Diavolo e serpente connotano la bestia per eccellenza: il maligno, Satana (fig. 9)<sup>80</sup>.

Al servizio di questa bestia immonda si pongono uomini malvagi, velenosi come serpenti, che non vogliono ascoltare la parola di Dio. Sono *in primis* gli eretici a meritare l'appellativo di «serpenti» perché vomitano veleno con i loro discorsi e avvelenano il cibo della Scrittura<sup>81</sup>. Gregorio Magno a proposito di Iob 20,14 («Il suo pane si muterà nelle sue viscere, diventando un veleno di vipera dentro di te») ricorda che se il pane è l'*intelligentia Scripturae Sacrae*, il fiele di aspidi è l'*error heresios* che contamina trasformando quella bevanda di vita in una coppa di veleno<sup>82</sup>. È chiaro che, giocando sul rapporto serpente-veleno, gli autori cristiani antichi fanno largo uso di terminologia del contagio, del *venenum*. Gerolamo compara l'eretico al serpente: come quest'ultimo mordendo di nascosto insinua il veleno, così l'altro calunniando di nascosto inietta il veleno nel cuore dei compagni; il serpente-diavolo può mordere uno di nascosto e senza che nessuno se ne accorga può infettarlo col veleno del peccato<sup>83</sup>. E come i serpenti sono variegati nel corpo, così gli eretici sono vari nei loro errori e complessi nella malvagità; deposta l'immagine di Dio, che consiste nella giustizia e nella santità della verità, hanno assunta quella del serpente, simbolo di malvagità e apparenza di verità. Ma non basta. Razza di vipere sono anche gli eretici, dalla natura velenosa e vendicativa, che avvinghiano nelle

**79** L'identificazione del serpente di *Genesi* con il diavolo è sancita da Ap 12,9 («Il grande drago, il serpente antico, chiamato diavolo e Satana ...») e 20,2 («Il dragone, l'antico serpente, che è il diavolo e Satana»). La raffigurazione del diavolo sotto forma di serpente o di dragone è anteriore a quelle antropomorfe; le più antiche risalgono al IV secolo. Cfr. Consolino (1995), in part. 290.

**80** Cfr. Tertulliano, *Polemica con i Giudei* 10,10 (CCL 1/2, 1377); *Contro Marcione* 3,18,7 (CCL 1/1, 533); Cromazio di Aquileia, *Commento al vangelo di Matteo* 14,5; 32,7 (CCL 9 A, 255 e 363); Gregorio di Elvira, *Commento al Cantico dei Cantici* 4,27 (CCL 69, 206).

**81** Cfr. Cassiodoro, *Commento ai Salmi* 139,4 (CCL 98, 1256). Cfr. anche Ciccarese (2007) 253–257.

**82** Cfr. Gregorio Magno, *Commento morale a Giobbe* 15,13,16 (CCL 143 A, 77).

**83** Gerolamo, *Commento all'Ecclesiaste* 10,11 (CCL 72, 338).



**Fig. 10.** *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, folio 66v, *De vipera*. © Per gentile concessione dell'Università di Aberdeen.

loro spire: *vipera venenatissima* definisce Tertulliano l'eretica Cainita, che contesta il battesimo come un serpente che aborre l'acqua, mentre nel *Contro Marcione*, in un contesto proverbiale, l'avvocato di Cartagine paragona l'aspide all'eretico e la vipera al Giudeo: *desinat nunc haereticus a Iudaeo, aspis, quod aiunt, a vipera mutuari veneno*<sup>84</sup> (fig. 10).

E infine il drago, il cui simbolismo nel cristianesimo affonda le sue radici nella visione dell'*Apocalisse* (cap. 12), dove è identificato con il serpente tentatore di *Genesi*, così che se Cristo è l'agnello, la simbologia drago-Satana s'impone<sup>85</sup>. Il drago, capo degli spiriti maligni, è lo stesso diavolo che fu scacciato dal paradiso, al punto da interpretare il suo nome con una fantasiosa etimologia: il drago si chiama così per il fatto che ha disertato da Dio<sup>86</sup>. Per estensione, il drago passa a significare i seguaci del diavolo, i capi degli eretici<sup>87</sup>. Agostino chiarisce che il nemico dei cristiani era un leone quando infieriva apertamente, ora che insidia di nascosto è il drago: il male, evidente come il ruggito del leone, si sente da lontano, si evita da lontano<sup>88</sup>. Il drago, cioè l'eretico, si avvicina con l'inganno, serpeggiando con movimenti occulti, stri-

**84** Tertulliano, *Il battesimo* 1,2 (CC 1/1, 277); *Contro Marcione* 3,8,1 (CCL 1/1, 518). Cfr. Ciccarese (2007) 373–375.

**85** Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 379–381; Godding (2000). Per la simbologia drago-Satana cfr. Origene, *Omelie sul Levitico* 16,6 (GCS 29, 502); Cirillo di Alessandria, *Commento a Isaia* 1,6 (PG 70, 288B).

**86** Cfr. Teofilo di Antiochia, *Ad Autolico* 2,28 (SC 20, 168).

**87** Cfr. Gerolamo, *Commento a Ezechiele* 10,32 (CCL 75, 449).

**88** Cfr. Agostino, *Esposizione ai Salmi* 39,1 (CCL 38, 423–424). Cfr. Quacquarelli (1975).

sciando lento, mormorando con astuto sibilo. Bell'esempio di fusione zoologica tra serpente, drago e leone per dipingere l'eretico.

## Concludendo

Dalla simbologia animale applicata all'eresia, si nota come gli eresiologi cristiani abbiano cercato di costruire una tipologia dell'eretico. La Chiesa ha ricevuto il retto insegnamento da Gesù e dagli apostoli; l'eresia è nata come erronea diramazione dall'ortodossia; è settaria e minoritaria, scaturisce da un travisamento del patrimonio tradizionale della fede o da un mescolamento dell'ortodossia con qualche filosofia pagana, è contraddistinta da uno spirito di fazione, da un'ansiosa ricerca della novità, si nasconde all'interno del seno della Chiesa, minandone l'unità e sviando le anime più deboli. I cristiani vedono la Chiesa di Dio costantemente minacciata da dottrine erronie, false e sacrileghe. Coloro che la pensano diversamente sono moralmente maligni e vengono loro attribuite stoltezza, smisurata ignoranza, insensatezza e depravazione. Questi individui sono calunniatori e ingannatori, minati da fermenti di malvagità, affetti da ignoranza di Dio, e professano dottrine di origine diabolica, distorcendo la fede. Essi con il veleno dell'eresia contaminano, agendo spesso subdolamente al suo interno, il corpo della Chiesa. Queste le caratteristiche dell'eretico che traspaziono dalla lettura della simbologia animale: corvi, lupi, vipere, serpenti, draghi, volpi, leoni.

Ciò non toglie che i cristiani, aspirando all'unità, siano pronti ad accogliere di nuovo nel seno della Chiesa quanti abbiano rinnegato l'eresia per entrare nel corpo della Chiesa. Proprio il lupo, icona per eccellenza del tempo escatologico – «il lupo e l'agnello pascoleranno insieme» recita Is 65,25 – può subire una metamorfosi ogni volta che un infedele entra nei *greges dominici*. Così chiosa Agostino: «Se ascolta la voce del pastore cambia natura e da lupo diventa pecora»<sup>89</sup>. Da lupo a pecora: dall'eresia si rientra nel seno dell'ortodossia, unendo fermezza e dolcezza, per essere condotti al pascolo di Cristo.

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### Sigle e abbreviazioni

CCL = *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum, Series Latina*, Turnhout–Paris.

CP = *Corona Patrum*, Torino.

CSCO = *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Paris–Louvain.

CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Wien.

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<sup>89</sup> Agostino, Commento al vangelo di Giovanni 45,10 (CCL 36, 393).

GCS = *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten (drei) Jahrhunderte*, Leipzig–Berlin.  
 PG = *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca*, ed. Jacques Paul Migne, Paris 1857–1866.  
 SC = *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris.

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Daniel Ogden

# The Function of Dragon Episodes in Early Hagiography

## i.

It had long been a commonplace of pagan dragon narratives that the dragon (*drakōn*, *draco*) should pump a miasma of pestilential air out into the atmosphere. The poison emanates from the dragon's venom,<sup>1</sup> and since this was often conceived of as fiery, the air produced was sometimes conceived of also as smoky.<sup>2</sup> But in hagiographic narratives the venomous miasma of the dragon is redeployed in a more specific way: the dragon's presence and its sickening breath are used to embody a community's commitment to pagan worship. So it is in the late fourth-century *Acts of Philip*, where Philip and his team have been sent by Jesus on a mission to convert the Ophianoi of Ophiorhyme, the 'Snake People' of 'Snake Town' (Ophiorhyme is identified in the text as Hierapolis-Pammukale).<sup>3</sup> As they approach the city they first encounter a great dark dragon surrounded by a great dark wind. It is a hundred cubits long, it has a belly of embers and fire, and it is attended upon by a host of snakes and a host of the offspring of snakes. Philip advises his followers:

Now we need help from the Saviour. Let us remember the words of Christ, who sent us on our mission and said, 'Fear nothing, neither persecution, nor the snakes of that place, nor the misty dragon [zopheros *drakōn*].' So let us stand like firmly fixed pillars before God, and our enemy's entire power will be nullified, and its threat will fail. So let us pray, and let us purify the air by sprinkling from cups, and this misty creature will be rendered still, and his smoke will be halted.

*Acts of Philip* 9 (V)

Here, Philip's association between the snakes of the place and the prospect of martyrdom makes the figurative function of the dragon and its breath clear. The Ps.-Abdian *Historia Apostolica* of the sixth century AD tells rather of Philip's mission to Scythia. Here, the dragon that lives under a statue of Mars has been rendering the locals seriously ill by pumping out its fumes:

The sick said to him, 'What are we to do?' The apostle replied to them, 'Cast down this Mars, and smash it up, and in the place in which it seems to stand fixed, establish a cross of my Lord Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.28–98, Lucan *Pharsalia* 9.619–699, Silius Italicus *Punica* 6.140–293, Athenaeus 221b–e (Alexander of Myndus Fi.6 Wellmann).

<sup>2</sup> Homer *Iliad* 6.152–195, Hesiod *Theogony* 820–880, Pindar *Pythians* 1.15–28, Silius Italicus *Punica* 6.140–293, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.1–3, 2.3.2.

<sup>3</sup> For Philip and his *Acts* see Bovon (1988), Amsler *et al.* (1996), (1999) (the latter for the text), Rutherford (2007), Ogden (2013a) 387–391, 422–425, (2013b) 207–220.

Christ, and worship it.' Then those that were racked with pain began to cry out, 'Virtue will be restored in us, and we will cast down Mars' ... [Then, after Philip has banished the dragon:] ... and he restored to health the whole crowd that had been afflicted by diseases because of the dragon's breath.

[Abdias] *Historia Apostolica* pp. 738–740 Fabricius

So too the *Acts of Silvester* (ca. AD 500) tells of the dragon of Rome, which lived at the bottom of a deep cave, and was fed with titbits by 'profane virgins', i. e., the Vestals, who would descend to it down 365 steps. This dragon suddenly comes up and, without actually emerging from its hole, corrupts the air around with its breath, as a result of which comes the death of people and, in great measure, mourning for the death of children.<sup>4</sup> Aldhelm, writing his treatises *On Virginity* in the seventh century AD, renders the significance of the dragon's breath more explicit:

... a death-bringing dragon [*draco*] that was lurking in the secret cave of a crypt in Rome and terrorising the unfortunate people in a savage fashion, corrupting the air with its venomous jaws and the pestilential blasts of its breath. The mistaken paganism of the heathens had had the custom of making the polluted offerings of a mad sacrifice to this same beast...

Aldhelm *De virginitate* (prose version) pp. 257–258 Ehwald

Aldhelm's Silvester goes on to draw a collar tight around the dragon's neck to keep the fumes in.

In the *Passion of St Victoria*, also ca. AD 500, Domicianus, the mayor of the town of Tribula, which is afflicted by its local dragon, comes to St Victoria for help. He tells her that he himself has moved outside the town to escape the dragon's blasts. Victoria reassures him that if he were to abandon his idols and worship Christ, the dragon would flee at once from him, and he would be freed from oppression.<sup>5</sup> Writing in AD 782–786 Paul the Deacon describes the miasma arising from the Dragon of Metz and the plague of snakes over which it presides in striking terms (the Dragon of Metz is the latter-day Graouilly, the star still of civic processions):

At the point in time that the venerable priest [Clement of Metz] came to the aforementioned city, the greatest calamity was destroying the people of the district, for the above-mentioned amphitheatre was filled with such a great multitude of serpents that not only did no one dare to come

<sup>4</sup> *Acts of Silvester* B (1), at Duchesne (1897) 31–32. For Silvester and his *Acts* see Mombrutius (1910) ii (text), Loenertz (1975), Pohlkamp (1983) (textual notes), Canella (2006), Ogden (2013a) 391–393, 420–421, (2013b) 221–227.

<sup>5</sup> *The Passion of St Victoria* 5–7, pp. 158–159 Delehaye. Once again Aldhelm makes the point more crisply, *De virginitate* (prose version) at Ehwald (1919) 308–309: 'It happened at that time that all the citizens who had lived in the city of Tribula were scorning the town, scattering in all directions, roaming this way and that, because they could not endure the venom and the blasts of a scaly dragon [*draco*]. Victoria freely promised these people that, if they would abandon their wretched little idols of gods, renounce the Lupercalia festivals of their temples and be converted to God, she would drive the venomous exhalations of the foaming basilisk far away and restore the city to a safe existence.' For Aldhelm on Victoria, see Mayr-Harting (1972).

to this same place, but no one even dared to come near it. But their venomous breaths had given rise to exceptionally cruel deaths, not just of men, but also of horses, oxen, sheep and other animals. ... So after the admirable worshipper of the Holy Trinity began to give his mind over fully to performing the duty of preaching laid upon him, the countless multitude of the sick soon flocked eagerly to where he was when they heard that he was preaching that the true God was the source of succour, and they learned from the mouth of the excellent shepherd how they had deservedly been infected by the serpents' venom. When he saw their manifest wretchedness, he made no delay in applying the most healthful medicine. So he pledged that they would have God's mercy all the more quickly if they did not refuse to abandon the detestable worship of idols. And so not only the sick but also the few who remained well promised on the basis of the healthful advice to renounce all effigies once they were delivered, so long as they were not cheated of their promised benefits by the bishop of God on high.

Paul the Deacon, *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* at *PL* xcv, 711–713<sup>6</sup>

## ii.

The saint is able to defeat or contain the dragon by the power of his faith, and his success in dealing with it is itself a demonstration of that faith. The starting-point for this notion, and the text to which this motif makes appeal, is the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus addresses his converts with the words:

See, I have given you the power to trample on snakes [*opheis*] and scorpions, and upon all the enemy's strength, and he will be able to harm you in no way.

Luke 10.19

This particular gesture is recalled in the fourth-century AD (or earlier) *Questions of Bartholomew*. Here Bartholomew has asked Jesus for a vision of the antagonist of mankind. This is the Revelation Dragon, who has now acquired the name of Beliar. Jesus reluctantly accedes to the request, and Beliar is brought forth from the abyss in chains of fire and under the guard of 660 angels. Jesus instructs Bartholomew, 'Draw near to him, Bartholomew, trample on his neck with your feet, and he will tell you the nature of his work and how he deceives mankind.' Bartholomew is of course terrified and asks Jesus for the border of his cloak for protection. Jesus refuses it, and tells him rather, in effect, merely to have faith in him as he approaches the dragon:

Jesus said to him, 'Is it not at my word that everything happens? Was it not by the will of my father that [lacuna] was made subject to the spirit? So follow my command, and go in my name and ask him what you want.' Bartholomew trampled on his neck and forced his face to the ground, all the way down to his ears. Bartholomew said to him, 'Tell me who you are and what your name is!' He replied to him, 'Relieve the pressure on me a little and I will tell

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<sup>6</sup> For Clement of Metz, the Graouilly and the traditions associated with them, see Chazan (2000), Goetz (2000), Michaux (2000), Wagner (2000), Ogden (2013b) 242–244.

you who I am, how I came here, what my work is and what is the nature of my power.'

*Questions of Bartholomew* 7<sup>7</sup>

But before this, in *The Shepherd of Hermas* of AD 130 – 150, Hermas overcomes a serpentine sea-monster charging at him in a vision by the power of his faith: 'I started to cry and to ask the Lord to deliver me from it, and I remembered the saying I had heard: "Do not doubt, Hermas." So, my brothers, I clothed myself in my faith in the Lord and remembered the great things He had taught me.' Then the Church, in the form of a shining white lady tells him, 'You were delivered from it successfully because you threw your anxieties off upon God and you opened your heart to the Lord, trusting that you could be saved by nothing except His great and glorious name... You have escaped great suffering because of your faith.'<sup>8</sup>

One of the most remarkable narratives to display the slaying of dragons proper as an act of faith is Rufinus of Aquileia's *History of the Monks in Egypt*, written before AD 410. Here a mixed bunch of believers and non-believers are walking through the desert, when they discover the trail of a huge dragon. The non-believers respond with terror, but the Christian brothers welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their faith and its power. They boast that they have already killed many snakes and dragons before, and one of them keenly runs off to the dragon's cave to get the job done, although he is subsequently dissuaded from seeing the project through by a local hermit, who tells him that the non-believers would not be able to tolerate even the sight of the creature. This tale projects the demonstration of faith through dragon-slaying as an emblematic, well-established and childishly exciting sport for the faithful. And the extent to which the dragon-slaying activity separates and distinguishes the faithful from even sympathetic unbelievers is clearly marked out. Such a narrative could not have been composed save in a literary or story-telling context in which saintly dragon-slaying is a hackneyed and pervasive theme, to an extent greater still, one feels, than the extant Christian dragon-slaying narratives prior to this text would in themselves indicate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For the *Questions of Bartholomew* see Kroll (1932) 71–82, Kaestli (1988).

<sup>8</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* vision 4.1–3. For the *Shepherd of Hermas* see Quasten (1949–1960) i, 92–105, Peterson (1954), Whittaker (1967) (text), Wilson (1995), Ehrman (2003), Lipsett (2011). Looking ahead, in the twelfth-century *Miracula Sancti Georgii*, George prays to God before closing with the dragon, 'Make the terrible beast fall at my feet, so that people will know that you are always with me' (*Miracula Sancti Georgii, Codex Romanus Angelicus* 46, §12).

<sup>9</sup> Tyrannius Rufinus of Aquileia *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 8, at PL 21, 420–422. For Ammon see Festugi  re (1961), (1964) iv.1, Ogden (2013b) 229–231.

### iii.

The result of the killing, banishing or burying of the dragon is the mass conversion of the local community, or the onlookers. This is presented as an intellectual response to the saint's victory over the dragon, but insofar as the dragon has served as an embodiment of their pagan error, its removal from the community must in itself entail the people's conversion. The writings of Luke again lie in the background here. In the Acts of the Apostles Paul sets the Maltese on the path to conversion with the demonstrative mastery of a viper, which bites him on the hand without effect, and is then shaken off into a pyre.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the Church (in the form of the shining white lady) says to Hermas, in words following on directly from the last quoted:

You have escaped great suffering because of your faith, and because you did not have doubt upon seeing such a huge beast. Take yourself off, therefore, and report His great deeds to the Lord's elect, and tell them that this beast is an example of the great suffering that is to come.

*Shepherd of Hermas* vision 4.1–3

Here the desirability of a progression from a personal demonstration of faith in dragon-slaying (or -manipulating) to the conversion of others by means of it is clearly articulated. The *Acts of Silvester* tells that after Silvester had shut in and quelled the dragon of Rome for first one year, then two, ‘all the servants of the dragon, agreeing amongst themselves that it had been truly overcome and shut in, prostrated themselves before St Silvester, put their faith in Christ and were baptized.’<sup>11</sup> Aldhelm’s verse version of this tale has the citizens of Rome celebrating the confinement of the dragon: ‘For that reason’, Aldhelm concludes, ‘the grace of baptism, shining from heaven, at once illumined the arches of Rome like the sun.’<sup>12</sup>

The *Acts of Philip* culminates in the saint consigning the Echidna, the ‘Viper’ that had been the object of the Ophiorhyme’s worship, to the abyss, but, along with it, in his wrath, the entirety of the citizen body too. When Jesus, manifest, restores the citizens to the surface: ‘They all fell on their faces, abased themselves before Philip and exhorted him, ready as they were to escape from their error. They prayed to become worthy of Christ’s presence.’<sup>13</sup>

When, in the *Passion of St Victoria*, the mayor of Tribula approaches St Victoria to rid his town of the local dragon and its depredations, he promises her: ‘If you expel the dragon from there, I will make all its citizens become Christians.’ We

<sup>10</sup> Acts 28.3–6.

<sup>11</sup> *Acts of Silvester* B (1), at Duchesne (1897) 31–32.

<sup>12</sup> Aldhelm *De virginitate* (poetic version) lines 545–556.

<sup>13</sup> *Acts of Philip* 32 (V). Note also the Ps.-Abdian narrative on Philip again: ‘As a result of this it came about that all those who had been persecuting the Apostle Philip repented and worshipped him, considering him to be God’ ([Abdias] *Historia Apostolica* pp. 738–740 Fabricius).

infer that this does indeed ensue, though we are not told it explicitly, the text confining itself to the citizens' grateful praise for Victoria herself.<sup>14</sup>

## IV.

Often the saint founds a church, a monastery or a hermitage for himself in the cave from which the dragon has been expelled. When, in the *Acts of Thomas* of ca. AD 220–240, St Thomas has defeated his Indian dragon, he orders that the chasm it has left behind be filled in by workmen, and that foundations be laid for guest-houses over it – presumably, that is, guest-houses for Christian visitors, missionaries or pilgrims.<sup>15</sup> In the second dragon episode of the *Acts of Philip* Philip compels the Dragon of the Rocks and its fifty attendant serpents themselves actually to build a church in the place in which they have been living, each one bringing a column for it, before he banishes them into the wilderness.<sup>16</sup> In her *Passion* Victoria, having expelled the dragon of Tribula, founds a nunnery in its vacated cave, for which the locals provide more than 60 virgin girls of nine years or above.<sup>17</sup> Paul the Deacon introduces Clement of Metz's dealings with dragon and snakes afflicting that city with a note of what must in fact have been the culminating episode of that story, namely the detail that the saint made his personal home in the vaults of the amphitheatre that the dragon and the snakes had been occupying, and also founded a chapel there in the name of St Peter.<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Tours' Caluppan, one of the subjects of his late sixth-century AD *Book of the Lives of the Fathers*, broadly fits into this pattern, in that he chooses a rough and inaccessible cave for his hermitage, from which, after taking up residence, he drives off the snakes and dragons that attack him there.<sup>19</sup> The first *Life of Samson of Dol*, of the seventh or eighth century AD, tells that, after destroying the Dragon of Dol, Samson refuses to accept any significant honour from the locals, but founds a monastery near the cave, in order to glorify the miracle, whilst he him-

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<sup>14</sup> *The Passion of St Victoria* 5–7, pp. 158–159 Delehaye. Coming forward to the twelfth century again, the dragon-slaying narrative of the *Miracula Sancti Georgi* culminates in the people of Lasia, hitherto worshippers of 'Heracles, Scamander, Apollo and the great goddess Artemis', raising a Christian temple in the name of St George (*Miracula Sancti Georgii, Codex Romanus Angelicus* 46, §12).

<sup>15</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 33. For the *Acts of Thomas* see Lipsius and Bonnet (1891–1903) ii.2, 147–150 (text), Bornkamm (1933), Klijn (1962), Bremmer (2001), Ogden (2013b) 202–204.

<sup>16</sup> *Acts of Philip* 11.2–8 (A).

<sup>17</sup> *The Passion of St Victoria* 5–7, pp. 158–159 Delehaye; so too Aldhelm *De virginitate* (prose version) at Ehwald (1919) 308–309.

<sup>18</sup> Paul the Deacon *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* at PL xcv, 711–713.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory of Tours *Lives of the Fathers* 11.1, at MGH *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* i.2, 259–260. For Caluppan and his *Life* see Godding (2000), Ogden (2013b) 235–236.

self lives as a hermit in the cave for a while, applying himself to fasting and prayer.<sup>20</sup> All of the stories we have been considering here look like aetiologies for the foundations of actual monasteries or hermitage sites, but this is the only one of them that can be connected with an identifiable monastery, that which was to become the basis of the present-day Cathedral of Dol.

## V.

Compatibly with the dragon's venomous breath being emblematic of pagan unbelief, the dragons themselves are frequently identified as a manifestation of Satan himself.<sup>21</sup> The starting-point for this identification is Revelation, where, in an elaborate and rather baffling allegory, Satan is depicted in the form of a great dragon with seven heads and ten horns that is ultimately cast down into the abyss by the archangel Michael.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly when, in the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas compels his Indian dragon to confess its identity, amongst the main confessions made features the claim, 'I am the one that dwells in and occupies the abyss of Tartarus.'<sup>23</sup> Writing in ca. AD 400 Paulinus of Nola pours scorn on the existence of the Dragon of Rome, which, so far as he

<sup>20</sup> *Vita i S. Samsonis, episcopi Dolensis* 1.50. For Samson, his lives and his dragons, see Flobert (1997) (text), Rauer (2000) 90–116, 150–159, Ogden (2013b) 240–241.

<sup>21</sup> The representation of Satan in the form of a serpent also features in the papers of Profs. Franchi and Moreschini in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> Revelation 12. As we have seen, the Revelation Dragon makes a temporary return to the world above in the *Questions of Bartholomew*, in which he has acquired the name Beliar, when Bartholomew rashly asks Jesus to show him 'the antagonist of mankind.' Beliar, compelled to speak, confesses: 'If you wish to know my name, I was at first called Satanael, which means "God's messenger." But when I disowned the stamp of God, I was given the name Satanas, which means "Tartarus-keeping messenger"' (*Questions of Bartholomew* 7).

<sup>23</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 32. The *Acts of John*, of AD 150–180, potentially offers a Devil dragon of yet older vintage, but the tale is a complex one and the case is far from clear-cut (71–86). Callimachus has fallen in love with the Christian Drusiana, the beautiful wife of Andronicus. Mortified to have become the occasion of lust in another, she prays to die and God grants her wish. But this is not the end of Callimachus' desire. He suborns Andronicus' steward Fortunatus to admit him to the tomb so that he can have sex with Drusiana's corpse. As they commence the act of violation in the tomb a massive serpent manifests itself, bites Fortunatus and kills him, whilst sitting on top of Callimachus until help arrives in the form first of an angel and then of St John. Callimachus is now converted, and John raises Drusiana from the dead (her living form is no longer an obstacle to Callimachus' virtue), and she in turn raises Fortunatus. But, unlike Callimachus, Fortunatus does not repent, and the serpent's poison gradually reasserts itself as a blackness that spreads over his body and kills him again. John declares, 'Keep your child for yourself, Devil.' This in itself seems to suggest that the serpent is the Devil, but such a supposition is problematic, given that the serpent has initially intervened to defend virtue and protect the body of Drusiana. Perhaps it is to be read rather as a self-defeating excrescence of the two men's evil. For the *Acts of John*, see Lipsius and Bonnet (1891–1903) (text), Junod and Kaestli (1988), Bremmer (1996), Lalleman (1998).

is concerned, was still supposed by others at any rate to exist: ‘However, this dragon either does not exist or, if it does exist, is the Devil himself, that former enemy tempter of the human race. Yet they worship him, who now trembles weakly before the name of Christ and confesses all his deeds.’<sup>24</sup>

Gregory of Tours tells that when St Caluppan was attacked by a plague of snakes in his hermit cell in the Cantal, ‘he did not doubt that it was the Devil that was launching these attacks upon him, because the Devil was known to take the form of a cunning snake.’ In the focal episode of the ensuing narrative he is attacked by a pair of large serpents in particular. When he has finally sent them on their way in the name of the Lord, one of them offers a resentful response as it departs:

But the snake, after retreating as far as the threshold of the little chamber, emitted a loud noise through its lower part and filled the room up with such a stench that it could be believed to be nothing other than the Devil.

Gregory of Tours *Lives of the Fathers* 11.1,  
at MGH *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* i.2, 59–60

Once again, albeit in a more humorous way here, we note the expectation that dragons should produce miasmas of malodorous air.

Paul the Deacon tells that when Clement of Metz engaged with the Dragon of Metz and its attendant snakes in the amphitheatre there, he was in fact engaging in a fight with the Devil himself: ‘Putting his trust in the Lord of Heaven and Earth, he courageously entered the vaults of the amphitheatre to fight the ancient serpent, that is, the Devil.’<sup>25</sup> The superb Dragon faced by Marina (Margaret) of (Pisidian) Antioch in her ninth-century AD *Martyrium* is introduced from the first as a manifestation (one amongst others) of the Devil, for it appears in response to her prayer, not unlike Bartholomew’s in his *Questions*, to see the Devil directly. The dragon eventually swallows her down, but Jesus precedes her into its stomach, and splits it open, killing the creature, but allowing Marina to emerge unscathed.<sup>26</sup>

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**24** Paulinus of Nola *Carmina* 32.143 – 146. The anonymous Latin *De promissionibus* of the fifth century AD has a rather different take on the Dragon of Rome and the Christian hero that dealt with it: the hero was not Silvester, but a nameless monk, and he discovered that the dragon was in fact a metal trap designed to impale Vestal virgins on a sword-like tongue, and smashed it up. The contraption was, we are told, the work of the Devil (*De promissionibus* 3.43, at PL 1, 835).

**25** Paul the Deacon *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* at PL xcv, 711–713.

**26** *Martyrium of St Marina* pp. 24 – 27 Usener. The dragon is described as follows: ‘After she had finished her prayer there was in that place [25] a great earthquake, and the prison was shaken. And suddenly there emerged from the corner a great and most terrifying dragon [*drakōn*], with a skin of all colours. Its crest and beard were like gold. Its teeth flashed with lightning, and its eyes were like pearls. A flame of fire and a great deal of smoke issued from its nostrils. Its tongue was like a sword. Snakes coiled around its neck. The corners of its eyes were like silver. It stood in the middle of the gaol roaring and hissing. It ran around Marina in a circle with its sword-tongue unsheathed, and its hissing made a terrible stench in the gaol. For Marina and her martyrium see Usener (1886) (text), Larson (2002), Ogden (2013b) 244–246.

Otherwise, or additionally, and unsurprisingly, dragons can be identified with the Serpent of Eden. So it is that the *Acts of Thomas* tells how Thomas compelled the Dragon of India to confess its identity. Amongst its claims is: ‘I am the one who entered Paradise through the fence and said to Eve everything my father commanded me to say to her.’<sup>27</sup> When, in the *Acts of Philip*, Jesus directs Mariamne to accompany St Philip on his mission against the snakes of the Ophianoi and Opheorhyme, he tells her that she must cut off her hair and dress as man, as an Adam, not an Eve: ‘This was the beginning of the snake’s war with man. The snake formed a friendship with the woman, and Adam was deceived by his wife, Eve. And it was because of Eve that Adam put on the snake’s slough [i.e. his human clothing], that is, its venom.’ She is, in other words, to become a prototype Encratite nun.<sup>28</sup> Gregory of Tours in his late sixth-century *Life of Andrew* tells of St Andrew’s destruction of the Dragon of Thessalonica. Andrew addresses the dragon: ‘Killer, put away the head that you raised in the beginning to the destruction of the human race, submit to the servants of God and die.’<sup>29</sup> And in his *Book of the Life of the Fathers*, Gregory has Caluppan address one of the two larger serpents that attack him with the question: ‘Are you not the one who cast forth the first-made man from his home in Paradise?’<sup>30</sup>

Dragons are also commonly identified with demons, and this explains how they can often be dispensed with by the simple application of exorcism, with which they are of course banished to the wilderness.<sup>31</sup> Thus the late sixth-century Ps.-Abdian account of Philip in Scythia tells how:

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<sup>27</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 32.

<sup>28</sup> *Acts of Philip* 8.4 (G).

<sup>29</sup> Gregory of Tours *Life of Andrew* 19. For Andrew and his *Life* see Prieur (1989) (text), Bremmer (2000).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Tours *Lives of the Fathers* 11.1, at *MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* i.2, 259–260.

<sup>31</sup> For ancient Judaeo-Christian exorcisms of demons (and pagan parodies thereof), see, e.g., Mark 5.1–10 (Jesus and Legion, the Demons of Gerasa), Acts 16.16–24 (Paul and the ventriloquist at Philippi), Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 8.42–49 (Eleazar), Lucian *Philopseudes* 16 (a ‘Syrian from Palestine’ and a smoky epilepsy demon), Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 3.38–39, 4.18, *Cyranides* 1.13.16–29, *PGM* IV.3007–3086. The ideal form of these exorcism narratives, actual or implied, is as follows:

- The demon is ordered out, but does not initially obey.
- The demon is ordered out again, with terrible threats, and does finally obey.
- Often the demon is adjured in the name of a particularly powerful authority (e.g. Solomon, Moses, Jesus).
- The demon is made to confess its name and identity.
- The demon gives a physical token of its departure: either it is visible as it departs, usually in the form of a dark figure; or it is made to knock over an external object on its outward flight. Discussions at: Knox (1930), Oesterreich (1930), Bonner (1943), (1944), Smith (1965), Thraede (1967), Edwards (1989), Twelftree (1993), Kotansky (1995), Jeffers (1996), Janowitz (2001) 27–46, Brashears and Kotansky (2002), Ogden (2007) 131–136, (2009) 166–171.

... the apostle said, 'I command you, dragon, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, come out from your place, and go and live in a deserted place, where men do not go, and where nothing is supplied of use for human well-being, so that you may harm no one in going there. Then that most fierce dragon came out and began to depart at speed, and was never seen anywhere again.

[Abdias] *Historia Apostolica* pp. 738–740 Fabricius

Similarly Venantius Fortunatus' late sixth-century AD *Life of Marcellus of Paris* tells how he chided his dragon to go off and live in the desert or plunge itself into the sea.<sup>32</sup> In Paul the Deacon's seventh-century AD *Deeds of the Bishops of Metz*, Clement of Metz exorcises that city's dragon with the words, 'In the name of the most holy and indivisible Trinity... I command that you should do no harm to man or beast and that you should at once cross this river [sc. *the Saille*] together with the whole of your venomous entourage and go into those parts where mankind cannot live.'<sup>33</sup> And already the early third-century AD *Acts of Thomas*, in which the dragon is compelled to confess that, amongst other outrages, it had been the Serpent of Eden, is relevant here, for the compulsion of a demon to confess its true identity is a principal component of the technique of exorcism.<sup>34</sup>

The development of such a hands-off technique for dealing with dragons permitted female saints to be shown dispensing with them too on an equal footing with their male counterparts, in something of a contrast with the pagan heritage, in which the techniques for dealing with dragons had been predominantly martial, and the destroyers of dragons had accordingly been almost exclusively male (Zeus, Heracles, Cadmus...).<sup>35</sup> So it is that St Victoria disposes of the dragon of Tribula in a strongly exorcistic fashion, according to the *Passion of St Victoria*, where she commands it, 'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, depart from this place, most villainous dragon... and go where neither men nor flocks live, and where there is nothing of interest to men, where neither the ploughman ploughs nor the voice of man is heard.' After this the dragon flees in such a fashion that one would think it was being thrashed with whips.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Venantius Fortunatus *Vita S. Marcelli Pariensis episcopi* 10, at *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* iv.2, 53–54. For Marcellus and his *Life* see Le Goff (1980) 155–188.

<sup>33</sup> Paul the Deacon *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* at *PL* xciv, 711–713.

<sup>34</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 32.

<sup>35</sup> See the examples collected at Ogden (2013b) 13–184 *passim*. However, pagan witches could drug dragons to sleep, as Medea did with the Colchis dragon at, e.g., Apollonius of Rhodes *Argonautica* 4.123–166 (with the scene illustrated on vases already from the beginning of the fourth century BC: cf. Ogden (2013a) 198–209). And an honourable mention goes to the Thessalian witch that succeeded in destroying a terrible 'Sacred Snake' with a ring of parching magical herbs at [Aristotle] *Mirabilium auscultationes* 845b (composed at some point between the third century BC and the second AD).

<sup>36</sup> *The Passion of St Victoria* 5–7, pp. 158–159 Delehaye. In Aldhelm's prose version of the dragon of Tribulan tale Victoria expels it with the words, 'In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, go out from here, most villainous dragon, and give honour to God! Go to a place of the sort uninhabited by men!' (Aldhelm *De virginitate* [prose version] at Ehwald (1919) 308–309).

The most elaborate text of interest here is once again the *Acts of Philip*.<sup>37</sup> The narrative in which he encounters the second great dragon en route to Ophiorhyme, the Dragon of the Rocks, is a complex one. As he and his team pass by a great pile of broken stones, fifty entities described initially as demons cry out in a confusion of voices (cf. Legion) and call upon these servants of an unnameable God (God's name is of course used to compel demons in exorcism) to be off, because they have become enfeebled by their mere presence and feel themselves being expelled from their cave beneath. Philip commands them in the name of Christ to reveal their former nature, whereupon 'the dragon that was amongst them' is compelled to utter a confession of the sort typically exacted from demons in the process of exorcism: he had been the serpent of Eden, and he and his companions had been the serpent-staffs of Pharaoh's mages. Philip then commands the 'demons' to come forth and they do so in the form of fifty rampant snakes, each sixty cubits in length, and they in turn call forth the dragon, himself a hundred cubits long, fiery and belching forth venom. The dragon begs Philip not to annihilate them, but to allow them rather to build a church for him on the site in six days. Philip protests that as snakes they have not the wherewithal to build and so, with a prayer, he transforms the fifty into humanoid demons, black and misty, as demons are typically described in the literature, pagan and Christian alike, of the early AD period.<sup>38</sup> In this shape they fly off and fetch a column each for the church, as we have noted above. Finally, we are told: 'The dragon revealed itself in the form of a rather black Ethiopian and said, "We are off, Philip, to a place we will no longer be seen by you, so that you may not order us to build there too. We have had enough. We have been defeated."'<sup>39</sup> Here there seems to be a strong identification between the dragon and his attendant snakes on the one hand and dark humanoid demons on the other hand, as the entities flip their forms back and forth between the two.

We are again given a sense of the proximity between dragons and demons in the ca. AD 770 *Conversio et passio ii S. Afrae*. Here, in Augsburg, St Narcissus of Gerundum redeems the soul of the prostitute Afra from a demon who manifests himself in the form of an Egyptian, 'blacker than a crow, naked, his body covered with the scars of elephantiasis,' by promising to render another soul to him in place of hers on the following day. But he tricks the demon and the soul he renders up to him is that of the dragon that is occupying a spring in the Julian Alps, polluting it and rendering it inaccessible. 'O that lying bishop!' proclaims the demon, 'And what is more, he has bound me with an oath to kill my friend, and if I do not kill him I will be forced to go into the abyss.'<sup>39</sup> Dragons and demons, it seems, are friendly professional colleagues in the mayhem to which they give rise.

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<sup>37</sup> *Acts of Philip* 11.2–8 (A).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Lucian *Philopseudes* 16, Pausanias 6.6.7–11, PGM VII.348–358, and the 'Egyptian' demon encountered by Saints Afra and Narcissus, discussed in the next paragraph.

<sup>39</sup> *Conversio et passio ii S. Afrae*, MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* iii, 60, §7.

The assimilation between the dragon and the demon ultimately led to the serpentine dragon's permanent acquisition of the demon's wings, and its achievement of the physical form in which we know and love it today (this in a gradual development largely taking place between ca. AD 400 and ca. AD 800). But that is a story for another time...<sup>40</sup>

## vi.

In a series of later texts the saint is shown to exhibit his absolute control over the dragon by tying a piece of often delicate clothing around the dragon's neck and leading it about like a meek and obedient dog. Venantius Fortunatus' *Life of St Marcellus* tells how Marcellus strikes the offending dragon, which has come to occupy the tomb of a wicked lady, three times on the head with his crosier. He then puts a handkerchief or perhaps a small cloak around its neck and drags the object of his victory out before the eyes of the assembled locals. He leads it in a procession, the locals following, before he sends it off, exorcistically, into the wilderness. In this text and the others considered here, one is evidently to imagine the serpent in rampant form, rearing its neck up and so allowing the saint to tie his garment around it conveniently.<sup>41</sup> The first *Life of St Samson of Dol* tells how Samson puts his cloak around the neck of the second of the four serpents with which he contends, before dispatching it to live under a rock beyond the Seine. In briefer and vaguer fashion we are also told that he dragged along his fourth dragon too, before throwing it into the sea and commanding it to die.<sup>42</sup> Paul the Deacon tells how Clement of Metz ties his scarf around the neck of the largest of the serpents in the amphitheatre at Metz (i.e., the presiding dragon), leads it to the local river Seille, and then orders it to cross the river with its multitude of attendant snakes, and disappear with them into the wilderness.<sup>43</sup> The twelfth-century AD (or effectively earlier) *Miracula Sancti Georgii* has St George, who has wounded his dragon, tell the sacrificial princess (subsequently 'Sabra') to take his horse's bridle and her own girdle and give them to him. He ties these onto the dragon and hands the end of this lead back to the girl so that she may lead the dragon to the city of Lasia with him. He will then kill the dragon before the Lasians when they profess belief. The combined use of the horse's bridle and the girl's girdle looks a little odd, though they both have their own logic. The horse's bridle is well suited to the task, whereas the use of the girl's girdle and then the giving of the lead to the girl herself seem to speak of an added level of subjection and

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<sup>40</sup> Ogden (forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> Venantius Fortunatus *Vita S. Marcelli Pariensis episcopi* 10, at *MGH Auctores antiquissimi* iv.2, 53–54.

<sup>42</sup> *Vita i S. Samsonis, episcopi Dolensis* 1.58, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Paul the Deacon *Gesta episcoporum Mettensium* at *PL* xcv, 711–713.

humiliation for the dragon.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps two traditions have been merged here. In the version of this tale in Jacobus de Voragine's fundamental hagiographical handbook, *The Golden Legend* (AD 1263–1267), we have mention only of the girdle, not the bridle, and here the princess is told by George to take her girdle and put it around the dragon's neck herself before leading it. The dragon is presumably humiliated yet further in this way, though Jacobus may also feel that it is improper that the pure George should touch a girl's (let alone a princess') girdle. Jacobus also tells us, winningly, that the dragon follows her 'like the tamest dog'.<sup>45</sup> It is not clear to me where this recurrent motif ultimately derives from. The earliest text of relevance seems to be the *Questions of Bartholomew* of the fourth century AD or earlier, in which the terrified Bartholomew asks Jesus for the border of his cloak so that he can have the courage to approach Beliar, but Jesus unhelpfully responds, 'You cannot take the border of my cloak, for this cloak of mine is not the one I wore before my crucifixion.' For all its general thematic relevance, this text as it stands would seem to undermine rather than justify the use of clothing in dealing with dragons.<sup>46</sup> But perhaps another origin of the motif lies somewhere else entirely: perhaps it is an aetiology, general or specific, for civic dragon processions, the antecedents of such contemporary ones as those found at Metz, starring St Clement's Graouilly, at Tarascon, starring St Martha's Tarasque (for which see below), and at Norwich, starring St George's dragon (locally known as 'Snap').<sup>47</sup> Venantius Fortunatus' sixth-century tale of Marcellus and his dragon, the earliest considered here, seems particularly well suited to such a purpose.

## vii.

Another technique of disposing of dragons that, like exorcism, usually eschews killing is the confinement of them in an underground abyss. Again the significance here may sometimes be an underlying perception that the dragon is a demonic entity, and therefore not susceptible to killing as such. This technique ostensibly has two functions: first it aligns the saint in question with St Michael in his confinement of the

<sup>44</sup> *Miracula Sancti Georgii*, *Codex Romanus Angelicus* 46, §12; for the text see Aufhauser (1911) 52–69. The shorter Georgian version found already in an eleventh-century manuscript in Jerusalem (Patriarchal Library, Jerusalem, cod. 2) appears to be an edited-down version of an already-existing text, probably a Greek one again, similar to that of the *Miracula* (for an English translation see Walter (2003) 140–142, this derived from the intervening Russian translation at Privalova (1977) 73). For George and his tradition see Fontenrose (1959) 515–521, Fischer (1975–), Didi-Huberman *et al.* (1994), Walter (1995), (2003) 109–144, Castellana (2000), Hansen (2002) 119–130.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobus de Voragine *Golden Legend* 58. For the *Golden Legend* see Graesse (1850) (text) and Ryan (1993).

<sup>46</sup> *Questions of Bartholomew* 7.

<sup>47</sup> Lane (1976).

Revelation Dragon, subsequently ‘Beliar’, to the abyss.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, and more subtly, it inscribes the saint in a yet more ancient tradition of pagan dragon-slaying in saluting Zeus’ confinement of Typhon in the earth, most famously beneath Etna in Sicily.<sup>49</sup> We might think also of Eucrates’ confinement of the serpentine Hecate he encounters in the woods to an underworld abyss he opens up with a magic ring given him by an Arab in Lucian’s *Philopseudes*.<sup>50</sup> But in these two cases there is a certain paradox in that both of these creatures already have their homes beneath the earth anyway.

In the complex and seemingly confused sequence of the Dragon of the Rocks in the *Acts of Philip*, we seem to have a dragon that has already, somehow, been confined beneath a great pile of rocks with its lesser attendants, only, paradoxically, to be liberated by Philip, and then to be dispatched, exorcistically, to a wilderness.<sup>51</sup> But more simply, and more gratifyingly, in the final encounter with the great Echidna or ‘Viper’ worshipped at Ophiorhyme Philip utters a Hebrew prayer, whereupon, ‘And lo! all of a sudden the abyss was opened up and swallowed down the whole of that area containing the proconsul [the wicked Tyrannognophus, ‘Tyrant of Darkness’, who sponsors the Echidna], the entirety of the sanctuary, the Echidna they worshipped and the priests of the Echidna, some seven thousand men, not counting women and children. Only the place in which the apostles stood remained stable. The proconsul was swallowed into the abyss.’<sup>52</sup> In the *Acts of Silvester* Pope Silvester confines the Dragon of Rome in its own cavern at the bottom of a 365-step descent, pulling a chain through the iron rings on its doors.<sup>53</sup> In so doing Silvester identifies himself directly with Michael in his confinement of the Revelation Dragon: ‘And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, with the key of the abyss and a large chain in his hand. He conquered the dragon, the ancient snake, that is the Devil or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He cast him into the abyss, and locked him in, making a seal over him, so that he should no longer lead the races of men astray before the completion of the thousand years.’<sup>54</sup> In the first *Life of St Samson of Dol*, the saint tames the second dragon he has to deal with by prayer, and then commands it to flee beyond the river the Seine and to remain beneath a certain rock.<sup>55</sup>

To go back once again to one of our earliest narratives, the ca. AD 220–240 *Acts of Thomas* has St Thomas destroy his Indian dragon with its own venom. We are told,

<sup>48</sup> Revelation 12–13; cf. *Questions of Bartholomew* 4.

<sup>49</sup> Thus, esp., Hesiod *Theogony* 820–880, Pindar *Pythians* 1.15–28, Strabo C750–751, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.1–3, Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 1–2 *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> Lucian *Philopseudes* 22–24.

<sup>51</sup> *Acts of Philip* 11.2–8 (A).

<sup>52</sup> *Martyrium of Philip* 27 (V).

<sup>53</sup> *Acts of Silvester* B (1), at Duchesne (1897) 31–32.

<sup>54</sup> Revelation 20.1–3.

<sup>55</sup> *Vita i S. Samsonis, episcopi Dolensis* 1.58

'Its venom and bile spilled out. And in the place in which its venom was spilled there opened a great chasm, and the dragon was swallowed down.'<sup>56</sup> There is a suggestion here that the chasm is opened up by the corrosive venom itself. Even so, the combination of chasm with killing is curious and anomalous in the context of the broader tradition.

## viii.

As to the dragons that are actually killed, one productive motif here is the bursting of them open in the middle. In the *Acts of Thomas* again, after Thomas has compelled the dragon to suck down its own venom, it inflates and bursts open, and its venom spills out.<sup>57</sup> In Rufinus' account of St Ammon of Egypt, Ammon compels his dragon to 'burst in the middle with loud report, belching forth all its venom together with its life.' The people of the neighbourhood cannot endure the consequent stench.<sup>58</sup> And in the *Martyrium of St Marina* Marina is swallowed by the Devil, manifest in the form of a dragon, only to be preceded into its stomach by Christ himself. Christ ruptures the dragon's guts, and splits it in half, and Marina emerges unscathed from its insides.<sup>59</sup> This motif may have roots in both pagan and Jewish traditions alike. For the Romans the Marsi were famous for their ability to burst snakes open with their incantations.<sup>60</sup> And the Septuagint's little second-century BC book of Bel and the Dragon preserves the engaging tale of Daniel's destruction of the Dragon of Babylon: 'And Daniel took pitch and fat and hair and boiled them until they congealed. He then made cakes and gave them into the mouth of the dragon. Upon eating them the dragon burst open.'<sup>61</sup>

## ix.

A frequently conjoined motif of particular interest in these narratives is that of the saint's revivification of the dragon's most recent boy victim. The earliest example comes in the ca. AD 220–240 *Acts of Thomas*, composed in Syrian Edessa, perhaps

<sup>56</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 33

<sup>57</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 33.

<sup>58</sup> Tyrannius Rufinus of Aquileia *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* 8, at *PL* xxi, 420–422 (Ammonas). The dragon destroyed at Gregory of Tours' *Life of Andrew* 19 is also said to belch forth its venom.

<sup>59</sup> *Martyrium of St Marina* pp. 24–27 Usener.

<sup>60</sup> Lucilius Book 20 F7 Charpin (575–576 Marx), Virgil *Eclogues* 8.70–71, Horace *Epodes* 17.29, Ovid *Amores* 2.1.23–28, *Metamorphoses* 7.203, *De medicamine faciei femineae* 39, Pliny *Natural History* 28.19, [Quintilian] *Declamationes maiores* 10.15. See Ogden (2013a) 213–214.

<sup>61</sup> Septuagint, Bel and the Dragon (Theodotion version) 23–27. It is possible that there has been some Greek-cultural influence upon this tale, either at the point of its original Aramaic composition or at the point of its translation. See Ogden (2013a) 384, (2013b) 189–190.

initially in Syriac. Thomas' mission to India is described. As he travels he finds the body of an attractive young man lying on the ground. He at once identifies the killing as the work of 'the enemy', whereupon the great dragon in question comes forth out of its hole, openly admitting the deed, and offering, in defiant explanation, the facts that it had found him kissing and making love to a beautiful woman with whom it was itself in love, and that too on the Sabbath. Thomas compels the serpent to suck the venom out of the young man's body, and by so doing restores him to life. But the sucking of the dragon, and no doubt too the venom ingested, inflates it until it bursts and dies, to be swallowed, as we have seen, by an abyss that now opens up in the ground.<sup>62</sup>

In the Ps.-Abdian *Historia Apostolica* St Philip, in the course of his mission to Scythia, is brought before a statue of Mars to be compelled to make sacrifice, but as he arrives a huge dragon emerges from underneath the statue base and bites both the priest's son and two attendant tribunes. When Philip has banished the dragon in exorcistic manner, he proceeds to raise the boy and the two tribunes from the dead.<sup>63</sup>

In Gregory of Tours' account of St Andrew's killing of the dragon at Thessalonica, Andrew accedes to a woman's request to come and deal with a dragon that is laying waste to the local area. The dragon, fifty cubits in length, charges at Andrew in rampant mode, but he commands it to die and it does so at once, vomiting forth a stream of venom. But then as he passes on he comes to an estate at which he finds a small boy bitten by the serpent and lying dead. Andrew prays again before commanding one of his attendants to raise the boy, which she duly does.<sup>64</sup>

In Rufinus' *History of the Monks in Egypt* we find the motif in modified form. The locals, blighted by a dragon, make petition to the hermit Ammon to deal with it for them, and to give weight to their plea bring with them a shepherd's son, who has lost his mind in his terror at laying eyes on the dragon, and whose body has been badly compromised by the dragon's breath, which has rendered him weak and so swollen that he has to be carried about. Ammon anoints him and restores him to full health, before going off to deal with the offending dragon itself, which he compels to belch forth its poison and die.<sup>65</sup>

And again we find the motif in modified form in the first *Life of St Samson of Dol*. Here we find Samson taking with him as a guide to the location of the lair of the dragon he has undertaken to kill a young boy he has just restored to life after a death of two hours. When they have come to the cave, Samson asks the boy to stand back and throws the dragon down from a great height. Although the boy had not been killed by the dragon, we sense the impact of the story-type under dis-

<sup>62</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 30–33.

<sup>63</sup> [Abdias] *Historia Apostolica* pp. 738–740 Fabricius.

<sup>64</sup> Gregory of Tours *Life of Andrew* 19.

<sup>65</sup> Tyrannius Rufinus of Aquileia *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* 8, at PL xxi, 420–422 (Ammonas).

cussion here in bringing a boy revivified by the saint into association with his dragon-slaying.<sup>66</sup>

And we find a similar phenomenon even in two lives in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*. His account of St Christina of Bolsena tells how she is surrounded by a number of venomous snakes, but they merely lick her; when a magician attempts to impel the creatures to bite her, they instead turn upon him and kill him; but Christina restores him to life and banishes the snakes to the desert.<sup>67</sup> Jacobus' account of St Martha tells how she bridles (NB) the Provencal dragon Tarasconus (or 'the Tarasque'); it dwells in the river Rhone, is half fish and is born of Leviathan and the Onachus, the latter of which can shoot its dung like darts at its pursuers over the distance of an acre; the locals then kill the Tarasque; in a separate but immediately following story, Martha restores a dead boy to life.<sup>68</sup> The Tarasque remains, like Graouilly of Metz, the celebrated heart of festivals in Provencal Tarascon (and in 2005 UNESCO entered him into a list of the 'masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity').

What are the origins of this motif of the revivified youth? One might point to the *Gospel of Thomas*, which includes the following tale of Christ's infancy:

Joseph sent his son Jacob to bundle up logs and bring them to his house. The child Jesus accompanied him too. As Jacob was gathering the firewood, a viper [*echidna*] bit his hand. He was laid low and on the point of death. Jesus came near and blew upon the bite. Immediately the pain ceased and the creature was burst, and Jacob was immediately restored to health.

*Gospel of Thomas* 16.1–2 (A), p. 147 Tischendorf

But the difficulty here is dating this text: it is thought now that the *Gospel of Thomas* in the form in which we have it dates from the sixth century AD, but derives from an original of the early third century AD or possibly even the late second century AD.<sup>69</sup>

We might also point, unexpectedly, to the first tale of Lucian's *Philopseudes*, the collection of marvellous stories that includes, most famously, that of the Sorcerer's Apprentice (inspiration for Goethe's *Zauberlehrling*). It is difficult to date most of Lucian's works with precision, but the latest dateable one is the *Alexander*, which must have been composed ca. AD 181. The *Philopseudes* cannot have been composed much later, and it was probably composed before. This engaging tale tells how somewhere in the Greek world (the setting is not identified), a vigorous farm slave and vinedresser, Midas, is bitten on the toe by a viper and lies on the point of death, his body rotting away. He is brought to his distraught master on a stretcher. The master calls in a Chaldaean Babylonian, who ties a fragment chipped from the tombstone of a virgin to the dying lad's toe and drives out the venom with an incantation. Midas leaps to

<sup>66</sup> *Vita i S. Samsonis, episcopi Dolensis* 1.50.

<sup>67</sup> Jacobus de Voragine *Golden Legend* no.98.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobus de Voragine *Golden Legend* no.105.

<sup>69</sup> Quasten (1949–1960) i, 123–125. For the *Gospel of Thomas* see Quispel (1957), Wilson (1960), Fallon and Cameron (1988), Valantasis (1997), Uro (2003), Gathercole (2012).

his feet and carries back the stretcher on which he has been brought. The Babylonian then carries purifying burning sulphur around the circuit of the farm three times at dawn, reciting seven sacred names from a book. He then calls forth all the reptiles within the boundaries. They all assemble before him, except for one old *drakōn*, too old or deaf to hear the command. The mage (as the Chaldaean is now described) knows that one is missing, and sends the smallest snake to fetch the *drakōn*, which duly arrives. He then blows upon them all and they are devoured in flames.<sup>70</sup> Here again we have precisely the conjoined motifs of dragon-slaying and the reanimation of the recent young victim of a serpent-attack. The presence of this collocation in a pagan text might raise the suspicion that it was a pagan collocation taken over by early Christian narrators. This is unlikely to be the case, however, as Lucian is almost certainly parodying Christian writing in this narrative: the motif of the healed Midas leaping onto his feet and carrying home under his arm the stretcher upon which he had been brought is an all-too-familiar one from the New Testament.<sup>71</sup> And here we may note that, whilst we cannot know where the well-travelled Lucian wrote this tale, he hailed from Syrian (now Turkish) Samosata, just some 20 miles as the crow flies from Edessa, where our earliest securely dateable Christian example of this motif-collocation, that of the *Acts of Thomas*, was written.<sup>72</sup>

Presumably the interest of this motif lies in the fact that it offers an intimation of Christ's resurrection,<sup>73</sup> and perhaps too the ultimate resurrection that awaits all believers that have, as it were, slain the dragon of unbelief.<sup>74</sup>

## X.

Let us conclude. In early Christian hagiography the dragon and the miasma of its pestilential breath frequently serve as an embodiment of pagan unbelief in a local community. The saint is able to defeat or contain the dragon by the power of his faith, and his success in dealing with the creature is itself a demonstration of that faith. The killing or the dismissal of the dragon achieves the conversion of the com-

<sup>70</sup> Lucian *Philopseudes* 11–13. For discussion of this episode see Radermacher (1905), Müller (1932) 38–47, Schwartz (1951) 41–43, Ebner *et al.* (2001) 50–52, 118–120, Ogden (2007) 65–104, (2013a) 411–415, (2013b) 199–202.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew 9.6–7, Mark 2.9, 2.11–12, Luke 5.24–25, John 5.8–9; cf. Betz 1961:158, Ogden (2007) 67.

<sup>72</sup> See Ogden (2013a) 386–387. The story-type may also exert an influence on the ultimately rather different tale from the *Acts of John*, of ca. 150–180 AD, in which, as we have seen, Drusiana, herself reanimated by John, proceeds to revive the last victim of the serpent that has guarded her corpse's honour, the steward Fortunatus. However, this serpent is not killed (we do not hear what happens to it), and Fortunatus only goes on to die again, since he repents not of his wickedness (71–86).

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20–21, Acts 1.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 11.23–33, Mark 12.18–27, Luke 14.14, 20.27–40, John 5.25–29, 6.39–59, 11.24–25, Acts 4.2, 17.32, 26.3–8, 24.15, 24.21, Romans 8.11, 1 Corinthians 4.14, 5.1–2, 6.14, 15.12–13, Philippians 3.12, 1 Thessalonians 4.13–16, 2 Timothy 2.11, 2.18, Hebrews 6.2.

munity in accordance with two different logics simultaneously: first, the community is, at surface level, persuaded by the demonstration of the power of faith; secondly, given that the dragon is itself the embodiment of the community's unbelief, its removal in itself entails that it should now see the light. The conversion of the community's unbelief to belief is given concrete representation in the building of a church, monastery or a hermitage, often in the very place the dragon itself had previously inhabited. The dragons in these fights are typically identified with or indeed compelled to confess their identity as Satan himself, the Serpent of Eden or a common demon. When dragons are killed, a favoured method is the bursting-open of them in the middle. But their strong identification with Satan or with demons often entails the tenet that they cannot actually be killed. Instead, they must rather be dismissed from the community they have been troubling and, quite appropriately, through openly exorcistic means. Compatibly with this, the forcing of a demon to reveal its true identity is a fundamental technique of ancient exorcism. The physical taming of the dragon, exorcistic or otherwise, is often represented by its being led around on a lead made from a delicate garment, sometimes an item of ladies' clothing. Exorcism typically dispatches its victims to the wilderness, but another technique for dealing with an unkillable dragon-demon is to (re-)confine it to the underworld abyss. A motif frequently found conjoined with a narrative of a saint's overcoming of a dragon, seemingly a very ancient one, is his revivification of the lad that has been its final victim: a reassuring intimation of resurrections, both that achieved by Christ and those awaiting the converted.

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### Abbreviations

- MGH Monumenta (1826-)*  
*PG Migne (1857–1904)*  
*PGM Preisendanz and Henrichs (1973–1974)*  
*PL Migne (1884–1904)*

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	i	ii	iii	iv	v	vi	vii	viii	ix
	Dragon's breath embodies pagan belief	Defeat of dragon as proof of faith	Mass conversion of on-lookers	Church etc. built at site of dragon's home	Exorcistic expulsion of the dragon	Leash made for dragon from scarf etc.	Dragon dispatched to the abyss	Dragon burst open	Killing co-ordinated with re-animation of a boy
<b>Hermas</b>	X	(X)	(X)						
<b>Bartholomew</b>	X				(X)	(X)			
<b>Thomas</b>			X			X	X	X	
<b>Philip</b>	X		X	X	X		X		X
<b>Silvester</b>	X		X			X			
<b>Ammon</b>		X					X	(X)	
<b>Victoria</b>	X		X	X	X				
<b>Andrew</b>									X
<b>Caluppan</b>			X						
<b>Marcellus</b>					X	X			
<b>Samson</b>				X		X	X		(X)
<b>Narcissus</b>					X				
<b>Clement</b>	X			X	X	X			
<b>Marina</b>							X		
<b>George</b>		X	X	X		X			



Horst Schneider

## Tiere in symbolischer Deutung: Der Physiologus

Die kleine, nicht sehr umfangreiche Schrift des Physiologus, die wahrscheinlich im 2. oder 3. Jh. n. Chr. in Alexandria entstand und auf Griechisch verfasst wurde, war von Anfang an sehr beliebt und wurde bereits in frühester Zeit immer wieder abgeschrieben. Alleine im Bereich des Griechischen kennen wir vier verschiedene Redaktionen aus der Entstehungszeit bis zum byzantinischen Mittelalter. Schon die erste Redaktion lässt sich in weitere verschiedene Rezensionen aufgliedern.<sup>1</sup> Der Text wurde also nie kanonisch, sondern blieb immer offen für Zusätze, Veränderungen und Modifikationen, er ist also ein sogenannter „Gebrauchstext“.<sup>2</sup>

Wer sich zum ersten Mal inhaltlich mit dem Physiologus beschäftigt, wird sich allerdings alsbald wundern. Denn er sieht sich mit einer Reihe von merkwürdigen Geschichten konfrontiert:

Das Wiesel empfängt durch den Mund und gebiert durch die Ohren, ein Einhorn lässt sich nur von einer reinen Jungfrau fangen, der Diamant kann nur durch Bocksblut

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Der vorliegende Beitrag geht auf mehrere Vorträge zurück: Bochum 2004 und 2014; München 2012; Konstanz 2013. Neue Aspekte ergaben sich auf einer Tagung in Bern 2015, deren Akten im Druck sind mit einer kürzeren Fassung dieses Beitrags, außerdem durch eine weitere Tagung in Paris 2017. Grundlage für diesen Beitrag ist mein Artikel über den Physiologus im Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum (RAC): 2016, Bd. 27, 722–743. 2018 (Juni) fand eine weitere Tagung in Hamburg zum Thema „Physiologus“ statt. Das zeigt, dass das Thema neuen Schwung bekommen hat.

1 Der Text des Physiologus galt aufgrund der komplizierten Handschriftenlage eigentlich als unedierbar bis es F. Sbordone 1936 gelang, eine kritische Edition aller (vier) Redaktionen zu publizieren (auf der Basis von 77 Handschriften). Hinzu treten noch zwei Appendizes in Sbordones Ausgabe mit weiteren Geschichten über verschiedene Tiere. Eine wichtige Ergänzung zu Sbordones Ausgabe ist die Edition von D. Offermanns, der eine weitere, bedeutende griechische Physiologus-Handschrift G (= Codex 397, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 10./11.Jh.) zusammen mit der ebenfalls sehr alten Handschrift M heranziehen konnte, die Sbordone noch nicht kannte. Eine weitere synoptische Ausgabe nur der ersten Redaktion legte D. Kaimakis als Ergänzung zur Edition Offermanns' im Jahre 1974 vor, der die verschiedenen Überlieferungsstränge der ersten Redaktion, wie sie von Sbordone unterschieden wurden, in ihren wesentlichen Gundzügen darstellen wollte. Allerdings ist diese Ausgabe nicht immer zuverlässig, so dass man in der Regel auf Sbordones und Offermanns' Ausgaben zurückgreifen muss. Neuerdings bereitet Caroline Macé (Frankfurt) eine neue Ausgabe vor (editio minor), die auch die frühen Übersetzungen berücksichtigt.

2 Die Kontroverse um die Datierung der 1. Redaktion des Physiologus hält an; das zeigen zwei zuletzt gehaltene Vorträge auf der Berner Physiologus-Tagung (November 2015): J. Spittler, The Physiologus and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (2. Jh. – vor Origenes) sowie S. Vollenweider, Der Physiologus vor der Schlange. Vom christlichen Umgang mit negativ besetzten Tiersymbolen (nach Origenes) (beide im Druck).

erweicht werden, der Vogel Phönix verbrennt zu Asche und wird wiedergeboren, der Salamander ist feuerfest.

Wer an ernsthafter Literatur interessiert ist, wird eine solche Lektüre nach dem ersten Eindruck schnell zur Seite legen, oder, wenn er auch noch feststellen muß, dass solche Geschichten in der Antike christlich ausgelegt wurden, nur den Kopf schütteln und über die vermeintliche Primitivität dieser christlichen Märchen lächeln.

Aus diesem ersten – gleichwohl fiktiven – Leseeindruck ergeben sich eine Reihe von Fragestellungen:

Wie sind diese uns oft merkwürdig anmutenden Geschichten zu bewerten? Warum werden sie erzählt und noch dazu mit einer christlichen bzw. allegorischen Auslegung verknüpft? Wie muß man sich das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld der Entstehungsgeschichte dieses Textes vorstellen? Welches Publikum hatte der Verfasser im Visier und was erreicht er durch diese Geschichten? Wer verbirgt sich hinter der immer wieder im Text genannten anonym bleibenden Autorität, dem so genannten Physiologus, auf die sich der Verfasser beruft? Man könnte auch alle diese Fragen bündeln und einfach sagen: Wie sollen wir dieses literarische Phänomen verstehen?

Klären wir zunächst den Begriff „Physiologus“. In den einzelnen Texten beruft sich der anonyme Verfasser stets auf die Autorität eines sogenannten Physiologus, d.h. eines ebenfalls anonym bleibenden „Naturwissenschaftlers“ ( $\delta\varphi\psi\iota\omega\lambda\gamma\omega\varsigma$ : der Naturkundige); ähnlich wie etwa auch Aristoteles in seiner Poetik (1447b19) Empedokles mit dem gebräuchlichen Terminus als  $\varphi\psi\iota\omega\lambda\gamma\omega\varsigma$  bezeichnet. Da kein eigentlicher Werktitel überliefert ist, hat sich eingebürgert, diesen Text nach dieser anonymen naturwissenschaftlichen Autorität „Physiologus“ zu nennen.<sup>3</sup>

Gattungstechnisch läßt sich der Physiologus den antiken Naturkunden zurechnen, die seit hellenistischer Zeit entstehen. Zu nennen wären hier als literarische Vorbilder vor allem die naturkundlichen bzw. botanischen und zoologischen Werke von Aristoteles' (De historia animalium / De partibus animalium) und Theophrast (De historia et causis plantarum), die Naturalis Historia des Plinius oder die Auszüge daraus des Solinus, die Schrift De natura animalium des Aelian oder Spezialwerke wie z.B. Juba II. von Mauretanien über Elefanten, Oppian über Fische und Jagd, Alexander von Myndos über Vögel, Dionysios über Vögel und Vogelfang, außerdem Lapidarien wie z.B. von Xenokrates von Ephesus oder Theophrast. Eine gewisse Nähe besteht außerdem zur antiken moralisierenden Tierfabel (Äsop, Phaedrus).<sup>4</sup>

Gegenstand der antiken Naturkunde sind üblicherweise Tiere, Pflanzen und Steine. Entsprechend antiker naturkundlicher Methodik beschreibt der Physiologus daher ihre „Natur/en“ ( $\varphi\psi\sigma\iota\varsigma/\varphi\psi\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ), das heißt ihre charakteristischen Eigenschaf-

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<sup>3</sup> H. Schneider, Physiologus: RAC 27, 724f.

<sup>4</sup> H. Schneider, Physiologus: RAC 27, 725f.

ten.<sup>5</sup> Dadurch erreicht er, dass der in ihnen verborgene Sinn entdeckt und erläutert werden kann, der für die Bibelerklärung und die christliche Lehre wichtig ist.

Religionswissenschaftlich gesehen sind die Beziehungen zwischen Göttlichem, Menschen, Tieren, Pflanzen und Steinen offen, so dass es mannigfache Beziehungen unter diesen geben kann bis hin zu Mischformen, Metamorphosen oder Übergängen (Seelenwanderung). Deshalb zählen zu den Tieren auch sogenannte Misch- oder Fabelwesen. Daher können also in all diesen Erscheinungsformen der kreatürlichen Welt, dh. von zahmen, wilden oder gewöhnlichen und exotischen Tieren, Misch- oder Fabelwesen, Pflanzen und Steinen verschiedene Formen des Göttlichen gefunden werden.<sup>6</sup>

Die Realität der Misch- und Fabelwesen wurde in der Antike zwar angezweifelt und kritisiert, doch wurde den Nachrichten über sie auch wegen mangelnder Überprüfbarkeit oder infolge der Berufung auf namhafte Autoritäten oft geglaubt, Gleches galt für entsprechende – märchenhafte oder legendarische – naturkundliche Berichte.<sup>7</sup>

Was für Tiere, Pflanzen und Steine bzw. welche Misch- oder Fabelwesen behandelt nun der Physiologus?<sup>8</sup>

Der Physiologus behandelt bekannte *symbolträchtige Tiere*:

Adler, Ameise, Biene, Löwe, Schlange;

*gewöhnliche Tiere des antiken Alltags:*

Biber, Eidechse, Eisvogel<sup>9</sup>, Esel, Fasan, Frosch (Land- und Wasserfrosch), Fuchs, Gemse, Hase, Hund<sup>10</sup>, Hirsch, Ibis, Ichneumon<sup>11</sup>, Igel, Käuzchen<sup>12</sup>, Krähe, Kuckuck<sup>13</sup>, Rebhuhn<sup>14</sup>, Reiher, Salamander, Schlupfwespen, Schwalbe, Specht, Sperling<sup>15</sup>, Storch, Taube, Thunfisch<sup>16</sup>, Turteltaube, Wiedehopf, Wiesel, Wildschwein;

<sup>5</sup> Vgl. J. Zachhuber, Physis: RAC 27, 744–781 hier 745: „Von Anfang an lassen sich trotz vielfältigen Gebrauchs des Terminus zwei Hauptbedeutungen unterscheiden. Einerseits bezeichnet Physis das eigentliche Sein, das Wesen oder das Prinzip eines Dinges. So zeigt Hermes dem Odysseus ‚die Physis‘ einer Pflanze an (φύσιν αὐτοῦ ἔδειξε), indem er ihn auf ihre wundersame Heilkraft hinweist, die gegen den Zauber der Kirke immun macht (Od. 10, 303). Physis kann hier durchaus mit ‚Natur‘ widergegeben werden. Andererseits kann das Wort aber auch ‚Ursprung‘ oder ‚Entstehung‘ bedeuten ..., wenn etwa Empedokles schreibt, Physis gebe es eigentlich ‚bei keinem einzigen von allen sterblichen Dingen und kein Ende in verderblichem Tode‘ (VS 31 B 8).“

<sup>6</sup> Vgl. W. Speyer, Mischwesen: RAC 24, 864–925, bes. 864–870.

<sup>7</sup> Vgl. W. Speyer, Mischwesen: RAC 24, 864–925, bes. 914–918.

<sup>8</sup> Im Folgenden werden in der Regel nur dann erläuternde Hinweise in den Anmerkungen gegeben, wenn die Tiere, Mischwesen, Pflanzen und Steine nicht zu den bekannten Redaktionen I–III gehören, ihre Identifikation strittig ist bzw. zusätzliche Hinweise sinnvoll erscheinen.

<sup>9</sup> Appendix Sbordone 323.

<sup>10</sup> Siehe B. E. Perry, Physiologus: PRE 22/1,1115 (4. Redaktion).

<sup>11</sup> Eine Schleichkatzenart; siehe Mielsch (2005) 67–70.

<sup>12</sup> So Treu (1981) 13f.134. Wörtlich: Nachtrabe. Die Zuweisung zum Käuzchen ist umstritten.

<sup>13</sup> Der Kuckuck findet sich nur in der Handschrift G Kapitel 49 (158 Offermanns).

<sup>14</sup> Oder Stein- bzw. Bläßhuhn, Wachtel; siehe Mielsch (2005) 112–115.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix Sbordone 314.

<sup>16</sup> Appendix Sbordone 317.

*außergewöhnliche (exotische) Tiere, Raubtiere und Aasfresser:*

Affe<sup>17</sup>, Bär<sup>18</sup>, Charadrius<sup>19</sup>, Prion/Pristis (Delphin/Sägefisch)<sup>20</sup>, Elephant, Enhydriis<sup>21</sup>, Geier, Hyäne, Krokodil, Papagei, Pavian<sup>22</sup>, Pelikan, Pfau, Panther, Strauß, Wolf; sowie (*teils symbolreiche*) *Misch- oder Fabelwesen*:

Basilisk<sup>23</sup>, Echidna, Einhorn, Gorgo, Greif, Phönix, Satyr<sup>24</sup>, Sirenen<sup>25</sup> und Hippo- oder Onokentauren<sup>26</sup>.

Nicht von antiken Quellen übernommen bzw. neu sind:

Aspidochelone<sup>27</sup>; Ameisenlöwe, Antholops<sup>28</sup>, Hydrippos<sup>29</sup>; Medea-Tier<sup>30</sup>; Pristis / Prion<sup>31</sup>.

An *Steinen* kommen vor:

Achat, Magnet, Diamant, Feuerstein, Gebär- oder Geierstein<sup>32</sup>, Indischer Stein<sup>33</sup> sowie die Perle.

Folgende *Pflanzen* kommen vor:

Maulbeerfeige<sup>34</sup>, der Baum Peridexion, Mandragora<sup>35</sup>.

**17** Appendix Sbordone 305 f. 318 f. 320 f.

**18** Siehe B. E. Perry, Physiologus: PRE 22/1,1115 (4. Red.).

**19** Vogel mit Heilkräften gegen Gelbsucht – wahrscheinlich fiktiv; siehe A. Kehl, Haradrius: RAC 13,585 – 593; Mielsch (2005) 121 f.

**20** Vielleicht gemeint in Kapitel 39: Prion / Pristis wegen der Begleitung der Schiffe; siehe E. Diez, Delphin: RAC 3,677.

**21** Die Identifizierung mit dem Fischotter – so Seel (1960) 23 – ist unsicher.

**22** Mielsch (2005) 77.

**23** Appendix Sbordone 316.

**24** Siehe B. E. Perry, Physiologus: PRE 22/1,1115 (4. Redaktion).

**25** Vgl. Rahner (1964) 257.

**26** Beide Formen sind überliefert.

**27** Seeungetüm, vgl. A. Breitenbach, Ketos: RAC 20,790.

**28** Vielleicht die Antilope.

**29** Wasserpferd; nicht gemeint ist das erst seit dem 9./10. Jh. aus dem nördlichen Europa bekannte Walross; vgl. W. Speyer, Mischwesen: RAC 24,864 – 925, hier 913; vgl. Schönberger (2001), rezensiert von H. Schneider: GFA 5 (2002) 1023 f.

**30** Benannt nach der kindstötenden Medea; Appendix Sbordone 317 f.

**31** Seetier namens „Säge“, siehe oben Delphin.

**32** Im Geier-Kapitel vom Adlerstein übertragen; siehe W. Speyer, Geier: RAC 9, 458; K. (Vorname unbekannt) Schneider / Eduard Stemplinger, Adlerstein: RAC 1, 94.

**33** Auch Froschstein genannt; vielleicht der aus Plinius, Naturalis historia 37,190 bekannte Wasserstein.

**34** Siehe V. Reichmann, Feige II [Sykomore]: RAC 7, 687.

**35** Gemeint ist Alraun; im Elefanten-Kapitel (2. Redaktion) als Aphrodisiakum (so schon Gen 39, 14 f. belegt) von der Elefantenkuh benutzt; Parallele zur Sündenfallgeschichte; siehe Ed. Stemplinger, Alraun: RAC 1, 309; I. Opelt, Elefant: RAC 4, 1021.

## Reihenfolge der Kapitel

Ein Aufbauschema oder Ordnungsprinzip der Kapitel ist nicht erkennbar, da diese einfach additiv aneinander gereiht werden, wohl aber beginnt der Text in Redaktion I–III und den alten Übersetzungen mit dem König der Tiere: dem Löwen. Manche Kapitel folgen aufgrund ihrer gemeinsamen Nennung in einer Bibelstelle aufeinander. So wird der Igel in der Nachbarschaft mit Sirenen und Hippo- bzw. Onokentauren in der 1. Redaktion behandelt nach Jes 13,21f LXX; in der 3. psbasilianischen Redaktion in Nachbarschaft des Hasen nach Ps 103 [104], 18 LXX.<sup>36</sup> Pelikan, Käuzchen und Adler (Kapitel 4–6) folgen offenbar assoziativ nach dem Vorkommen in Ps 101,7 und 102,5 LXX aufeinander in der 1. Redaktion.<sup>37</sup>

Analysiert man die formale Struktur der einzelnen Kapitel des Physiologus, so kristallisiert sich ein typischer Aufbau heraus:

In einem ersten Teil haben wir zu Beginn oft ein Bibelzitat, in dem das betreffende Tier, die Pflanze oder der Stein genannt wird. Sodann folgt eine naturkundliche Beschreibung der Eigenschaften bzw. der Natur, die sich auf die Autorität des Physiologus stützt.

In einem zweiten Teil werden diese Eigenschaften christlich bzw. allegorisch ausgelegt. Beslossen wird das Kapitel im Regelfall durch einen formelhaften Rückgriff auf die Autorität des Physiologus („Schön hat der Physiologus gesprochen ...“).

## Aufbau eines Physiologus-Kapitels

### 1. Teil

- 1.1. Beginn
- 1.1.1. Bibelzitat

1.1.2. Berufung auf die Autorität des Physiologus (z. B. „wie der Physiologus sagt“) und naturkundliche Beschreibung der Physis

### 2. Teil

- 2.1. Christliche Deutung der Physis (allegorisch / typologisch) unter Berufung auf verschiedene Bibelstellen oder biblische Paradigmata
- 2.2. Formelhafter Abschluß mit erneutem Bezug auf die Autorität des Physiologus („Schön hat der Physiologus gesprochen ...“)

Ein Beispiel soll dies verdeutlichen, nämlich

Kapitel 4. Vom Pelikan<sup>38</sup>:

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<sup>36</sup> Vgl. F. Witek, Igel: RAC 17, 925 f.

<sup>37</sup> Siehe K. Alpers, Physiologus: TRE 26, 596–602, hier 597.

<sup>38</sup> Text: Appendix (87–115, 313f. Sbordone).

**Bibelzitat**

Schön sagt David: „Ich bin gleich dem Pelikan in der Wüste“ (Ps 101,7).<sup>39</sup>

**Naturkundliche Beschreibung mit Berufung auf den Physiologus**

Der Physiologus sagt vom Pelikan, dass er von Natur aus sehr kinderlieb ist. Wenn er die Jungen geboren hat und sie ein wenig herangewachsen sind, schlagen sie den Eltern ins Gesicht. Die Eltern züchtigen die Kinder dann und töten sie. Später bereuen die Eltern das und betrauern die Kinder drei Tage lang, die sie getötet haben. Am dritten Tage reißt sich ihre Mutter die Brust auf; das Blut tropft auf die Leichen der Jungen und sie weckt sie wieder auf.

**Christliche Hermeneia**

So sagte auch der Herr im Jesajabuch: „Söhne habe ich aufgezogen und sie erhöht, und sie sind von mir abgefallen“ (Jes 1–2). Es hat der Schöpfer uns zu Herrn der gesamten Schöpfung geboren, und wir haben ihn geschlagen: Auf welche Weise haben wir ihn geschlagen? „Wir haben der Schöpfung mehr gedient als dem Schöpfer“ (Rm 1,25; Mk 1,5). Als unser Heiland an das Holz des Kreuzes hinaufgegangen war, hat er seine Seite geöffnet und Blut und Wasser zur Rettung und zum ewigen Leben vergossen. Das Blut durch den, der gesagt hat: „Er nahm den Kelch und dankte“ (Mt 26,27; Mk 1,4; Lk 3,3; Apg 13,24,19,9); das Wasser dient zur Taufe der Buße.

**Fomelhafter Abschluß mit erneutem Bezug auf die Autorität des Physiologus**

Schön hat der Physiologus über den Pelikan gesprochen.

Dieses Grundmuster wird vielfach variiert. So kann z.B. am Beginn das Bibelzitat fehlen oder häufig fehlt auch der Rückbezug auf die Autorität des Physiologus am Ende des Kapitels. Es gibt auch Kapitel, in denen der Physiologus gar nicht genannt wird. Allerdings reichen diese formalen Beobachtungen alleine nicht aus, um Rückschlüsse auf die Echtheit oder spätere Hinzufügung eines einzelnen Kapitels oder Textes zu ziehen.

Bei der Frage der Bewertung der überlieferten Textvarianten muß man sich vor allem klarmachen, dass schon der Text, den Sbordone in der ersten Redaktion bietet, keinen reinen Text einer ursprünglichen Physiologus-Fassung bietet, sondern vor allem die Hauptvarianten der wichtigsten Handschriftenfamilien, in die sich die erste Redaktion weiter untergliedern läßt. Diese enthalten aber eine Vielzahl von unechten Zusätzen und Änderungen, insbesondere Glossen und Scholien.

Dafür einige Beispiele:

### 1. Das Kapitel über den Salamander<sup>40</sup>

#### 31. Vom Salamander

Es gibt ein Lebewesen, das Salamander heißt. Der Physiologus hat über ihn gesagt: wenn er in den Feuerofen kommt, verlöscht der ganze Ofen, und wenn er in die Fußbodenheizung (sc. Hypokausten) des Bades kommt, verlöscht die Fußbodenheizung. Wenn nun der Salamander das Feuer durch seine natürliche Anlage löscht, wie können dann bis heute noch Leute bezweifeln, dass die

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<sup>39</sup> Text: 1. Redaktion (Sbordone 16 – 19). Die in diesem Beitrag abgedruckten Übersetzungen gehen auf ein Manuskript zurück, das ursprünglich von Ursula Treu stammt und der Redaktion „Fontes Christiani“ übergeben wurde. Der Text der Übersetzung wurde von mir überarbeitet und redigiert.

<sup>40</sup> Text: Sbordone 101–102.

drei Jünglinge im Feuerofen keinen Schaden erlitten, sondern im Gegenteil den Ofen abkühlten? Denn es steht geschrieben : „Und selbst wenn du durchs Feuer gehst, wird die Flamme dich nicht verbrennen“ (Jes 43,2). So, oh Mensch, sei auch du in der Lage die ewige und unauslöschliche Flamme zu löschen.“

Die Feuerfestigkeit des Salamanders, die in der Antike als pseudonaturwissenschaftliche Tatsache galt, sie wird z. B. von Aristoteles, Theophrast, Plinius und Aelian überliefert,<sup>41</sup> wird hier mit einem berühmten Rettungsparadigma aus dem Alten Testament in Verbindung gebracht: die drei Jünglinge im Feuerofen aus dem Buch Daniel. Eine ausführlichere Hermeneia und eine abschließende Bemerkung („Schön hat der Salamander gesprochen ...“) fehlen allerdings in diesem Strang der Überlieferung.

In einigen Handschriften folgt jedoch noch ein weiterer Text, den Sbordone in zwei geringfügig voneinander abweichenden Fassungen in seinem Haupttext abgedruckt hat. Ich zitiere hier nur den ersten Text:<sup>42</sup>

### 31.a. Über die drei heiligen Jünglinge

Beim Propheten Daniel steht eine bewundernswerte Geschichte über die drei edlen Jünglinge geschrieben, die wegen einer Verleumdung in den Feuerofen geworfen worden waren und ein solches Loblied im Feuerofen sangen, dass man sie nur bewundern kann (vgl. Dan 3). Denn sie waren gerecht. Weshalb aber hätte sich dieses Wunder nicht wahrhaft ereignen können, da doch auch die heiligen Apostel Tote erweckt haben und größere Taten vollbracht haben als diese Gerechten? Und sie Berge ins Meer versetzt haben (vgl. 1 Kor 13,2)?

Zunächst fällt auf, dass dieser Exkurs inhaltlich nur noch auf die drei Jünglinge abhebt und den Salamander und seine Physis ganz außer acht lässt. Eine enge Verknüpfung mit der Geschichte des Salamanders fehlt. Zudem ist dieser Passus auch durch eine eigene Überschrift von dem vorhergehenden Text abgetrennt (in den Handschriften überliefert). Das legt den Schluss nahe, dass er nicht zur ursprünglichen Physiologus-Geschichte über den Salamander gehörte. Es handelt sich vielmehr um einen exegetischen Zusatz, der vielleicht sogar einmal als Scholion am Rand des Textes überliefert war und später in den Haupttext hineingelangte. Vielleicht empfand der Kopist den ihm vorliegenden Text als zu kurz oder als inhaltlich unbefriedigend und fügte deshalb diesen exegetischen Exkurs ein. Der Text ist offensichtlich als Veständnishilfe für die Anspielung des Physiologus auf die drei Jünglinge im Feuerofen gedacht. Der Physiologus setzt das Wissen um diese berühmte biblische Episode aber voraus, und er konnte das auch guten Gewissens tun. Denn dieses Exempel – wie auch andere alttestamentarische Rettungsparadigmen – war bei den frühen Christen bekannt: Wir kennen es z. B. auch aus der frühchristlichen Katakombenmalerei (Priscilla-Kata-

<sup>41</sup> Aristoteles, *De historia animalium* 552b15; Theophrast, *De igne* 60; Plinius, *Naturalis historia* 29,4,76; 10,67,188; Aelian, *De natura animalium* 2,31. Siehe den Apparat mit weiteren Belegen bei Sbordone 101.

<sup>42</sup> Text: Sbordone 102–103.

kombe 3. Jh.). Sbordone hätte diesen Text also eigentlich als Scholion oder exegetischen Zusatz kennzeichnen sollen.

Ein ähnliches Phänomen können wir an einer anderen Stelle im Diamantkapitel beobachten, wo Sbordone eine Reihe von Bibelstellen mit in seinen Haupttext aufnimmt, zu denen er im Apparat lapidar bemerkt, dass er auch nicht wisse, warum diese Verse an dieser Stelle in diesen Handschriften überliefert seien, da sie mit dem voraufgegangenen Text nicht viel zu tun haben.<sup>43</sup>

**2. Beispiel:** Auch das Kapitel über den Diamanten lässt sich in der ersten Redaktion nach Sbordone genauer analysieren. Das Kapitel lautet

### 32. Vom Diamantstein

Der Physiologus hat über den Diamanten gesagt, dass er im Land nach Sonnenaufgang hin gefunden wird. Er wird nicht tagsüber gefunden, sondern allein des Nachts. Adamas (sc. der Unbezwungliche) wird er genannt, weil er alles bezwingt, selbst aber von nichts bezwungen wird. Auch unser Herr Jesus Christus richtet alle, ihn selbst aber kann keiner richten (vgl. 1 Kor 2,15). Denn er hat gesagt: „Wer von euch kann mich einer Stunde zeihen (Joh 8, 46)?“ Im Osten wird er gefunden, denn wahrlich sagt der Prophet: „Aufgang (sc. Osten) ist sein Name“ (Sach 6,12).

Es fällt auf, dass hier lediglich die gebräuchliche Etymologie des Adamas (der nicht bezwungen werden kann) und die Auffindungslegende des Diamanten für die Darstellung der Physis und die sich anschließende Hermeneia benutzt werden. Außerdem fehlt die typische Abschlußformel, was aber durchaus häufiger vorkommt.

Eine weitere Version, die von Sbordone in Kapitel 32bis abgedruckt wurde, orientiert sich hingegen stark an Plinius<sup>44</sup> bzw. Xenokrates<sup>45</sup> Beschreibung des Diamanten und erwähnt ganz besonders auch die Legende der Feuerfestigkeit, die Hammer-Amboß-Legende<sup>46</sup> sowie die Bocksblutlegende<sup>47</sup>.

### 32 (bis).

Es gibt einen Stein, der Diamant genannt wird, denn er wird weder vom Eisen geschnitten noch wird er durch Schnitzen weich. Er schmilzt auch nicht im Feuer, das alles verzehrt, sondern allein in Bocksblut, das, weil es heißer ist als alles andere, die unnachgiebige Härte des Steines erweichen kann. ... Weswegen und warum ist diesem Ding ein so merkwürdiges Wesen gegeben? Deswegen, damit, wenn jemand der göttlichen Botschaft nach Christus Vertrauen schenkt, aber wider Willen nicht glauben kann, er doch das Geheimnis des Glaubens annehmen soll, wenn er nur auf den Diamanten blickt. ... So unbezwingbar durch Gewalt ist er: Was auch Könige und

**43** Apparat Sbordone 106 zu Zeile 2–10: *nescio quo pacto loca bibl. plane inutilia in Ali irrepserint.*

**44** Plinius, Naturalis historia 37,15,55–61.

**45** Plinius verweist u. a. auf das Gemmenlexikon des Xenokrates von Ephesus (1. Jh. n. Chr.), der für uns vor allem durch einen in späterer Zeit überlieferten Auszug über den Adamas faßbar ist, nämlich im Kommentar des Hieronymus zu dem biblischen Propheten Amos 7, 7–9.

**46** Hammer-Amboss-Legende bedeutet, dass der Diamant selbst durch beste Hämmer und Ambosse nicht zertrümmert werden kann. Siehe dazu Haas / Hödl / Schneider (2004) 139–142.

**47** Bocksblutlegende bedeutet, dass der Diamant nur durch Bocksblut erweicht werden kann; vgl. Haas / Hödl / Schneider (2004) 146–156; Ohly (1976).

Tyrannen gegen ihn geplant haben, alle haben sie ihr Ziel verfehlt. Denn wie einen Diamantstein haben sie Christus angegriffen, aber sie wurden als ohnmächtig entlarvt. ...Der aber, obwohl allen überlegen gefunden, wird wie der Diamant durch warmes Blut gebeugt. ... Durch warmes Blut wird also wie der Diamant auch Christus, der Unbesiegbare, besiegt, und sein eigenes Innere wird erweicht, und deshalb genießt er das Königreich im Himmel.

Der Verfasser dieser zweiten Version in Kapitel 32bis verzichtet ganz auf die Nennung der Autorität des Physiologus. Er hat seine Quellen (vor allem Plinius, vielleicht Xenokrates) offenbar deshalb stärker ausgeschöpft, weil ihm die vorliegende Fassung des Physiogustextes zu kurz bzw. nicht ausreichend erschien. Hinzu kommt, dass die handschriftliche Basis, auf die sich diese Version stützen kann, ausgesprochen dünn ist. Denn sie ist nur in einer Handschrift der ersten Redaktion überliefert.<sup>48</sup> Diese Version gehört daher sicher nicht zum ursprünglichen Bestand. Wann sie allerdings zum Physiogustext hinzukam, bleibt unsicher.

Die Hammer-Amboss-Legende wird auch noch genannt in Kapitel 42 – eine weitere Version, wieder ohne Nennung des Physiologus, wobei die magisch-apotropäische Kraft des Steines zusätzlich beschrieben wird:

#### 42. Vom [starken] Diamantstein

„Es gibt noch eine andere Eigenart des [starken] Diamanten. Dieser scheut nämlich weder Eisen, wenn man ihn damit schlägt, noch [scheut er] das Feuer, [wenn man versucht, ihn damit zu verbrennen], noch nimmt er den Dunst des Rauches an. Wenn er sich in einem Hause befindet, geht weder ein böser Geist dort hinein noch wird irgend etwas Böses gefunden. Der Mensch aber, der ihn besitzt, besiegt jeden Anschlag des Teufels. Der Diamant ist unser Herr Jesus Christus. Wenn du ihn also im Herzen festhältst, Mensch, wird dir kein Übel jemals widerfahren.“

Gleiches gilt auch für ergänzende Kapitel, die mit der typischen Fomel eingeleitet werden: „Es gibt auch noch eine weitere Physis ...“ Solche Versionen liegen z. B. vor beim Wildesel (Kapitel 45) und auch wieder beim Diamanten (Kapitel 42). Auch diese Textfassungen wurden also erst später hinzugefügt.

Wichtig bleibt also festzuhalten, dass auch die von Sbordone ermittelte sogenannte erste Redaktion nicht eins zu eins identisch ist mit einer möglichen Ursprungsfassung.

Wie aber ist der Text selbst zu verstehen? Welches Interesse verfolgt der Verfasser mit diesen Texten und wie muß man sich Ihre Entstehung vorstellen?

Generell kann man sagen, dass der Physiologus die Informationen der ihm vorliegenden naturkundlichen Werke benutzt oder sich an bekannte naturkundliche Überlieferungen, Geschichten und Beobachtungen aus seiner Um- und Alltagswelt anlehnt. Dabei werden einzelne φύσεις oder Geschichten unverändert aus der naturkundlichen Tradition übernommen, in Einzelheiten modifiziert, auf andere Arten übertragen, neu erfunden oder im Hinblick auf die Auslegung umgeformt.<sup>49</sup> Die

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<sup>48</sup> Sbordone 106 zu den Codices: *in charta Allaciana 216 (CXLI) apud Bibl. Vallicellianam servatur.*

<sup>49</sup> Siehe hierzu H. Schneider, Physiologus: RAC 27, 726f und 732–735.

Tendenz sich von einer heidnischen Umwelt abzugrenzen und dem paganen Kult eine christliche Deutung der Welt und Natur entgegenzusetzen wird in einigen Kapiteln besonders deutlich: so etwa im Kapitel über die Sonneneidechse.

## 2. Von der Sonneneidechse

Es gibt eine Eidechse, die Sonneneidechse genannt wird, wie der Physiologus sagt. Wenn sie alt geworden ist, nimmt sie an beiden Augen Schaden und wird blind: Sie sieht das Licht der Sonne nicht mehr. Was macht nun die gute Natur in ihr? Sie sucht eine nach Osten gelegene Mauer und kriecht in eine Mauerspalte, und wenn die Sonne aufgeht, öffnen sich ihre Augen, und sie werden wieder gesund.

In dieser Weise suche auch du, o Mensch, wenn du das Gewand des alten Menschen trägst (vgl. Eph 4,22–24; Kol 3,9) und die Augen deines Herzens trübe werden, die aufgehende Sonne der Gerechtigkeit (Mal 3,20), unseren Herrn Jesus Christus, [dessen Name bei dem Propheten „Aufgang“ genannt wird] (vgl. Sach 6,12; Lk 1,78). Er wird die Augen deines Herzens öffnen.

Das Kapitel über die Sonneneidechse ist relativ kurz und nach dem bereits oben beschriebenen Schema aufgebaut. Es fehlt lediglich ein formelhafter Abschluß in diesem Zweig der Überlieferung. Zunächst wird im ersten Teil ihre Erblindung im Alter dargestellt. Diese heilt sie dadurch, dass sie sich in einer Mauerspalte in Richtung Osten verkriecht und den Sonnenaufgang betrachtet. Im zweiten Teil werden die wesentlichen Elemente dieser Geschichte wieder aufgenommen und allegorisch gedeutet. Der in das Gewand des alten Adam gehüllte Mensch, dessen Augen nicht mehr richtig sehen können, soll sich zur Sonne der Gerechtigkeit (sc. Christus) hinwenden, um sein Augenlicht zurückzubekommen.

Im ersten Teil knüpft die Geschichte über die Sonneneidechse an allseits bekannte Beobachtungen über die Mauereidechse an und ihr besonderes Verhältnis zur Sonne: Sie galt in der Antike als Sonnentier, das sich erst bei der Mittagshitze ins Kühle zurückzieht. Dieses Verhalten greifen Dichter wie Theokrit oder Vergil gerne auf, um die Mittagsstimmung zu beschreiben. In Theokrits Eidyllion 7, Vers 21–22 fragt Lykidas: „Wohin eilst du Simichidas denn jetzt in der Stunde des Mittags, wo sogar die Eidechsen in den Mauerritzen schlafen?“ Bekannte Eidechsenarten wie die Smaragdeidechse, Mauereidechse oder auch unsere heimische Zauneidechse waren in der Antike in Europa bzw. im Mittelmeerraum genauso verbreitet wie heute.

Der Text ist in seinem zweiten allegorischen Teil mit wichtigen Bildern und Begriffen des christlichen Glaubens durchsetzt: das Gewand des alten Adam, die Blickrichtung nach Osten zur Sonne der Gerechtigkeit und der Sonnenaufgang als Symbol Christi bzw. seiner Auferstehung.

Dass hier aber ausgerechnet auf die Blindheit der Eidechse rekurriert wird, die sich ähnlich wie die Schlange verjüngen kann, wird erst vor dem Hintergrund der antiken medizinisch-magischen Praktiken verständlich, die man mit diesen Reptilien verband. Plinius kennt in seiner großen naturkundlichen Enzyklopädie gleich mehrere Rezepte, wie man mit Hilfe von Eidechsen, verschiedene Mittel gegen Augenkrankheiten herstellen konnte. Z. B. sticht man einer Eidechse zunächst die Augen aus und lässt sie sie dann mit einem Eisen- oder Goldring zusammen in einem Glasbe-

hälter. Sobald die Eidechse das Augenlicht wiedergewonnen hat, lässt man sie frei. Der Ring kann dann als apotropäisches Mittel gegen Augenentzündungen getragen werden. Oder man sperrt eine Eidechse zusammen mit neun Steinen, auf denen Eidechsen eingraviert sind, neun Tage lang in einem frischgebrannten Tongefäß ein. Dann nimmt man jeden Tag einen Stein weg. Am neunten Tag entlässt man die Eidechse wieder in die Freiheit. Die so gewonnenen Steine eignen sich nun zur Abwehr und Behandlung von Augenkrankheiten. Aelian berichtet sogar, dass er selbst einmal Augenzeuge bei einer solchen magischen Prozedur gewesen sei.<sup>50</sup>

Campbell Bonner hat in seinem Buch über magische Amulette insgesamt 16 solcher magischen Steine mit eingravierten Eidechsen beschrieben, die alle aus dem ägyptischen Raum stammen und in das 2. oder 3. Jh. datiert werden.<sup>51</sup>

Offenbar wurde die Geschichte über die Erblindung und Regeneration der Sonneneidechse im Physiologus als christliches Gegenstück zum paganen medizinisch-magischen Volks- und Naturglauben konzipiert. Man wußte um diese Praktiken, akzeptierte sie sogar als pseudonaturkundliche Realität und versuchte eine christliche Deutung, um sie aus der heidnischen Sphäre in die christliche hinüberzuführen. Dieses Verfahren wendet der unbekannte Autor dieses Textes mehrfach an.<sup>52</sup>

Dabei beruft sich der Verfasser dieses Textes auf den Physiologus, das heißt einen anonymen Naturkundler oder Naturwissenschaftler, dessen Autorität unbestritten bzw. dessen Ansehen hoch ist. Spätere Kopisten oder Redaktoren empfanden diese anonyme Autorität des Physiologus allerdings als unbefriedigend. Deshalb wurde der Physiologustext immer wieder unterschiedlichen berühmten christlichen Autoritäten wie Chrysostomus, Basilius, Epiphanius, Ambrosius oder Hieronymus zugewiesen, um dem Text durch die Pseudoautorschaft eines bekannten Kirchenvaters einen höheren Stellenwert zu verleihen.<sup>53</sup>

Neben solchem pseudonaturkundlichem Wissen und manchmal auch märchenhaften oder legendenhaften Erzählelementen, die durchaus auch aus der Bibel stammen können, steht aber auch echte Naturbeobachtung mit präzisen Beschreibungen. Wenn z. B. die Eigenschaft des Ibis als Wat- und Stelzvogel beschrieben wird, der nicht schwimmt bzw. sich nur im seichten Wasser aufhält.

Die breite Rezeption, die zahlreichen Handschriften, Versionen und Übersetzungen machen zudem deutlich, dass der Verfasser des Physiologus das christliche Wissen erfolgreich popularisierte. Seine christliche Naturkunde wurde so zu einer Art Volksbuch, das man gerne las und zitierte. Dabei dürfte der Text zunächst für den Unterricht oder die christliche Predigt geschrieben worden sein, aus dem Bedürfnis heraus, einerseits in der Bibel und in der Alltagswelt vorkommende Tiere, Pflanzen

<sup>50</sup> Aelian, *De natura animalium* 5,47; Plinius, *Naturalis historia* 29,129 – 131.

<sup>51</sup> Bei den Steinen handelte es sich meistens um Jaspis. Siehe Bonner (1950) 69 – 71. Diese Amulette, auch Ringe, sind jetzt bequem greifbar in *The Campbell Bonner magical gems data base*: z. B. Cbd. 1183, 1233, 1255, 1708, 1792.

<sup>52</sup> Z. B. in Kapitel 40: Ibis; vgl. Schneider (2002) 151 – 164.

<sup>53</sup> Vgl. B. E. Perry, Physiologus: PRE 22/1, 1076 – 1078.

und Steine in den Zusammenhang der christlichen Botschaft zu stellen, und sie aus der Vorstellungswelt einer feindlichen, heidnischen Gesellschaft herauszulösen und mit christlichen Assoziationen zu verknüpfen, andererseits die Neugier des christlichen Lesers oder Hörers durch teils wunderbare christlich inspirierte Geschichten zu fesseln, und zu zeigen, dass man auch mit christlichen Texten belehren und unterhalten kann. Dass die einfach strukturierten Geschichten über Tiere, Pflanzen und Steine für das Vorstellungsvermögen der einfachen Gläubigen besonders gut nachvollziehbar sind und unmittelbar ansprechend waren, liegt auf der Hand. Außerdem dürfen wir nicht vergessen, dass die christliche Literatur in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten ja noch im Entstehen begriffen war. Das Wissen über das Christentum und seine verschiedenen Manifestationen und Glaubensinhalte mußte ja erst noch verbreitet werden. Wie die christliche Naturkunde des Physiologus offenbar als Gegenpol zu den paganen Tierbüchern und Naturkunden konzipiert wurde, so entsteht z. B. auch im 2. Jahrhundert in den apokyphen Apostelakten das christliche Pendant zum paganen Roman, der in dieser Zeit eine Blüte erlebt.<sup>54</sup> Man darf auch nicht vergessen, dass der Außendruck für die christlichen Gemeinden in den ersten Jahrhunderten sehr groß war. Die Christen werden verfolgt, sie werden von gebildeten Heiden literarisch bekämpft, und sie müssen sich mit einem paganen Bildungsprogramm auseinandersetzen, das mit nicht-christlichen Inhalten operiert. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird deutlich, dass auch eine Schrift wie der Physiologus kein primär paradoxographisches Interesse verfolgt, das heißt er sammelt nicht Kuiositäten oder Naturwunder, um das Interesse eines sensationshungrigen Publikums zu befriedigen, wie wir das aus dem paganen paradoxographischen Schrifttum kennen.<sup>55</sup> Vielmehr versucht er in erster Linie, das Geheimnis der christlichen Offenbarung auf einer naturkundlichen Basis zu vermitteln. Er lehrt ganz im paulinischen Sinne (Röm 1,20), Gott in der Schöpfung zu erkennen.

Das exegetische Interesse, das den Verfasser des Physiologus leitet, hat Augustinus in *De doctrina christiana* 2,16 auf den Punkt gebracht:

Die Unkenntnis der Dinge erzeugt aber dunkle, figürliche Redeweisen, wenn wir Eigenschaften von Lebewesen, Steinen, Pflanzen oder anderen Dingen nicht kennen, die meistens wegen irgendeines Vergleichspunktes in der Hl. Schrift angeführt werden. ... Denn sogar die Kenntnis des Karfunkelsteines, der im Finstern leuchtet, erhellt viele dunkle Stellen in den Büchern, wo auch immer er wegen eines Vergleichspunktes angeführt wird; die Unkenntnis von Beryll oder Diamant verschließt sehr oft die Tore des Verständnisses.<sup>56</sup>

In ähnlicher Weise entwickeln die Kirchenväter auch die Vorstellung vom „Buch der Natur“ oder „Buch der Schöpfung“ (*liber creaturae* oft bei Augustinus belegt), das es

<sup>54</sup> Vgl. z. B. zu Parallelen zwischen den Thekla-Akten und den zeitgenössischen Liebesromanen des 2. Jahrhunderts Schöllgen (2000) 597–606.

<sup>55</sup> Zuletzt vertreten von Schönberger (2001) 143, der von einem „Natur-Wunder-Buch mit heils geschichtlicher Deutung“ spricht.

<sup>56</sup> Augustinus, *De doctrina christiana* 2,16, übersetzt von K. Pollmann, Stuttgart 2002, 66f.

zu lesen und zu deuten gilt. Die Natur bot sozusagen eine symbolische Sprache, die es zu entschlüsseln galt; sie beinhaltete „einen theologischen Text“<sup>57</sup> der mit stauenswerten göttlichen Wundern aufwarten konnte.<sup>58</sup>

Dabei führt das „Wunder“, das man tagtäglich sieht, allerdings bald auch zur Gleichgültigkeit des Betrachters. Augustinus hebt dies am Beispiel der Diamantschleifer hervor, die mit dem indischen Diamanten arbeiteten, der ja unzerstörbar sei, außer durch Bocksblut. Ein anderes Beispiel liefert ihm die wunderbare Kraft des Magneten. Manches über das sich der Mensch bei dem ersten Kontakt noch wundert, wird eben schnell zur Alltagserfahrung und zum Alltagswissen. Hat man sich erst einmal an das Ungewohnte gewöhnt, verliert es schnell seinen Anreiz zum Staunen. So mag es dann auch demjenigen gehen, der den Physiologus zum wiederholten Male liest.<sup>59</sup>

In der Spätantike ist der griechische Physiologus so beliebt, dass er in alle wichtigen Sprachen des griechisch-römisch-orientalischen Kulturreises übersetzt wird. Seiner Beliebtheit als eine Art „Volksbuch“ tut auch die Verurteilung durch das Decretum Gelasianum (6. Jh.)<sup>60</sup> keinen Abbruch. Der ersten Redaktion entstammen die Vorlagen für alle lateinischen Übersetzungen sowie für die armenische, koptische, syrische, arabische und äthiopische Physiologus-Version. Die verschiedenen lateinischen Übersetzungsvarianten des Physiologus wurden ihrerseits wieder im Mittelalter in die entsprechenden Nationalsprachen übersetzt, vor allem ins Französische und Englische, meist in der stark verkürzten Form der „Bestiarien“. Solche Texte finden wir bereits bei Isidor von Sevilla. Die sogenannten Dicta Joannis Chrysostomi de naturis bestiarum, die in über 30 Handschriften aus dem 12.–15. Jahrhundert überliefert sind, entstanden wahrscheinlich in Frankreich und tradieren 27 Kapitel des Physiologus, allerdings ohne die Stein- und Pflanzenkapitel. Die Zuweisung an den berühmten Kirchenvater Johannes Chrysostomus erfolgte, um der Schrift größere Autorität zu verleihen.

Der Physiologus eines nicht näher bekannten Theobald<sup>61</sup> diente als Schulbuch. Diese Bearbeitung enthält 12 Kapitel in verschiedenen metrischen Formen.<sup>62</sup> Als Schul- und Unterrichtsbuch wurde dieser Text auch mit Glossen und Kommentaren versehen.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> So Cox (1983) 436: „Nature was a symbolic language, a theological text.“

<sup>58</sup> Siehe zu diesem Thema den Beitrag von K. Heyden auf der Berner Tagung: *Liber creaturae und sacra scriptura. Zur Bedeutung der Naturkunde für die Bibellexegese der Kirchenväter* (im Druck).

<sup>59</sup> Vgl. Augustinus, *De civitate dei* 21,4 (CCL 48, 764); Chr. Hornung, Magnet: RAC 23, 993–1005, bes. 1001.

<sup>60</sup> Decretum Gelasianum 6, 11 (TU 38/4, 12 Dobschütz) : *Liber physiologus, qui ab haereticis conscriptus et beati nomine Ambrosii praesignatus, apocryphus* (vgl. Perry 1100f).

<sup>61</sup> Vielleicht handelt es sich um den gleichnamigen Abt von Monte Cassino (1022–1035). Ende des 15. Jh. wurde der Physiologus Theobaldi mehrfach ins Deutsche übersetzt.

<sup>62</sup> Behandelt werden Löwe, Adler, Schlange, Ameise, Fuchs, Hirsch, Spinne, Wal, Sirenen, Onokentauren, Elefant, Turteltaube und Panther.

<sup>63</sup> Henkel (1976) 36–41.

Daneben wird der Physiologus ins Althochdeutsche, Italienische, Waldensische, Provenzalische, Spanische und Tosco-Venetianische übersetzt. Im slavischen Raum wird der Physiologus vor allem nach der 2. Redaktion ins Bulgarische, Russische, Serbische und Tschechische sowie ins Rumänische übersetzt, ins Georgische nach der 1. Redaktion, außerdem in skandinavische Sprachen.

Im ganzen Mittelalter bleibt der Physiologus den Menschen durch seine eingängigen und wunderbaren Geschichten im Bewußtsein. Vielfach wird sich auf das durch die Autorität des Physiologus verbürgte Wissen berufen. So findet Material aus dem Physiologus auch Eingang in naturgeschichtliche Enzyklopädien des 13. und 14. Jh.: z. B. bei Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus* (13. Jh.), Thomas von Cantimpré, *De natura rerum* (13. Jh.), Vinzenz von Beauvais, *Speculum naturale* (ca. 1250) oder etwa auch bei Konrad von Megenburg, *Buch der Natur* (14. Jh.).

Allerdings trat die in der Auseinandersetzung mit Aristoteles entstehende wissenschaftliche Naturkunde bzw. Zoologie des Mittelalters den Geschichten des Physiologus auch kritisch entgegen. So folgt Albertus Magnus diesen höchstens, insofern sie – ausnahmsweise könnte man sagen – auch verlässliche Informationen bieten, die aus der Naturbeobachtung stammen. Ansonsten gelten diese Geschichten Albert meist als fabulöses Zeug, das man weder beobachten noch nachprüfen kann und der Welt der positiven Erfahrung entzogen ist. Ja, im Gegenteil soll die in der Tradition des Aristoteles stehende Naturbeschreibung solche spekulativen Fabeleien ablösen und zu ihrer Destruktion beitragen. So referiert Albertus Magnus z. B. in seinem Tierbuch *De animalibus* eine Version der Pelikangeschichte des Physiologus. Diese kommentiert Albert abschließend mit den Worten: „Das liest man eher in Erzählungen als dass man es mit Hilfe der Naturwissenschaft durch die Erfahrung nachgewiesen hätte.“<sup>64</sup> Auch die Geschichte aus dem Physiologus über den Vogel Strauß, der glühendes Eisen frisst, das durch seine Verdauung dann geläutert wird, glaubt Albert nicht, weil er sie selbst überprüft hat:

Über diesen Vogel sagt man, dass er Eisen essen und verdauen könne. Doch ich habe diese Erfahrung nicht gemacht. Denn ich habe mehreren Straußenvögeln mehrfach Eisen vorgesetzt und sie wollten es nicht essen. Hingegen haben sie kleine Knochenstücke und Steine gierig verzehrt.<sup>65</sup>

Ebenso überprüft Roger Bacon die Bocksblutlegende, indem er einen Diamanten damit behandelt, ohne auch nur igendeine Wirkung feststellen zu können.<sup>66</sup> Einen weiteren Aspekt der mittelalterlichen Reaktionen auf den Physiologus zeigt die berühmte Apologie des Bernhard von Clairvaux. In einem Schreiben an den Abt Wilhelm

<sup>64</sup> Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus* 23, 132 (1506f Stadler): *Haec autem potius in hystoriis leguntur quam sint experimento probata per physicam.*

<sup>65</sup> Albertus Magnus, *De animalibus* 23, 139 (1510 Stadler): *De hac ave dicitur quod ferrum comedat et digerat: sed ego non sum hoc expertus quia ferrum saepius a me pluribus strutionibus obiectum comedere noluerunt. Sed ossa magna ad breves partes truncata et arida et lapides avide comedelerunt.*

<sup>66</sup> Roger Bacon, *Opus Maius*, Pars Sexta, *De Scientia Experimentali*, Cap. I. (2, 168 Bridges).

von St. Thierry verteidigt Bernhard seine schlichte, asketische Lebensführung und kommt dabei auch auf die seiner Meinung nach übertrieben luxuriösen Malereien und Ausschmückungen in den Klosterkirchen zu sprechen, die von der Besinnung auf die wahren Inhalte des religiösen Lebens ablenkten. Bernhard geißelt diese Darstellungen scharf. Die einzelnen Beispiele, die er anführt, können wohl auch auf den Physiologus zurückgeführt werden (Affe, Löwe, Eselskentauren, Einhorn etc.). Bernhard spricht in diesem Zusammenhang von seltsamen Ungeheuern und einem paradoxen Schönheitsempfinden. Die Besucher der Kirchen würden von solchen Bildern abgehalten in die Bücher zu schauen:

Was soll jene lächerliche Ungeheuerlichkeit, diese außerordentlich wunderbare, entstellte Schönheit und schöne Entstelltheit? Was machen die unreinen Affen da? Was die wilden Löwen? Was die ungeheuerlichen Kentauren? Was die Halbmenschen? Was die gefleckten Tiger? Was die kämpfenden Soldaten? Was die Flöten spielenden Jäger? Hier sieht man an einem Pferd den Schwanz einer Schlange, dort an einem Fisch einen Pferdekopf. Dort hat ein Tier vorne die Gestalt eines Pferdes, hinten zur Hälfte die Form einer Ziege. Dies gehörnte Lebewesen hat hinten die Form eines Pferdes. Es gibt so viele, so wunderbare verschiedene Formen überall, dass man lieber die Gemälde auf den Marmorwänden liest als in den Büchern.<sup>67</sup>

Doch bleibt dieses Diktum Bernhards ein Einzelfall. So wurden Bilder, Motive oder Geschichten aus dem Physiologus z.B. auch gerne in Predigten verwandt.<sup>68</sup> Wie präsent der Physiologus den Menschen des zwölften Jahrhunderts im Westen war, zeigt eine Episode aus dem *Speculum virginum*, einer anonym überlieferten Schrift, die eine Art Leitfaden für das monastische Leben darstellt.<sup>69</sup> In dem Dialog zwischen dem geistlichen Führer Peregrinus und seiner Schülerin Theodora erwähnt dieser auch die Geschichte vom Einhorn. Theodora bemerkt zwar, daß sie diese Geschichte bereits kennt und schon oft gehört hat, doch bittet sie ihn, sie noch einmal vorzutragen. In seinem Vortrag integriert Peregrinus dann die Physiologusgeschichte über

<sup>67</sup> Vgl. Bernhard von Clairvaux, *Apologie an Abt Wilhelm XII*, 29 (2, 197 Winkler); Pitra [1855] LXXII: *Frusta omnino fuit vel animosior eloquentissimi Bernardi zelus, quem ea in bonis Cluniacensibus, quae per Ecclesiam liberrimo jure fiebant, adeo acriter reprehenderet, totumque Physiologi gregem, incaute et candide in claustris Cluniacensis, ut videtur, parietibus depictum, censoria virga exagitaret: „Caeterum ait, in claustris, coram legentibus fratribus, quid facit illa ridicula monstruositas, mira quaedam deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas? Quid ibi immunda simiae [cf. Physiol. cap. LIV, p. 370]? Quid feri leones [ib., cap. I]? Quid monstruosi centauri [cap. XV, de Sirenis et Onocentauris]? Quid semihomines [cf. de satyris, c. LVIII]? Quid maculosae tigrides [Physiol. arm. cap. XXXV, p. 396]? Quid milites pugnantes? Quid venatores tibicinantes [cf. cap. XXV, n. 2, de Unicorni]? Cernitur hinc in quadrupede cauda serpentis [forte gryphonis]? Illinc in pisce caput quadrupedes [an hydrippus?]. Ibi bestia praefert equum, capram trahens retro dimidiā. Hic cornutum animal equum gestat posterius [rhinocerus?]. Tam multa denique, tamque mira diversarum formarum ubique varietas, ut magis legere libeat in marmoribus quam in codicibus.* Die Zuweisung an den Physiologus muss bei einigen der von Bernhard beschriebenen Wesen offen bleiben. Bernhard könnte auch an Mischwesen denken, wie wir sie aus der zu Beginn des 12. Jahrhunderts entstandenen Kirchendecke in Zillis in der Schweiz kennen.

<sup>68</sup> Vgl. Schmidtke (1968); Obermaier (online-Publikation seit 2012).

<sup>69</sup> *Speculum virginum* 9 (FC 30/3, 782–787).

das Einhorn in seine allegorisch-symbolische Interpretation, reichert sie aber zusätzlich noch mit Einzelheiten aus der antiken Zoologie an. So bringt er Einhorn und Nashorn zusammen und erzählt neben der wunderbaren Geschichte vom Fang des Einhorns durch eine unberührte Jungfrau auch von der natürlichen Feindschaft zwischen Nashorn und Elefant, die schon von Plinius und anderen antiken Autoren berichtet wird.<sup>70</sup> Er vermischt also Eigengut des Physiologus mit der naturkundlichen Tradition.

Im griechischsprachigen Osten wird der Physiologus wohl vor allem in monastischen Kreisen rezipiert wie die zahlreichen Handschriften klösterlicher Provenienz zeigen und natürlich die Zuweisung einer ganzen Redaktion an den Kirchenvater Basilius, der das östliche Mönchtum maßgeblich beeinflußte.<sup>71</sup>

Die literarische Rezeption des Physiologus reicht von der Antike über das Mittelalter bis in die neuzeitliche Moderne. Immer wieder findet man Geschichten oder Motive, die mit dieser christlichen Naturkunde zusammenhängen: z. B. bei Georgios Pisides, Michael Glykas<sup>72</sup>, Leonardo da Vinci<sup>73</sup> oder Abraham a Santa Clara<sup>74</sup>, um nur einige wenige Namen zu nennen. Ein Beispiel aus neuester Zeit ist Umberto Ecos Roman Baudolino, in dem die Einhorngeschichte aus dem Physiologus gleich zu Beginn verarbeitet wird.<sup>75</sup>

**Kunsthistorische Rezeption:** Die Nachwirkung des Physiologus beschränkte sich aber nicht nur auf die Literatur, auch für die bildende Kunst bot der Physiologus immer wieder Anregungen und Motive bzw. sogenannte ikonographische Typen: im Bereich der Kirche auf Verzierungen im Kirchenschmuck, auf Kapitellen, Gewändern, Wand-

<sup>70</sup> Elefanten und Nashörner galten als natürliche Feinde in der Antike. Ein Vergleich beider Tiere aufgrund ihrer Größe und Ähnlichkeit lag nahe. Im Zirkus wurden beide Arten gezwungen gegeneinander zu kämpfen; vgl. Plinius, *Naturalis historia* 8,71; Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae* 80,11, Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana* 11,1.

<sup>71</sup> Vor allem das Froschkapitel der 2. Redaktion zeigt monastischen Einfluss (Kap. 26 Sbordone 253f).

<sup>72</sup> Zu Pisides und Glykas siehe Ben E. Perry, *Physiologus*: PRE 22/1,1115.

<sup>73</sup> Zu Leonardo siehe Ben E. Perry, *Physiologus*: PRE 22/1,1128.

<sup>74</sup> Der hochgebildete Augustiner-Barfüßer Abraham a Santa Clara (geboren 1644), seit 1689 in Wien und dort auch 1709 verstorben, zitiert neben antiker und christlicher Literatur offenbar auch den Physiologus, so etwa: „Wenn ich fragen sollt, welches der angenehmste und vornehmste Vogel wär‘, so würde mir vielleicht mit solcher Antwort begegnet werden, etwan der Adler, als welcher ein Koenig und Oberhaupt des ganzen gefiederten und geflügelten Geschlechts, der auch mit unverwendeten Augen das strahlende Sonnenlicht immerzu anblickt und in Anschauung dieser Himmelsfackel seine einige Ergötzlichkeit fühlet, als seien jene gar schlecht adelich, deren Sinn und Gewinn wenig nach dem Himmel zielet? Etwan der Vogel Phönix, welcher mit verwunderlicher Courage sich freimütig auf den klein brennenden Scheiterhaufen setzet, jedoch mit merklichem Vortheil, weil aus dessen Aschen ein neuer Phönix hervorstammet; dieser Vogel kann füglich alle Christen beherzter machen, daß sie ob dem Tod, wann sie schon erbleichen, wenigstens nicht sollen erschrecken, zumal der entzogene Leib am jüngsten Tag in allgemeiner Auferstehung wieder erstattet wird.“ Abraham a Sancta Clara, Mercks Wienn. Das ist des wütenden Tods umständige Beschreibung, Wien 1680, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Kap. 1, S. 13 (übers. von B. Kroeber), München 2003 (dtv).

teppichen, im Chorgestühl usw. Dabei ist die Zuordnung zum Motivbestand des Physiologus nicht immer eindeutig. Ein ganzes Bildprogramm des Physiologus findet man selten; so in der Stiftskirche von Gernrode (an der Westseite des Grabes des heiligen Gero (entstanden etwa 1080) oder auch in einer Kiche aus dem 14./15. Jh. in Celje in Slowenien.

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### Abkürzungen

CCL	Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina
FC	Fontes Christiani
GFA	Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft
BZ	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
Gn	Gnomon
PL	Patrologia Latina
PLRE	Paulys Realencylopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaften
RAC	Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum
TRE	Theologische Realenzyklopädie
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen

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Claudio Moreschini

## Gregorio Magno e il mondo animale, tra curiositas e simbologia

Il tema del rapporto tra l'uomo e l'animale è stato affrontato da molte e diverse angolature, non solamente storiche e di storia del costume e del pensiero, ma anche sul piano antropologico e religioso. Molti sono i contributi dedicati alla natura, alle funzioni e al significato degli animali nel Medioevo, e già anche nel mondo non cristiano. Più trascurato, in ambito latino, sembra essere il periodo della tarda antichità e del primo cristianesimo – più trascurato e ristretto soprattutto ai testi agiografici. Una studiosa ha dedicato al tema uno stimolante contributo, che tuttavia si è incentrato soprattutto sul mondo greco e bizantino.<sup>1</sup> Un esempio che vogliamo considerare, pur senza pensare di potere esaurire l'argomento, è quello di Gregorio Magno e del suo modo di 'vedere' il mondo animale: vissuto alle soglie del Medioevo Latino, egli è spinto da un interesse molto diverso da quello delle narrazioni agiografiche, perché è quasi esclusivamente indirizzato alla esegetica scritturistica, e di conseguenza è mosso da un interesse eminentemente morale. E ciononostante questo non esclude una attenta considerazione della realtà (anche della realtà 'imaginaria', se possiamo così definirla). Lo dimostra il fatto che Gregorio è guidato più dalla attenzione per i *mirabilia* animali, che non da una forma di simpatia e di vicinanza per essi, che è l'interesse prevalente che caratterizza la ricerca attuale. Gregorio Magno considera il mondo animale non per sé, ma in funzione soprattutto di un paragone con l'uomo, nella varietà dei suoi atteggiamenti e delle sue passioni. Si tratta di un interesse di tipo esegetico e didascalico.<sup>2</sup> L'erudizione di Gregorio in questo ambito è stata osservata fuggevolmente da Riché,<sup>3</sup> il quale ha notato il suo interesse per la medicina ed anche per le scienze naturali: gli stambecchi, i corvi, gli struzzi etc. ed anche conoscenze di mineralogia. Gregorio mescola conoscenze concrete personali a notizie che gli giungono dai libri e dai suoi studi. Ad esempio, in Mor. 31,47,94 si parla della vista acuta dell'aquila, che è capace di fissare gli occhi nel sole. Tuttavia l'esempio scelto da Riché non è decisivo, perché questa caratteristica dell'aquila era ben nota, e risaliva almeno a Plinio.

Quali possono essere state le fonti di Gregorio? Secondo Riché, Gregorio avrebbe attinto da qualche lapidario o bestiario, ma avrebbe usato anche la *Naturalis Historia* di Plinio il Vecchio, e comunque la fonte principale rimane la Scrittura, il cui testo viene attentamente considerato. Ma certamente bisogna ipotizzare varie fonti intermedie tra Plinio e Gregorio Magno, e sicuramente fonti cristiane: una di esse può essere stata il quarto capitolo delle *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae* di Eucherio di

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1 Cfr. Orselli (2013) con ricca e aggiornata bibliografia.

2 Come dice Ciccarese (2009) 45–49.

3 Cfr. Riché (1999) 112; solo un cenno su Gregorio in Grant (1999).

Lione, dedicato appunto all'argomento *de animantibus*. Quello che, soprattutto, è importante è che «gli autori cristiani hanno saputo piegare alle loro esigenze tutto il ricco patrimonio di nozioni e curiosità che hanno ricevuto dalla tradizione ‘scientifica’ pagana».<sup>4</sup>

Una ricerca sul mondo animale in Gregorio Magno sarebbe assai estesa: nel presente contesto presentiamo alcuni *specimina* di particolare interesse. I *Moralia in Iob* sono sicuramente la sua opera più ricca di interpretazioni e di motivi – del resto, anche per altri aspetti, i *Moralia* sono l'opera forse più intelligente e colta di Gregorio, che si serve ampiamente della cultura greca, quale era disponibile ai suoi tempi, attinta non solo a Roma, ma anche a Costantinopoli, ove si era recato come *apocrisiarius*.

## 1 Animali fantastici

### Il myrmicoleon

In *Moralia* 5,20,40 Gregorio spiega le parole di Eliphaz il Themanite (Gb 4,11): *tigris periit, eo quod non haberet praedam*, e spiega che cosa significhi la tigre in quel passo scritturistico,<sup>5</sup> ma subito aggiunge che il testo della Settanta ha: *myrmicoleon periit, eo quod non haberet praedam*.<sup>6</sup> Questa bestia stupefacente per la sua struttura fisica, difficilmente immaginabile,<sup>7</sup> fu spiegata dal *Physiologus*<sup>8</sup>, che ne spiega le caratteristiche (cap. 20): il leone-formica ha le membra anteriori di leone e quelle posteriori di formica. Il padre, quindi, è carnivoro, la madre, invece, erbivora; per questo motivo il leone-formica nasce dotato di due nature, e non può mangiar carne a causa della natura della madre, né erba a causa della natura del padre: così perisce per mancanza di nutrimento. In questo modo il *Physiologus* può spiegare il testo della Settanta, che «il mirmicoleone muore perché non trova il suo nutrimento». Evidentemente il *Physiologus* ha svolto le sue osservazioni partendo dal passo di Giobbe.

La parola insolita spinge Gregorio ad una spiegazione, che però non è quella, fisica appunto, del *Physiologus*: il mirmicoleone, egli dice, è un piccolissimo animale,

<sup>4</sup> Così Ciccarese (2009) 37.

<sup>5</sup> Significato negativo alla tigre è dato, invece, da Eucherio (form. spirit. intell. 481 [CCL 66, 30]): *tigris feminea interdum arrogantia*, facendo riferimento anche lui a questo passo di Giobbe, ma secondo il testo ebraico, non secondo i Settanta.

<sup>6</sup> Nel testo originale: μυρμηκολέων ὥλετο παρὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν βοράν. Solo la Settanta, e solo in questo caso, ha questa parola, che risulta essere una traduzione sbagliata del termine ebraico che significa ‘leone’. Giustamente la Vulgata ha *tigris*: Gregorio, dunque, commenta il testo di Giobbe avendo sott'occhio sia la Settanta sia la Bibbia latina.

<sup>7</sup> Su di essa cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 407–411.

<sup>8</sup> Per una caratterizzazione di quest'opera si rimanda al contributo di Horst Schneider in questo volume.

nemico delle formiche, che si nasconde sotto la polvere e le uccide quando trascinano i chicchi di frumento. Ma la spiegazione è più sottile:

Myrmicoleon autem *Latine* dicitur, uel formicarum leo, uel certe expressius formica pariter et leo. Recte autem leo et formica nominatur, quia siue uolatilibus, seu quibuslibet aliis minutis animalibus formica est, ipsis autem formicis leo. Has enim quasi leo deuorat sed ab illis quasi formica deuoratur.

Se, dunque, Eliphaz dice che il mirmicoleone perisce, perché non trova il suo nutrimento, la spiegazione è che il testo biblico con l'esempio del mirmicoleone che muore intende condannare sia la paura sia l'audacia, come se Eliphaz dicesse: giustamente tu, Giobbe, sei stato colpito dalla sventura, perché fosti timido di fronte ai superbi e audace di fronte ai sottomessi. Trasferito sul piano morale, il mirmicoleone non ha la sua preda e parimenti Giobbe è stato insieme superbo e timido, e quindi in nessuno dei due casi ha vinto, ma è stato colpito dalle percosse e non ha potuto fare del male ad altri. Per questo motivo, anche se la traduzione esatta del passo di Giobbe è *tigris*, dice Gregorio, il termine *myrmicoleon* meglio si adatta alla situazione.

Più avanti (Mor. 5,22,43), tuttavia, Gregorio propone altre spiegazioni, facendo riferimento a quanto aveva detto precedentemente: l'animale che sta nascosto nella polvere e uccide le formiche che portano il grano indica l'angelo apostata, gettato in terra dai cieli. Questo angelo insidia proprio nel loro cammino le menti dei giusti che preparano per sé la mensa delle buone opere e le uccide all'improvviso, come fa il mirmicoleone con le formiche. Infatti il mirmicoleone è leone per le formiche, mentre è formica *uolatilibus*,<sup>9</sup> perché il nostro nemico, come è debole e formica con coloro che gli resistono, così è forte e leone con coloro che si accordano con lui. Quindi per alcuni è leone, per altri formica, perché le menti carnali non resistono alla sua crudeltà, mentre quelle spirituali schiacciano la sua debolezza. Gregorio propone un'ulteriore interpretazione. Eliphaz, dunque, che è la *figura* degli eretici,<sup>10</sup> parla nel modo che si è visto: gli eretici sono superbi perché presumono di essere santi, e proclamano esultanti: *myrmicoleon, uel certe tigris periit, eo quod non haberet praedam*.

In conclusione, Gregorio, come è logico, non ritiene possibile la spiegazione letterale di quell'animale fantastico. Il *myrmicoleon* non è leone e formica insieme, che sarebbe impossibile nella composizione fisica dell'animale, ma un animale indefinito che si comporta da leone e da formica. Tanto più, quindi, è utile, anzi, necessaria, in presenza di un *defectus litterae*, l'interpretazione simbolica.

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<sup>9</sup> Cioè con i volatili, i quali si nutrono di formiche. Il riferimento ai *volatilia* a questo punto sembra improvviso, ma era stato preparato dal passo precedente (5,20,40), ove si dice che il mirmicoleone è formica *sive volatilibus seu quibuslibet aliis minutis animalibus*.

<sup>10</sup> I falsi amici di Giobbe sono il tipo degli eretici nei confronti della Chiesa: cfr. Moreschini (1986).

Probabilmente Gregorio sviluppa la spiegazione che era stata data da Agostino<sup>11</sup> ed era materiale e morale insieme; in Agostino, però, essa è solamente un accenno: il mirmicoleone deve essere inteso o secondo una interpretazione fisica (perché afferra e danneggia di nascosto il frumento, in quanto gli toglie l'occhio e ne impedisce la germinazione) o secondo un'interpretazione morale (il mirmicoleone domina su quelli che sono avari e raccolgono tesori in terra) o secondo un'interpretazione spirituale che è in parte quella di Gregorio: il mirmicoleone simboleggia il nemico che perseguita i giusti, come se fossero delle formiche che, d'estate (secondo il racconto) preparano per sé il nutrimento per l'inverno, ma non potrà pascersi di esse, quando i buoni saranno separati dai giusti (*uel quia iustos persequitur, quasi formicas praeparantes sibi escas aestate ad hiemem, quibus non pascetur, cum boni ab impiis fuerint separati*).<sup>12</sup>

## L'onocentaurus

Per la prima volta l'onocentrauro si legge nella LXX (Is. 34,14), ove è descritto come una specie di sciacallo. Eusebio (in dipendenza da Origene?) colloca l'onocentrauro tra i ‘demoni e gli spiriti selvaggi’ di cui parlerebbe il passo di Isaia, e dice che, più precisamente, alcuni traduttori lo renderebbero con ‘sirene’, in quanto spiriti menzogneri e lusingatori;<sup>13</sup> Teodoreto lo interpreta come un animale che «sta insieme ai demoni che si trasformano assumendo molte figure» nel deserto.<sup>14</sup>

Un poco alla volta, quindi, il significato morale è divenuto prevalente. L'aspetto negativo dell'animale è proposto anche da Gerolamo, il quale intende gli onocentauri come ‘gli uomini dissoluti’.<sup>15</sup> Ma già in ambiente pagano, a partire da Apuleio almeno, l'asino simboleggiava la dissolutezza e la stoltezza, come si vede dal fatto che nel romanzo di Apuleio il titolo originario di *Metamporphoseon libri* fu sostituito, già dai tempi di Agostino, da quello di *asinus aureus*, ed anche nel mondo cristiano l'asino ha un significato negativo, spesso simboleggiando i pagani.<sup>16</sup>

Dell'onocentaurus Gregorio parla nei *Moralia* (7,28,36), citando il passo di Isaia (34,11): *et occurrit daemonia onocentauris, et pilosus clamabit alter ad alterum.* Seguendo la tradizione, anche Gregorio ritiene che il nome di ‘onocentrauro’ indichi i

<sup>11</sup> Aug. in Iob 4 (CSEL 28/2, 513,17).

<sup>12</sup> Il rapporto simbolico tra animali ed eretici è tema del contributo di Roberta Franchi in questo volume.

<sup>13</sup> Eus. Is. 13 (PG 24,189D).

<sup>14</sup> Theod. Is. 34,11–15 (SC 295, 334–336).

<sup>15</sup> Hier. Is. 6,20, commento a 13,22 e 34,14.

<sup>16</sup> Ciccarese (2002) 156–157. Altrettanto può dirsi per l'asino selvatico (*onager*): cfr. *Moralia* 7,7. Tuttavia altrove (*Moralia* 30,15,50) l'onagro ha un significato positivo: l'onagro, poiché nella sua selvaticezza vive da solo, simboleggia coloro che vivono liberi da ogni peso della vita sociale.

dissoluti e i superbi.<sup>17</sup> In greco, egli dice, l'asino è detto ὄβος, e con il termine di 'asino' si indica la lussuria, come attesta Ezechiele (23,20), che dice: *ut carnes asinorum, carnes eorum.* Invece con il termine 'toro' si indica il collo della superbia (cioè tenuto diritto dalla superbia), come la parola del Signore per bocca del salmista (Ps 21,13) ha detto dei Giudei nella loro superbia: *tauri pingues obsederunt me.* Partendo da questo presupposto, della polemica antiebraica, Gregorio prosegue nella sua interpretazione. Gli onocentauri sono coloro che, soggetti ai vizi della lussuria, si inorgogliscono proprio di quello di cui dovrebbero vergognarsi, e si dilettano anche dell'opera della vergogna. Agli onocentauri – cioè ai dissoluti – si fanno incontro i demoni, come ha spiegato Isaia (nel passo sopra citato), perché gli spiriti maligni si sottomettono ai dissoluti, proprio come essi desiderano. Per cui giustamente Isaia aggiunge: *et pilosus clamabit alter ad alterum.* Questi esseri pelosi non sono altro che quelli che i Greci chiamano *panas* ('satiri', al plurale), i Latini *incubi*: la loro forma comincia (cioè, nella parte superiore) con l'aspetto umano, ma termina alle estremità (nella parte inferiore) con una bestia. È, questo, l'aspetto usuale del satiro. Questi satiri si chiamano l'uno con l'altro, quando *perpetrata nequitia perpetrandam malitiam prouocat, et quasi quadam cogitationis uoce, commissa iam culpa, culpam adhuc quae committatur inuitat.*

## Il drago

Nello stesso passo precedentemente considerato (*Moralia* 7,28,36) Gregorio, dopo aver citato Isaia (34,11), così prosegue:

In peruersa igitur mente draco cubat et struthio<sup>18</sup> pascitur, quia et latens malitia callide tegitur et intuentium oculis simulatio bonitatis antefertur. Quid namque per dracones nisi malitia, quid uero struthionum nomine nisi hypocrisis designatur? Struthio quippe speciem uolandi habet, sed usum uolandi non habet quia et hypocrisis cunctis intuentibus imaginem de se sanctitatis insinuat, sed tenere uitam sanctitatis ignorat.

Secondo Gregorio, dunque, i due animali, lo struzzo e il drago, agiscono insieme. Considereremo tra poco il valore simbolico dello struzzo, mentre in questo passo il drago indica la malvagità.<sup>19</sup> Quindi il drago dorme e lo struzzo si nutre nella mente perversa, perché la malvagità nascosta viene astutamente coperta e davanti agli occhi di chi guarda appare una finta bontà.

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<sup>17</sup> Dopo Gregorio, questa spiegazione è proposta anche da Isidoro di Siviglia (orig. 11,3,39), ma senza commento spirituale: *Onocentaurum autem uocari eo quod media hominis specie, media asini esse dicatur; sicut et Hippocentauri, quod equorum hominumque in eis natura coniuncta fuisse putatur.* Su di lui, molto più che su Gregorio, si sofferma Grant (1999) 113ss.

<sup>18</sup> *Struthio* è termine tardo, che si diffonde a partire dal IV sec. e sostituisce *struthocamelus*.

<sup>19</sup> Per un tale valore del drago nell'agiografia si veda il contributo di Daniel Ogden in questo volume.

Anche precedentemente (*Moralia* 4,10) Gregorio aveva spiegato che il drago significa la malvagità, perché questo è confermato anche dall'Apocalisse di Giovanni (Apc 20,3): il drago trascina sulla terra coloro che, come le stelle del cielo, stanno attaccati alla realtà celeste.<sup>20</sup> Ora il drago è tenuto racchiuso nell'abisso, perché la malvagità diabolica è tenuta chiusa nei cuori degli eretici. Ma poi, come dice lo stesso testo sacro (Apc 20,7), il drago viene fatto uscire dal pozzo dell'abisso, perché ogni veleno di serpente velenoso, che in un primo momento era stato tenuto coperto per timore, in seguito viene aperto pubblicamente dal cuore dei malvagi (*Moralia* 19,9,15). In *Moralia* 20,39,75 Gregorio commenta Gb 30,29: *frater fui draconum et socius struthionum*. I perversi, egli dice, aspirano il vento, come fanno i draghi, quando si gonfiano di una malvagia superbia, e, dediti alle cose temporali e terrene, trascurano di procurarsi quelle eterne. Il passo di Geremia è spiegato più ampiamente in *Moralia* 29,26,52. Gregorio afferma che il profeta (cfr. Ger 14,6) disse: *onagri steterunt in rupibus traxerunt uentos quasi dracones, defecerunt oculi eorum, quia non erat herba*. Questo passo profetico può essere applicato polemicamente agli Ebrei:<sup>21</sup>

Quo dicto superba ac nequissima Iudeorum est persecutio prophetata. Ipsi quippe onagri pro mentis elatione, ipsi dracones pro uirulenta cogitatione uocati sunt. Qui steterunt in rupibus, quia non in deo, sed in summis potestatibus huius mundi confisi sunt dicentes: regem non habemus nisi Caesarem. Traxerunt uentos quasi dracones, quia spiritu elationis inflati superbia malitiosa tumuerunt.

Avremo occasione di considerare il drago anche in seguito, al di fuori della interpretazione del testo sacro.

## 2 Animali esotici

### Il cammello

Gregorio parla del cammello più di una volta (es. *Moralia* 1,15,22; 1,28,40) come simbolo dei popoli pagani, che sono *torti moribus atque onusti idolorum cultibus*. Infatti il cammello ha una figura tortuosa, come già avevano spiegato Origene<sup>22</sup> e Gerolamo,<sup>23</sup> dal quale probabilmente Gregorio dipende.<sup>24</sup> Già Eucherio aveva notato

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**20** Poco prima (4,9) aveva detto che il drago dell'Apocalisse è il *serpens antiquus, qui est diabolus et satanas*: infatti, il drago è, sostanzialmente, un serpente con le zampe.

**21** Così anche Eucherio, il quale, tuttavia, propone anche l'identificazione dell'onagro con l'eremita (form. spirit. intell. 491 [CCL 66, 31]).

**22** Orig. comm. Matth. 18,19 – 20.

**23** Hier. Is. 7,24 (a Is. 21,6).

**24** Isid. orig. 12,1,35: *Camelis causa nomen dedit, siue quod quando onerantur, ut breuiiores et humiles fiant, accubant, quia Graeci χαρά humile et breue dicunt; siue quia curuus est dorso*. Qui, dunque,

la stranezza della figura di questo animale, ma aveva insistito soprattutto sul fatto che esso fosse una bestia da soma, e l'aveva quindi simboleggiato con i ricchi, appesantiti dai beni di questo secolo, o anche coloro che sono pervertiti nei loro comportamenti (*moribus distorti*).<sup>25</sup> Questo è ripreso da Gregorio (*Moralia* 2,48):

Per camelos qui mundum aliquid habent, dum ruminant et immundum, dum nequaquam ungulam findunt, supra iam diximus bonas rerum temporalium dispensationes intellegi in quibus quo est cura distensior, eo nobis multiplicius insidiatur inimicus. Omnis enim qui dispensandis terrenis rebus praesidet, occulti hostis iaculis latius patet.

Il criterio fondamentale, seguito da Gregorio per i suoi confronti, è quello di vedere le caratteristiche dell'anima della persona nelle peculiarità fisiche dell'animale. Gregorio, quindi, in un primo momento (come dice in 2,48,75) osserva (*Moralia* 1,15,22; 1,28,40) che i cammelli, come dice la Scrittura (Lv 11,4), poiché sono animali impuri (*communia*; la Vulgata: *immunda*), simboleggiano la vita dei Samaritani – cioè i pagani nell'opinione degli Ebrei. Il cammello, quindi, indica il paganesimo, che è tortuoso e vizioso. E, analogamente, i Giudei: i cammelli, infatti, ruminano, ma non hanno l'unghia fessa, per cui *indicant qui in Iudea iuxta litteram historiam audierant, sed uirtutem eius discernere spiritualiter nesciebant* (2,32,52).

Tuttavia il termine *commune*, che nel linguaggio biblico indica l'impurità, può indicare anche qualcosa di diverso (1,28,40), e cioè qualcosa che, nella comune lingua latina, è, appunto, 'comune'. Pertanto l'animale *commune* designa le buone amministrazioni delle cose terrene, che hanno in comune qualcosa che appartiene al secolo e qualcosa che appartiene a Dio. Stabilito questo, Gregorio sviluppa il paragone tra il termine *commune* e il cammello, che è l'animale che non ha l'unghia fessa: l'amministrazione delle cose terrene procura un turbamento della mente, ma prepara una ricompensa per l'eternità. In questo modo, l'animale, come se fosse 'comune', possiede qualcosa della legge divina, e qualcosa, però, non la possiede, perché si dedica alle cose terrene:

Vngulam namque non findit quia non se penitus anima ab omni terreno opere disiungit, sed tamen ruminat quia bene dispensando temporalia, per certitudinis fiduciam caelestia sperat. Terrenae igitur dispensationes, quasi camelorum more, capite legi concordant, pede discrepant; quia et caeli sunt quae iuste uiuentes appetunt et huius mundi sunt ea in quibus opere uersantur.

In due passi molto simili tra di loro (*Moralia* 1,15,21 e 35,16,38) Gregorio svolge un'altra interpretazione spirituale del cammello. Questa bestia può significare sia il paganesimo sia – all'opposto – Cristo. Che il cammello significhi il paganesimo è confermato anche dall'episodio dell'incontro di Rebecca con Isacco (35,16,38):

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Isidoro propone l'etimologia di *camelus*, comunque proposta sempre con i medesimi criteri, della descrizione fisica dell'animale.

<sup>25</sup> Eucher. form. spirit. intell. 518 (CCL 66, 32).

quando, seduta sul cammello, vide Isacco al calar della sera, Rebecca subito scese e, vergognandosi di fronte a lui, si coprì con il velo (Gn 24,63–65), cioè si vergognò di essere pagana. E poiché Isacco simboleggia, secondo una ben diffusa tradizione tipologica, Cristo, i cammelli sono i popoli pagani che si vergognano di fronte a Cristo. Oppure (*Moralia* 2,32,52) i cammelli sono coloro che nella Giudea avevano ascoltato il racconto della Scrittura secondo la lettera, ma non erano in grado di discernere spiritualmente il suo valore. Se, invece, il cammello indica il Signore, la spiegazione è differente: il cammello è citato nelle parole di Mt 23,24, ove è detto che i Giudei filtravano la zanzara, ma inghiottivano il cammello, cioè lasciarono passare immune il brigante Barabba, ma vollero mandare a morte il Signore, che si era abbassato a portare il peso dei nostri peccati: la zanzara, infatti, è spiegato con molta attenzione alla realtà, *susurrando uulnerat*, mentre il cammello, *sponte se ad suscipienda onera inclinat*. Di conseguenza, *liquauerunt ergo iudeai culicem quia seditionis latronem dimitti petierunt; camelum uero glutierunt quia eum qui ad suscipienda nostrae mortalitatis onera sponte descenderat extinguere clamando conati sunt*. Questa ambiguità nella interpretazione del cammello è proposta anche successivamente, nel passo che abbiamo già considerato (35,16,38): con il termine ‘cammello’ il Signore talora indica la superbia dei pagani, perché è tortuosa per il gibbo che sta sulla loro parte superiore. Talora, invece, il cammello indica il dono di grazia del Redentore, che si è abbassato dall’altezza e dalla potenza della sua condizione ad accogliere i pesi, cioè i nostri peccati – il cammello è qui considerato come l’animale che abbassa il collo fino a terra e trasporta le merci. E siccome il Signore dice che è più facile che un cammello passi per la cruna di un ago che un ricco giunga al regno dei cieli (Mt 19,24), anche questa immagine si riferisce al Signore: il cammello passa effettivamente per la cruna di un ago, quando il nostro Redentore passò attraverso le angustie, fisiche e morali, della passione per subire la morte.

Conforme a questa interpretazione positiva è anche il passo di *Moralia* 1,28,40, sempre spiegato con il riferimento visivo alla figura del cammello, che abbassa il collo fino a terra: i tremila cammelli che Giobbe possedeva indicano l’abbassare la nostra superbia:

si omne quod in nobis altum ac tortuosum est, rationi fidei subditur [...]. Camelos quippe possidemus, si quod altum sapimus, humiliter deponamus. Camelos procul dubio possidemus cum cogitationes nostras ad infirmitatis fraternae compassionem flectimus, ut uicissim onera nostra portantes, alienae infirmitati compati condescendendo nouerimus.<sup>26</sup>

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**26** Il significato negativo e positivo del cammello, il quale si abbassa o perché è gravato da colpe o perché nella sua umiltà indica Cristo che affronta la passione è indicato anche da Ciccarese (2002) 220–221.

## Il rinoceronte

A questo animale è dedicata una lunga spiegazione, che si divide in due sezioni (*Moralia* 31,2,2–7,9 e 15,29ss.). La prima spiegazione inizia con l'interpretazione della domanda rivolta a Giobbe (39,9): *numquid volet rhinoceros servire tibi?* Il rinoceronte, infatti, è indomito e non può essere tenuto a freno in nessun modo; se è fatto prigioniero, immediatamente muore. Il suo significato greco, tradotto in latino, è: *in nare cornu*. Queste spiegazioni provengono da Plinio (8,76), così come il particolare (8,71): *rhinoceros unius in nare cornus*, il quale è ripreso anche da Eucherio<sup>27</sup> e da Agostino (*in Iob* p. 618,4 e 26: μονοκέρως unicornis est).<sup>28</sup> Il rinoceronte inspira l'aria con il naso ed emette un odore particolare, per cui è avvertito dall'odore, anche quando non lo vediamo (31,16,30). Esso porta nel naso un corno con cui percuote. Da Plinio deriva anche il particolare che il rinoceronte non può essere tenuto in cattività: *hanc feram vivam negant capi* (8,76).

La seconda spiegazione è proposta in *Moralia* 31,15,29:

Buxei quoque coloris esse describitur, qui etiam cum elephantis quando certamen aggreditur, eo cornu quod in nare singulariter gestat, uentrem aduersantium ferire perhibetur, ut cum ea quae molliora sunt uulnerat, impugnantes se facile sternat.

Anche questa descrizione riprende quella di Plinio (*ibid.*).

Passando dalla descrizione fisica a quella spirituale, Gregorio osserva che la narice del rinoceronte può indicare la vanità (*fatuitas*), in particolare quella degli eretici. Di conseguenza il rinoceronte indica le potenze di questo mondo, gonfie di vana arroganza e superbe per i falsi onori, all'esterno, ma ripiene di miseria all'interno (31,2,2). Questa identificazione è svolta a lungo da Gregorio: Dio ha spezzato le rigide (dure, spietate) potenze di questo mondo non con le parole, ma con i miracoli, per cui attualmente esse sono serve di Dio. I potenti sono i ricchi, e dei ricchi Cristo disse che difficilmente il ricco entrerà nel regno dei cieli (Mt 19,23ss.). E siccome i discepoli gli risposero: se le cose stanno così, chi potrà salvarsi?, Cristo rispose che quello che è impossibile per gli uomini è possibile per Dio, cioè è possibile a Dio spezzare la superbia dei ricchi e dei potenti (*ibid.*). Anche il resto della citazione (*aut morabitur ad praesepe tuum?*, scl., il rinoceronte) si adatta a questa interpretazione (31,3,3). Il presepe è la Sacra Scrittura, e Cristo fu deposto nella mangiaia. Il rinoceronte, agli inizi della storia della Chiesa, disprezzava le parole dei patriarchi ed i santi misteri, ma poi Dio spezzò questa superbia ed ora vediamo che i potenti del mondo ascoltano le parole di Dio e stanno chiusi, a pascolare la Parola. Gregorio stesso vide le improvvise conversioni e umiliazioni dei potenti di questo mondo, che

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<sup>27</sup> Eucher. form. spirit. intell. 483 (CCL 66, 30).

<sup>28</sup> Quindi Gregorio confonde il rinoceronte con il monocerote di cui parla Plinio. La stessa confusione in Isid. orig. 12,2,12: *Idem et monoceron, id est unicornus, eo quod unum cornu in media fronte habeat pedum quattuor ita acutum et ualidum ut quidquid inpetierit, aut uentilet aut perforet.*

minacciavano la Chiesa, ma Cristo soggiogò alla sua fede le potenze terrene e consumò i duri cuori dei persecutori (31,4,4–5).

Anche la seconda parte della interpretazione si trova in *Moralia* 31,15,29. Il passo di Gb 39,19 richiede di spiegare anche in un altro modo, oltre che secondo il significato morale (*aliter etiam moralitate postposita*), la potenza del rinoceronte e la vanità dello struzzo (di cui si parla subito dopo). La parola di Dio, infatti, deve essere indagata adeguatamente (*ventilari*: significato della parola), così come la terra è arata perché produca la messe. Segue un dettaglio interessante:

Rhinoceros iste, qui etiam monoceros *Graecis exemplaribus nominatur*, tantae esse fortitudinis dicitur, ut nulla uenantium uirtute capiatur; sed sicut hi asserunt, qui describendis naturis animalium laboriosa inuestigatione sudauerunt, uirgo ei puella proponitur, quae uenienti sinum aperit, in quo ille omni ferocitate postposita, caput deponit, sicque ab eis a quibus capi quaeritur, repente uelut inermis inuenitur.

Questa notizia fantastica deriva dal *Physiologus graecus* 22, come indica Gregorio stesso nel suo riferimento (*sicut hi asserunt, qui describendis naturis animalium laboriosa inuestigatione sudauerunt*).<sup>29</sup> Anche il *Physiologus*, infatti, asserisce che il rinoceronte può essere ammansito solo da una παρθένος γυνή.<sup>30</sup> La spiegazione morale di questo fatto straordinario è data poco dopo (31,16,30). Per catturare il rinoceronte, la vergine apre il suo seno: la vergine è la Sapienza divina, di per sé inviolata, che tuttavia apre il suo segreto manifestandosi nella carne. Il termine del *Physiologus* greco (παρθένος γυνή) ha suggerito questa interpretazione religiosa (il testo greco, però, si riferisce piuttosto alla Vergine Maria, invece che alla Sapienza di Dio). La domanda sopra ricordata, come possa Giobbe sottomettere il rinoceronte, trova la sua risposta più avanti (31,16,30), ove si dice che Giobbe è la figura della Chiesa, che inizialmente era stata perseguitata da Paolo. L'apostolo costituisce un esempio del rinoceronte, se passiamo dal genere all'individuo (*de genere ad speciem*). Paolo, che proveniva dal popolo ebraico ed era inizialmente il primo per superbia, mentre si solleva contro Dio come per difendere la Legge, *cornu in nare gestauit*. Successivamente però, in umiltà, abbassa il suo stesso corno che ha nel naso e confessa le sue colpe precedenti. L'interpretazione dell'apostolo Paolo come rinoceronte continua in *Moralia* 31,18,33–19,35. Dio nutrì fiducia nella fortezza di questo particolare rinoceronte (riferimento a Gb 39,11), perché, quanto più lo sopportava mentre lo colpiva crudelmente, tanto più sapeva che avrebbe affrontato le avversità con maggior costanza in suo favore. Ed anche il colore grigio (*buxeus*) del

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<sup>29</sup> Cfr. anche Isid. orig. 12,53.

<sup>30</sup> Come si vede, dunque, il *Physiologus* era conosciuto anche in occidente: esso fu impiegato da Ambrogio e Rufino. È esistita una traduzione latina: quando fu eseguita? Ambrogio, Rufino e Gregorio usarono la traduzione latina o si servirono del *Physiologus* greco? Gregorio potrebbe essersi servito dell'originale greco: conosceva abbastanza bene il greco, e scrisse i *Moralia* stando a Costantinopoli, quindi in un ambiente greco.

rinoceronte si confà all'aspetto di Paolo, che castigava il suo corpo e conduceva una vita ascetica (31,19).

Infine Gregorio passa a spiegare il significato dell'unico corno del rinoceronte, che è chiamato anche 'unicorno' (*per hunc rhinocerotam, uel certe monocerotam, scilicet unicornem*). L'uso indifferenziato di *rhinoceros* e *unicornus* si trova, anch'esso, in Plinio (8,76): *in India et boves solidis unguulis, unicernes*. Questo unico corno può significare il popolo ebraico, il quale si fece vanto della sua singolarità tra tutti gli altri popoli, ma non si vantò delle opere, bensì si vantò della Legge di Dio, che solo lui aveva ricevuto. Per questo motivo il Signore annuncia la sua passione per bocca del profeta (Ps 21,22), pregando: *libera me de ore leonis, et a cornibus unicornuorum humilitatem meam*. Tra gli Ebrei, infatti, tanti erano gli *unicernes*, o almeno i rinoceronti, che nella loro vanità si levarono contro l'insegnamento della verità. Il riferimento cristologico dell'unicorno è antico: due passi di Tertulliano lo attestano. Il primo (*adv. Marc.* 3,18,3) identifica Cristo con Giuseppe, che è così benedetto dal padre Giacobbe (Gn 49,5):

sicut et Christus a Iudeis carnaliter <fratribus,> cum benedicitur a patre etiam in haec uerba: tauri decor eius, cornua unicornis cornua eius, in eis nationes uentilabit pariter ad summum usque terrae, non utique rhinoceros destinabatur unicornis nec minotaurus bicornis, sed Christus in illo significabatur, taurus ob utramque dispositionem, aliis ferus ut iudex, aliis mansuetus ut saluator, cuius cornua essent crucis extima.

Il secondo si legge in *adv. Iud.* 10:

Si adhuc quaeris dominicae crucis praedicationes, satis iam poterit tibi facere uicesimus primus psalmus, totam Christi continens passionem, canentis iam tunc gloriam suam: foderunt, inquit, manus meas et pedes, quae propria est atrocitas crucis; et rursus, cum auxilium patris implorat: saluum me fac, inquit, ex ore leonis, utique mortis, et de cornibus unicornuorum humilitatem meam, de apicibus scilicet crucis.

Anche il *Physiologus* (terza redazione), cita questo passo dei Salmi con riferimento a Cristo. Lo conosce anche Basilio, che afferma (*hom. in Ps.* 28,5, [PG 29, 296BC]): l'unicorno è un animale fortissimo, come è detto anche in Gb 39,10; grazie a questa sua forza fisica, esso ama la libertà e vive libero. L'unicorno divenne poi un animale famoso nel Medioevo.

Da tutto questo si vede come Gregorio attribuisca al rinoceronte una doppia natura, sia buona sia malvagia, come già aveva detto Eucherio, sia pure in modo sintetico.

## Lo struzzo

Lo struzzo è ricordato da Gregorio in *Moralia* 7,28,36 nella citazione di Is 34,13–14: *erit cubile draconum et pascua struthionum* (ove si uniscono, quindi, i due animali). Analogamente i due animali sono considerati insieme in Mor. 20,39,75, ove si com-

menta Gb 30,29: *frater fui draconum et socius struthionum*, mentre in seguito (*Moralia* 31,8,11 e 31,20,36) lo struzzo è unito, per la sua somiglianza (ma solo somiglianza) all'airone e allo sparviero: *penna struthionis similis est pennis herodii et accipitris*.

Della malvagità del drago e della natura demoniaca dell'onocentaurò si è detto prima: qui, lo struzzo è caratterizzato dall'ipocrisia – cioè dal fatto che la realtà è nascosta sotto una apparenza diversa. L'ipocrisia, cioè la falsità, consiste nel fatto che lo struzzo apparentemente vola, ma in realtà non ne è capace: così, l'ipocrisia offre di se stessa un'immagine di santità, ma è incapace di praticarla. In questo passo, comunque, malvagità e ipocrisia vanno insieme. Oltre che gli ipocriti, lo struzzo indica i simulatori (*Moralia* 20,39,75), per lo stesso motivo che si è detto (possiede le ali, ma non è capace di volare). Così Cristo rimprovera i Farisei di essere simili ai sepolcri imbiancati: fuori appaiono belli, ma all'interno sono ripieni di ossa (Mt 23,27–28). Come se dicesse: l'aspetto della penna sembra che vi sollevi, ma il peso della vita vi grava in basso (*Moralia* 31,8,11). Anche il paganesimo può essere paragonato allo struzzo, perché anch'esso possedeva delle penne, ma non era in grado di volare, in quanto possedeva la natura razionale, ma ignorava l'agire secondo ragione. Lo struzzo ha un significato negativo anche per Eucherio, in quanto simboleggia l'eretico o il filosofo.<sup>31</sup>

Più avanti lo struzzo è citato da Giobbe (Gb 39,13) in contrapposizione all'airone (*herodius*) e allo sparviero (*accipiter*) (*Moralia* 31,8,11 e 20,36). In questi casi Gregorio è più dettagliato, pur mantenendo l'interpretazione fondamentale: lo struzzo indica l'ipocrisia, ed in particolare quella degli Ebrei: esso, infatti, possiede le penne come l'airone e lo sparviero, ma non possiede le loro qualità fisiche (cfr. anche il *Physiologus* 17, p. 323: στρουθοκάμηλος):

Accipitris quippe et herodii parua sunt corpora, sed pennis densioribus fulta, et idcirco cum celeritate transuolant, quia eis parum inest quod aggrauat, multum quod leuat. At contra struthio rarissimis pennis induitur, et immani corpore grauatur; ut etsi uolare appetat, ipsa pennarum paucitas molem tanti corporis in aere non suspendat.

Le penne dell'airone e dello sparviero, infatti, sono strette e assai forti (*conclusae et firmiores*), e quindi possono attraversare l'aria a volo grazie alla loro solidità; in esse vi è poco che gravi al basso, molto che sollevi (*eis parum inest quod aggrauat, multum quod leuat*). Di conseguenza sia l'airone sia lo sparviero hanno un significato almeno parzialmente positivo, significando gli eletti, i quali, finché vivono qui nel mondo, non possono essere totalmente privi di un contagio, anche piccolo, della colpa. Questo era già stato accennato da Eucherio: *accipiter interdum sanctus, ut puto, rapiens regnum Dei*.<sup>32</sup>

Invece lo struzzo ha un significato totalmente negativo: esso possiede penne rade (*dissolutae*), che quindi non possono volare, perché sono superate dall'aria

<sup>31</sup> Eucher. form. spirit. intell. 420 (CCL 66, 26).

<sup>32</sup> Eucher. form. spirit. intell. 442 (CCL 66, 27).

stessa, che avrebbero dovuto comprimere volando (così Gregorio cerca di spiegare il volo: *eo uolatum sumere nequeunt, quo ab ipso quem premere debuerant aere transcenduntur*). Si aggiunga che lo struzzo è appesantito da un corpo enorme.<sup>33</sup> Anche Plinio (10,56), sottolinea la grossezza del corpo dello struzzo, e precisa (10,2) che le penne gli sono state date per correre, ma non per volare.

Gregorio dà, quindi, la spiegazione simbolica delle penne dello struzzo (*Moralia* 31, 20,39). Esse sono simili a quelle dell'airone e dello sparviero, perché la voce della sinagoga conservò, a parole, la voce di coloro che l'avevano preceduta (*priorum doctrinam*), ma nella vita la ignorò. L'airone e lo sparviero, invece, sono gli antichi padri, i quali furono in grado di volare alto, attuando nella loro vita quei principi che erano stati in grado di vedere (*Moralia* 31,20,36).<sup>34</sup>

Anche il passo già ricordato di *Moralia* 7,28,36 (da noi in parte già considerato a p. 80s) contiene, parimenti, una polemica con gli Ebrei:

Vnde bene contra peruersam mentem sub Iudeaeae specie per Isaiam dicitur: erit cubile draconum et pascua struthionum occurrent daemonia onocentauris, et pilosus clamabit alter ad alterum. Quid namque per dracones nisi malitia, quid uero struthionum nomine nisi hypocrisis designatur? Struthio quippe speciem uolandi habet, sed usum uolandi non habet quia et hypocrisis cunctis intuentibus imaginem de se sanctitatis insinuat, sed tenere uitam sanctitatis ignorat. In peruersa igitur mente draco cubat et struthio pascitur, quia et latens malitia callide tegitur et intuentium oculis simulatio bonitatis antefertur.

Vanità e ipocrisia furono, fin dai tempi della predicazione evangelica, caratteristiche della sinagoga. Lo struzzo, quindi, indica la singagoga, che ebbe le ali della Legge, ma con il cuore strisciava *in infimis* e mai riuscì a sollevarsi da terra (*Moralia* 31,20,36). Oppure (*Moralia* 31,23,42) se lo struzzo leva in alto le ali, questo significa che la sinagoga non ha più paura del suo creatore, ma apertamente lo contesta.

Una caratteristica dello struzzo è quella di produrre le uova, ma di abbandonarle poi a terra, come dice Giobbe (39,14) (*Moralia* 31,9,14, anche 31,10,15 e 31,12,17<sup>35</sup>) (il *Physiologus*: γεννᾷ δὲ ὡς καὶ οὐδὲ πυρώνει<sup>36</sup> αὐτά, ὡς ἔθος). Questo particolare deve essere inteso nel senso che gli ipocriti parlano bene, cioè generano figli, ma non sono in grado di nutrirli con la rettitudine della vita o con i giusti ammaestramenti, che sono indicati dal nido a cui gli struzzi non appendono le uova (*Moralia* 31,9,14). Quello, invece, non era stato il comportamento di Paolo, il quale non si era dimenticato dei suoi figli (*Moralia* 31,12,17), ma temeva che, vedendo che il loro maestro era sottoposto alle ignominie della predicazione, perdessero la fede. E per questo motivo Paolo non si preoccupava delle proprie torture, ma della tentazione che esse potevano far sorgere nei suoi figli.

<sup>33</sup> Anche Isidoro (orig. 12,7,20) afferma che lo struzzo *Graeco nomine dicitur, quod animal in similitudine avis pinnas habere uidetur; tamen de terra altius non eleuatur*.

<sup>34</sup> Sul valore positivo dell'airone cfr. anche Ciccarese (2002) 77–79.

<sup>35</sup> Un riferimento non diretto: Gregorio dice: ... *filiorum suorum more struthionis oblitus*.

<sup>36</sup> La parola manca nei lessici correnti: in base alla etimologia dovrebbe significare ‘scaldare’.

### 3 Animali comuni

#### L'aspide e la vipera

I due animali sono considerati insieme (*Moralia* 15,15,19) a causa della citazione di Gb 20,16: *caput aspidum suget et occidet eum lingua viperae*. L'aspide si distingue dalla vipera, in quanto è un piccolo serpente, mentre la vipera ha un corpo più lungo; inoltre l'aspide produce delle uova, dalle quali nascono i figli, mentre i figli della vipera, quando essa li ha concepiti, aprono con la violenza i fianchi della madre ed escono fuori: *Vnde et uipera, eo quod ui pariat, nominatur. Vipera itaque sic nascitur ut uiolenter exeat et cum matris sua exstinctione producatur*. Gregorio ripete la notizia vulgata a proposito dell'origine della vipera e l'etimologia della parola (la sua fonte probabile fu Plin. 10,62,69<sup>37</sup>). Gli aspidi, che sono serpenti piccoli, significano i nascosti suggerimenti degli spiriti immondi, i quali si insinuano nei cuori degli uomini inizialmente persuadendoli di cose malvagie, invece la lingua della vipera indica la violenta tentazione del diavolo. Infatti in un primo momento la tentazione serpeggiava lentamente, poi attrae violentemente. Premessa questa differenza, Gregorio propone la interpretazione spirituale del passo di Giobbe: l'ipocrita succhia la testa degli aspidi, perché l'inizio dei suggerimenti del male nasce prima, nascostamente, nel cuore, mentre la lingua della vipera l'uccide, perché in seguito la mente umana, così catturata, è uccisa dal veleno di una tentazione violenta. Inizialmente gli spiriti immondi parlano al cuore dell'uomo con consigli sottili, e così, dolcemente persuadendo, si può dire che riversano il veleno dell'aspide. Una tentazione improvvisa spesso uccide una mente che non si guarda non appena la succhia, mentre una lunga tentazione, poiché suggerisce cose malvagie persuadendo a lungo, è come una vipera che uccide con la lingua (*Moralia* 15,15,19 in fine).

Quanto al basilisco, Gregorio, dopo aver citato Is 59,5 (*qui comedenter de oibus eorum morietur*), aggiunge l'etimologia: *Regulus namque serpentum rex dicitur*. Il *regulus* è l'anticristo, perché è il capo (*regulus*) dei malvagi, e comunque non è *rex* come Cristo, ma solamente *regulus*, cioè un re inferiore. È identificato con il diavolo anche dal *Physiologus*, p. 316,21ss.

Più avanti (*Moralia* 17,32,51) Gregorio cita un passo messianico famoso (Is 11,8–9): *delectabitur infans ab ubere super foramine aspidis; et in cauerna reguli qui ablactatus fuerit manum suam mittet*. Il bambino che non sarà più allattato è il Signore, e il buco in cui abita l'aspide e la tana del basilisco indicano il cuore dei malvagi. L'aspide indica il demonio che incrudelisce di nascosto, mentre il basilisco è il serpente che colpisce apertamente.

L'esempio del *regulus* è ulteriormente spiegato in *Moralia* 33,37,62–63 con riferimento al Leviatano, che è chiamato *regulus*. Isaia, appunto, aveva detto (14,29): *de radice colubri egredietur regulus*. Bisogna, quindi vedere in che modo il basilisco

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<sup>37</sup> Anche Isidoro (orig. 12,4; sent. 2,25) conosce questa caratteristica della vipera.

uccida, sì che, osservando il suo comportamento assassino, emerge in modo più chiaro la sua malvagità. Il basilisco non uccide con il morso, ma consuma con il suo fiato; spesso infetta anche l'aria con il fiato e fa marcire con il solo soffio delle narici una cosa che si trovi anche lontana. Possiamo quindi comprendere che danni esso procuri nel cuore dell'uomo con il fumo della sua esalazione pestilenziale.

Anche in questo caso, la fonte è Plinio (8,78):

Eadem et basilisci serpentis est vis. sibilo omnes fugat serpentes nec flexu multiplici, ut reliquae, corpus impellit, sed celsus et erectus in medio incedens necat frutices, non contactos modo, verum et adflatos, exurit herbas, rumpit saxa: talis vis malo est.

Gli occhi dell'uomo vengono indeboliti dal fumo, che esce dalle narici di questo serpente. In seguito a tali nocive *inspirationes* (detto in senso concreto e traslato insieme: inspirazione e suggerimenti) sorge nel cuore dell'uomo il pensiero perverso, per colpa del quale si ottunde la vista della mente, perché non possa vedere la luce (della dottrina cristiana e della salvezza).

## Il serpente ceraste

Commentando le parole di Giacobbe nelle benedizioni dei suoi figli (Gn 49,17: *fiat Dan coluber in via, cerastes in semita, mordens ungulas equi, ut cadat ascensor eius retro*), Gregorio osserva (*Moralia* 31,24,43) che Dan è chiamato non solamente con il nome più generico di *coluber*, ma anche con quello più specifico di *cerastes*. Eccone l'etimologia: *Kέρατα enim Graece cornua dicuntur*.<sup>38</sup> Si dice, infatti, che questo serpente abbia le corna, sì che esso allude in modo calzante all'avvento dell'Anticristo, che è armato con le corna del potere (*cornibus potestatis*) insieme con il morso della sua predicazione, esercitato contro la vita dei fedeli. Questo avviene anche ora: Dan diventa serpente nella strada, perché, in questa vita, che è ampia come una strada, invita a camminare coloro che blandisce, come se non volesse fare loro del male; ma quando è nella strada morde, perché consiglia con il veleno della sua perversa dottrina quelli ai quali lascia la libertà di camminare. Diventa, inoltre, *cerastes* nel sentiero (*in semita*), perché assale con la malvagità di un'astuta persuasione quelli che ha trovato essere fedeli cristiani e che si stringono a percorrere la strada stretta (*semita*) del comandamento di Dio. E non solo, ma li schiaccia anche con il terrore del potere terreno, e con l'angoscia della persecuzione, dopo aver mostrato i benefici di una falsa dolcezza, adopera le corna del potere. E poiché l'Anticristo cerca di dominare l'ultima età del mondo, si dice che codesto ceraste morda le unghie del cavallo dell'Anticristo stesso.

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<sup>38</sup> Gregorio si riallaccia alla ben nota tradizione greca di Nicandro e a quella latina di Lucano.

## Lo scorpione

È ricordato come esempio in *Homiliae in Hiezechihalem prophetam* 1,9,21<sup>39</sup>. Lo scorpione avanza tastando la strada e ferisce con la coda; non morde di fronte, ma infligge il suo male con la parte posteriore. Gli scorpioni sono tutti coloro che sono suadenti, ma malvagi: essi non si oppongono ai buoni faccia a faccia, ma non appena questi si sono allontanati, li biasimano, infiammano altri, che riescono a scuotere, e provocano tutti i danni che possono e non cessano di produrre opere mortifere. Dunque, gli scorpioni sono coloro che all'aspetto appaiono carezzevoli e innocui, ma dietro il dorso portano quello da cui possono emettere il veleno.

## Il draco

Del *draco* abbiamo già detto sopra, con riferimento all'Apocalisse. Ma sia nell'Apocalisse sia nella immaginazione popolare il drago è un animale che divora.<sup>40</sup> Se non è facile incontrare draghi nella vita di tutti i giorni, il drago per eccellenza è il demonio, che divora il peccatore: costui talvolta può anche liberarsene, soprattutto grazie alle preghiere degli amici e degli altri fedeli. Esempi di questa accezione del drago, inteso come il diavolo, si trovano nelle popolari *Homiliae in euangelia* 1,19,7<sup>41</sup>: un fedele, già invasato, comincia all'improvviso a gridare: *Ecce discessit, ecce exiit, ante orationes uestras fugit draco qui me acceperat*. La stessa situazione in *Homiliae in euangelia* 2,16,38, ove si legge un altro episodio. Un malato all'improvviso migliora grazie alle preghiere dei fedeli, e comincia a gridare esultante con quanta più voce ha: *Gratias Deo, ecce draco qui me ad deuorandum acceperat fugit. Orationibus uestris expulsus est, stare non potuit. Pro peccatis meis modo intercedite, quia conuerti paratus sum et saecularem uitam funditus relinquere*. Popolari sono anche i *Dialogi*. Ivi (*Dialogorum libri* 2,25) si legge un caso analogo. Un drago appare ad un monaco per divorarlo, e questi, pieno di spavento, comincia a gridare a gran voce: *currite, currite, quia draco iste me deuorare uult*. Fortunatamente i compagni riescono a portare nel monastero il monaco che tremava. Tuttavia non riuscirono a vedere il drago, perché in esso si nasconde il demonio, che non può essere visto. E ancora (*ibid.* 4,40): il drago, dice il peccatore, che mi aveva preso per divorarmi, ecco che è fuggito. Esso è stato scacciato dalle preghiere dei fedeli, non ha potuto resistere. Continuino, i fedeli, a intercedere per i suoi peccati, perché è pronto ad abbandonare la vita del secolo e a convertirsi.

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<sup>39</sup> (CCL 142,134).

<sup>40</sup> Un drago spaventoso, che divora gli uomini, è l'argomento anche di un'interessante novella di carattere popolare in Apuleio (*met.* 8,19 – 21).

<sup>41</sup> (CCL 141,151).

## Lo stambecco (*ibices*) e le cerve

Dello stambecco e delle cerve parla Gb 39,1 (*numquid nosti tempus partus ibicum in petris, uel parturientes ceruas obseruasti?*). Il termine *ibex* indica due specie differenti di animali, spiega Gregorio (*Moralia* 30,10,36): nella parte meridionale del mondo si intendono gli uccelli del Nilo, cioè quelli che noi conosciamo con il nome di ‘*ibis*’ vere e proprie, mentre nell’oriente e nell’occidente si intendono dei quadrupedi, appunto gli stambecchi, che partoriscono nelle pietre perché quello è il posto in cui abitano. Le cerve, a loro volta, uccidono i serpenti e li dilaniano a morsi, secondo un’altra notizia diffusa.<sup>42</sup> Si dice inoltre che, se passano a nuoto i fiumi, ciascuna cerva pone il peso della sua testa sul dorso di quella che la precede, e così, venendo l’una dopo l’altra, esse non sentono il peso della fatica. Nel passo di Giobbe il parto degli stambecchi o delle cerve significa la persona dei maestri spirituali. Costoro, infatti, partoriscono tra le pietre come gli stambecchi, perché, insegnando la dottrina dei Padri, che sono stati chiamati ‘pietre’ grazie alla loro solidità, essi generano delle anime che possano convertirsi e non sentono nessun danno, quando cadono, perché sono accolti nelle loro corna, nel senso che, qualunque caduta di una rovina temporale sia loro capitata, essi si raccolgono nei due Testamenti della Sacra Scrittura, e si salvano, per dir così, accogliendosi l’uno con l’altro; queste persone sono i dottori che abbandonano i figli che hanno incautamente generato. Costoro sono stati chiamati ‘cerve’ dal profeta Geremia (14,15), perché, come le cerve, vivono dei serpenti che hanno ucciso, cioè vivono perché hanno distrutto i vizi.<sup>43</sup> Plinio (8,214) ricorda solo la velocità dello stambecco nella corsa, nonostante che le sue corna siano ampie e pesanti.

## Il riccio (*hericius*)

Ne parla Gregorio nei *Moralia* (33,29,53). Il profeta, egli spiega, per condannare la Giudea, esclama (Is 34,14–15): *ibi cubauit lamia et inuenit sibi requiem; ibi habuit foueam hericius*. La parola *ibi* indica la Giudea, il fantasma (*lamia*) gli ipocriti: il fantasma, infatti, ha il volto umano, ma il corpo della bestia, così come gli ipocriti mostrano al primo aspetto quello che ha un’apparenza di santità, ma il loro corpo è di bestia, perché quello che essi macchinano sotto l’apparenza del bene è estremamente ingiusto. Anche il riccio indica i malvagi, che si coprono con delle difese di ogni genere. Gregorio dà una descrizione molto visiva della bestia:

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<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Ciccarese (2002) 315–316.

<sup>43</sup> La stessa interpretazione (il parto degli stambecchi nelle pietre è come l’insegnamento divino dell’apostolo Paolo) è ricordata in *Moralia* 30,10,36 e 30,10,39: vi accenniamo solamente in breve, perché ha più l’aspetto di una vera e propria interpretazione spirituale, che non di un interesse per i *mirabilia* degli animali.

quia uidelicet hericius, cum apprehenditur, eius et caput cernitur et pedes uidentur et corpus omne conspicitur; sed mox ut apprehensus fuerit, semetipsum in sphaeram colligit, pedes introrsus subtrahit, caput abscondit; et intra tenentis manus totum simul amittitur, quod totum simul ante uidebatur.

Così si comportano anche i maliziosi. Infatti la testa del riccio è ben visibile: questo significa che l'inizio da cui il peccatore si muove per andare verso il peccato è ben visibile. Anche i piedi del riccio si vedono, perché si notano le orme, lasciate dalla malvagità quando viene messa in atto; tuttavia, la mente maliziosa adduce all'improvviso delle scuse e quindi tira indietro i suoi piedi, perché così può nascondere tutte le tracce della sua iniquità. Il malizioso ritira la testa, perché con delle scuse mirabolanti vuol dare ad intendere di non aver nemmeno iniziato a compiere un'azione malvagia, per cui nella mano di chi lo afferra rimane, per così dire, una palla, perché colui che afferra il malizioso all'improvviso si accorge di aver perso tutto quello che aveva afferrato. Ed infine il riccio ha la sua tana tra i reprobi, perché la mente maliziosa, raccogliendosi su se stessa, si nasconde nelle tenebre della propria difesa.

## Il bruco e la rucola

In *Moralia* 33,37,65 Gregorio intende spiegare un passo del profeta Gioele (1,4,4–5): *Vnde bene per Ioeל prophetam dicitur: residuum erucae comedit locusta; et residuum locustae comedit bruchus; et residuum bruchi comedit rubigo. Expergiscimini ebri et flete.* La rucola (*eruca*), di cui qui si parla, striscia in terra con tutto il suo corpo e indica la lussuria: questa pianta, infatti, era ritenuta un'erba dotata di proprietà afrodisiache (cfr. Hor. *sat.* 2,8,51; *moretum* 86). Essa insozza il cuore di colui del quale si è impadronita, in modo che ivi non può sorgere l'amore per la purezza, che sta in alto (infatti, la rucola striscia a terra). La locusta, a sua volta, siccome vola via saltando (*saltibus euolat*), indica la vanagloria, che si esalta per l'effetto di vari pensieri di superbia. Ed infine, il bruco, perfettamente raffigurato nei suoi movimenti: *cuius paene totum corpus in uentrem colligitur*, e per questo (*in uentrem colligitur*) significa la ghiottoneria. Quindi, per tornare al passo profetico, la locusta mangia il resto della rucola, perché spesso, quando il vizio della lussuria ha abbandonato la mente, subentra la vanagloria per il fatto che ci si è liberati del peccato e la mente si inorgoglisce credendosi santa grazie alla sua castità. E quello che rimane della locusta, infine, lo mangia il bruco, perché spesso, quando ci si oppone alla vanagloria che proviene da una presunta castità, si indulge sfrenatamente ad altri vizi, come quello del ventre o dell'ambizione<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Per vedere come Gregorio interpreti la locusta ci siamo soffermati solo su questo passo, perché qui la locusta è introdotta insieme al bruco e alla rucola, ma, come ha osservato Ciccarese (2009) 47–48, in *Moralia* 31,25,45–50 Gregorio propone ben cinque interpretazioni della locusta.

## Conclusione

I *Moralia in Iob* sono l'opera di Gregorio Magno che presenta il maggior numero di esempi, ed i più vari, di interpretazione spirituale e di interesse per i *mirabilia* degli animali. Molto probabilmente interviene in questo fatto la diversità dei livelli letterari: più semplici e popolari sono i *Dialogi* e le omelie sul Vangelo e su Ezechiele; più dotti e impegnati sul piano dottrinale e spirituale i *Moralia in Iob*. Di conseguenza le allegorie abbondano in quest'opera, mentre sono scarse nelle altre due, nelle quali il mondo animale è osservato e considerato nella sua normale concretezza. Dobbiamo credere, quindi, che sia stato il testo biblico a suggerire a Gregorio le spiegazioni e le interpretazioni, a spingerlo a compiere ricerche erudite. Muovendosi all'interno del testo biblico, nemmeno Gregorio, come altri prima di lui, sfugge alla tentazione – quasi obbligata in un'opera di esegeti, come quella del libro di Giobbe – di attribuire ai vari animali un significato allegorico (per lo più, morale). Ciononostante, anche nei *Moralia* spesso lo scrittore si libera da questa costrizione per dedicarsi ad una osservazione attenta, ora di simpatia ora di repulsa, di essi. L'immagine traslata viene costruita proprio mediante l'attenta osservazione dell'animale, del suo corpo, dei suoi movimenti e delle sue caratteristiche insolite, che stimolano la curiosità. Questo, naturalmente, è solo un particolare dell'esegeti di Gregorio, ma esso ben si adatta alla caratteristica generale, che unisce mirabilmente concretezza e spiritualità.

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Françoise Lecocq

## The Flight of the Phoenix to Paradise in Ancient Literature and Iconography

The ancient phoenix had an extraordinary fate. Mixing an oriental cosmic bird with the Egyptian *benu* sacred to the Sun, the unique and rare creature of the Greek and Roman mythology became, in a few centuries, an imperial symbol and a Christian emblem, both ubiquitous until today.<sup>1</sup> Historians, but mostly poets and novelists, whether Greeks or Romans, pagans or Christians, variously rebirthed the creature over and over again on the basis of an initially sparse and ambiguous source material. However, they all agreed to give the phoenix an Eastern country as its abode, hot and exotic, and one producing aromatics. This country was at first Arabia, then the phoenix migrated towards the far East into India, homeland of wonderful and colorful birds like the parrot or the peacock, and a country producing cinnamon; the latter became the preferred spice of our bird, and the palm tree became its official tree.

If the cinnamon can be explained by an error in the work of Pliny the Elder, the tree was justified by the Greek homonymy: φοῖνιξ is a name common to the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and to the unique bird, maybe due to a common red color and/or a Phoenician origin. Indeed, the homonymy also applies to a country: Phoenicia, land of palm trees, and also producer of the purple dye.<sup>2</sup> That land was called, depending on times and the status of imperial rules, (As-)Syria or Lebanon, a neighbour of the land of Israel, also called Judea. By the way, the personification of the province of Judaea is to be seen on Roman currencies with the attribute of a palm tree, whereas the Greek word λίθανος, as a common noun, denotes “incense”, one of the aromatics of the phoenix.

Very early, the poets played with all these polysemies: Ezekiel the Tragedian, the Jewish Greek speaking author of Moses' *Exodus* (2nd c. BC), from Alexandria, placed the bird in an oasis of palm trees similar to Elim in the Bible. And according to Ovid, in the following centuries, the pious and innocent phoenix lives in the evergreen woods of the Elysian Fields amongst other birds. At a further remove, as far away as the country of the rising sun, the sacred abode of the bird was moving little by little closer to Paradise, when the phoenix became, somewhat naturally, a Christian symbol. The magnificent eternal bird came to find its ease in a place defined by evergreen trees and everlasting creatures: not only in the cosmological Eden of Adam and

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<sup>1</sup> There are two monographs on the ancient phoenix: by Hubaux/Leroy (1939) comprising 266 pp. (on the abode of the phoenix and on Paradise, see Chapter III: *Loca sancta*, 56–65), and by van den Broek (1972), comprising 485 pp., with a rich iconography (on the abode of the phoenix, see Chapter VIII: *The Abode*, 305–334; on Paradise, 172–177). On the durability and the renewal of the values of the phoenix until today, see Lecocq (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Guilleux (2001).

Eve with all the other animals, but also in the eschatological Paradise, where it symbolized by its regeneration the resurrection and glory of Christ.

Here I will examine the abodes of the phoenix and their commonalities in the Greek and Latin literature: Arabia in Herodotus, an oasis of palm trees for Ezekiel the Tragedian, the Elysian Fields in Ovid, India (or Ethiopia) for an imaginary Far Eastern, the country of the sunrise and of aromatics in the novels. Afterwards, I will survey the paradisiacal abode, whether terrestrial or celestial, in the Christian and rabbinic texts, the more important being the *Carmen de aue phoenice* of Lactantius, introducing into his mythical geography biblical countries such as Lebanon and Syria (formerly Phoenicia). From the time of these texts, the bird begins to approach, and even enter the biblical Paradise in some Christian poems and some commentaries on *Genesis*, both Christian (e.g. that of St. Ambrose) or Jewish (e.g. of certain rabbis), and also in popular literature, like the bestiary named *Physiologos*<sup>3</sup>. Finally, I will study Christian iconography, mostly mosaics found in Rome and Syria, which, somewhat paradoxically, do not depict exactly the same thing as Christian texts. On these mosaics we can see the phoenix either in the Adamic Paradise or in the Heavenly Jerusalem, at the beginning or at the end of times.

## I The Terrestrial Abodes of the Phoenix in Early Greek and Latin Literature

In Ancient Egypt, according to the Heliopolitan cosmogony, the *benu* bird emerged from the primordial waters during the creation of the world and arose on the first hillock; afterwards, it became the image of the Sun god under his different names: Atoum, Ra and Osiris, bearing on its head the solar disk and/or a divine crown. In the Osirian cult, the bird was associated with a metaphysical creature symbolizing the soul of the deceased: the *ba*. Its ornithologic species evolved from the wagtail to a heron and/or a falcon.<sup>4</sup>

The realistic image of the gray heron, a common migratory bird but uncommon in its great size,<sup>5</sup> can be seen in the sacred papyri (such as *The Book of the Dead*), on the paintings of many graves, or on the engravings of magic gemstones.<sup>6</sup> No Egyptian document tells its life story or explains its astronomical cycle. The first narrative, told by Herodotus in the 5th c. BC, is elliptical and problematic: if he makes it a sacred bird of the sun frequenting the temple of Heliopolis, the Greek historian gives it an

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the latter, see Horst Schneider's contribution in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> See Lecocq (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Either the existing species of *Ardea cinerea* or *Ardea Goliath*, or the extinct species of *Ardea bernuides*: see Hoch (1979).

<sup>6</sup> For the gemstones, see Nagy (2001).

Arabic origin, the look of a bird of prey (in fact, certainly the solar hawk Horus),<sup>7</sup> and a cycle of 500 years, which makes no sense relative to Egyptian astronomy.

According to him, the phoenix periodically brings the corpse of its father embalmed, so to speak, in a ball of myrrh,<sup>8</sup> coming from Arabia (but not any precise locale) into the temple of the Sun at Heliopolis. Herodotus' narrative takes place in a description of Egyptian fauna, conveying almost no hint at a religious meaning; for our purposes, we may note that he names Arabia ἐνδαιμών (*felix* in Latin), which carries the double meaning of “fertile” and “fortunate”.<sup>9</sup> This qualifier alludes to the production of aromatic plants: a perfumed country is considered blessed by the gods, as also is India.<sup>10</sup> Herodotus' phoenix is linked only with myrrh, but this theme of aromatics is to witness a great development,<sup>11</sup> and it will play a role in the attribution of the Christian Paradise as its abode. Moreover, *Arabia felix* geographically corresponds to the south of the Arabic peninsula: many authors associated the aromatics of the phoenix with Sheba, also homeland of the famous queen loved by King Solomon.

In the 2nd c. BC, the Alexandrian Jewish poet Ezekiel the Tragedian wrote a play on the exodus from Egypt of the Hebrew people under the direction of Moses. He portrayed the phoenix<sup>12</sup> in a palm grove inspired by the biblical oasis of Elim.<sup>13</sup> The bird not mentioned by the Bible, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> is borrowed by Ezekiel from Greek literature, which itself contained very little on this topic at this date. The invention of this episode by this singular Jewish Greek-speaking poet is based on a pun on the bird and the homonymous date palm: it was natural and likely to give a tree as a home to a bird, and the palm tree is typical of the Mediterranean landscape, while assuming also symbolic values (sometimes the same ones as the bird, such as a long life).<sup>15</sup>

As far as we can judge from the fragment of the play (featuring only a short description of the bird), this invention was not ornamental, nor devoid of meaning: the

<sup>7</sup> The Egyptian images and texts authorized this mix-up between the *benu* and the falcon god Horus: see Labrique 2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Histories* 2.73 on the phoenix, and 3.107 on Arabia.

<sup>9</sup> See Evans (2003), Tallet (2010), and Labrique (2013).

<sup>10</sup> See Lallemand (1988).

<sup>11</sup> Even if I do not follow the analysis and conclusions of Detienne (1989): see Lecocq (2009b), Lecocq (2012), and Lecocq (2015).

<sup>12</sup> *Exagoge*, fragment 17 = l. 254–269, ed. Holladay (1989). The fragment was transmitted by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio euangelica* 9.29, and by Pseudo-Eustathius, *Commentarius in Hexaemeron* (PG 18:729C-732 A). The bird of the *Exagoge* has no name; against its identification as the phoenix, Wacholder-Bowman (1985), seeing instead an eagle coming from the Exodus and from the book of the homonymous Prophet Ezekiel – which I do not accept. On the biblical eagle, see Ciccarese (1980).

<sup>13</sup> *Exagoge*, fragment 16, 243–253. In the Bible (Exodus 15:27, and Numbers 33:9), Elim was one of the camps for the Hebrews on the return road from Egypt to Israel, an oasis with twelve wells and seventy date palms. Various geographic localizations have been proposed: see Hoffmeier (2005).

<sup>14</sup> See Lecocq (2014b).

<sup>15</sup> See Diaz de Bustamante (1980), 49–55.

symbolism appears to be a good omen for the return of the Hebrew people to the Promised Land, a sign of the revival of its freedom in a new era. At any rate, this is the meaning of the appearance of the bird later.<sup>16</sup> The twelve springs and seventy palm trees (with symbolic figures) of the oasis of Elim in the Bible also make it an image of the native land: Φοινίκη in Greek. One can understand it as “the country of the phoenix”, or, conversely, the phoenix as the “Phoenician bird”. This new pun will be taken up later mainly by Lactantius, along with the topic of the palm grove.

In addition to these associations, some late documents also established a mysterious relationship between Moses, Joseph, and the city of On, the Hebrew name for Heliopolis.<sup>17</sup> A late Coptic sermon on Mary mentions three appearances of the phoenix, punctuating the history of the Old and New Testaments: once in the time of Moses, before that once in the time of Adam, and finally once in the time of Christ.<sup>18</sup> What is important here is the creation of a new image and a new link.

The association of the phoenix with the palm tree was destined to have a long literary and iconographic afterlife, pagan as well as Christian: the evergreen palm tree was for the pagans a symbol of duration just like the bird, and the palm branch has positive meanings in the Christian religion, either the palm branches of Palm Sunday or the palm of martyrdom. On a mosaic for example, the presence of the tree assures the identification of the bird (also recognizable as divine by its solar nimbus), as in a kind of rebus or emblem: “This tree and this bird bear the same name.”

It would be a traditional question to ask if the tree gave its name to the bird, or conversely the bird to the tree, from Pliny the Elder to Lactantius and Isidorus.<sup>19</sup> If pagan writers resumed this association found for the first time in Ezekiel it is only in the Christian iconography that we find the image of the bird on the tree.<sup>20</sup>

As for the new link, Ezekiel was the first author, and the only one for a long time before the rise of Christianity, to give the phoenix a religious valence, whatever that is. In doing so, he facilitated its indirect entry into the biblical material. This syncret-

<sup>16</sup> See Heath (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Iounou in Egyptian. See, for example, Philonenko (1968). Moreover, according to Chyutin (2001) 171–207, the destination of the exode in the play is the city of Heliopolis itself, and consequently, the phoenix is with no doubt the Egyptian bird.

<sup>18</sup> See van den Broek (1972) 33–49. In the apocryphal *Assumption of Moses* (2 Mos. 15,27), it is semantically impossible to know if the words *projectio p/Phoenicis* refer to the bird or to the country.

<sup>19</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 13,42; Lactantius, *Carmen de aue phoenix*, 69–70; Isidorus, *Etimologiae* 17,7,1.

<sup>20</sup> See Lecocq (2009a): there is, if not a palm tree, at least a branch on the first Roman coin showing the phoenix, an *aureus* of Hadrian, where the bird is holding within its claws a palm or a cinnamon twig or, more probably, a branch of laurel. The plant was meant to assure the identification of the creature, but the species is hardly recognizable: see my article “Deux faces du phénix impérial: Trajan et Hadrien sur l’*aureus* de 117/118,” in: Stéphane Benoist / Alban Gautier / Christine Hoët-Van Cauwenbergh / Rémy Poignault (eds.), *Mémoires de Trajan, mémoires d’Hadrien*, Lille, forthcoming.

ic tendency of Jewish thought to integrate elements coming from other cultures is attested under various forms<sup>21</sup>.

In the case of our bird, the same phenomenon will occur later for Christians, who had themselves preserved the fragments of the *Exagoge*. We know them thanks to bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived at the time of emperor Constantine and Lactantius, both of whom had an interest in the phoenix: the former minted currencies with the image of the bird, and the second wrote the longest poem dedicated to it. Once Christians adopted the symbolic bird, another Jewish phoenix will not appear for a long time. Now we come to the Latin and Greek literature in Roman time.

In the 1st c. BC, the Roman senator Manilius located the bird in a city of the Sun not in Egypt, but in Panchaia:

*Aethiopes atque Indi discolores maxime et inenarrabiles ferunt aues et ante omnes nobilem Arabiae phoenicem, haud scio an fabulose, unum in toto orbe nec usum magno opere [...]. Ex ossibus deinde et medullis eius nasci primo ceu uermiculum, inde fieri pullum, principioque iusta funera priori reddere et totum deferre nidum prope Panchaiam in Solis urbem et in ara ibi deponere.*<sup>22</sup>

Ethiopia and the Indies possess birds extremely variegated in colour and indescribable, and Arabia has one that is famous before all others (though perhaps it is fabulous), the phoenix, the only one in the whole world, and hardly ever seen. [...] from its bones and marrow is born first a sort of maggot and this grows into a chicken, and that this begins by paying due funeral rites to the former bird, and carrying the whole nest down to the City of the Sun near Panchaia, and depositing it upon an altar there.<sup>23</sup>

It seems at this point to be a part of Arabia (according to the geographer Pomponius Mela, whose narrative on the phoenix is close to Manilius)<sup>24</sup> rather than the utopian land of Euhemerus. Settled for the first time in a perfumed nest (a motif taken up again by Ovid and latter authors), in Manilius the phoenix began to become the bird of the aromatics which that land, imaginary or not, was supposed to produce, just like the earlier *Arabia felix*. This geographical change is the first of the relocations of the bird towards more unknown, exotic countries, those considered to be closer to the borders of the world: namely, Ethiopia and India. These countries are real, but fantasized, particularly in ancient Greek novels.<sup>25</sup> So, in the last century before the Common Era the phoenix was getting closer to the rising sun, taking steps

<sup>21</sup> See Berthelot (2010).

<sup>22</sup> In Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 10.3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Translated by H. Rackham (The Loeb Classical Library 353), Cambridge, MA 1940.

<sup>24</sup> *The Description of the World* 3.83–84. In Diodorus of Sicily, the grove of Panchaia island, on the east coast of Arabia, is a land of frankincense, myrrh, and date palms, harboring many birds and happy people (*The Library of History* 17.50.4).

<sup>25</sup> In Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 3.49; in Lucian, *The Ship* 44, and *The Death of Peregrine* (where the main character is a caricatured phoenix); in Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 25.2; in Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story* 6.3.3, where the bird is said to originate from Ethiopia “or” from India: see Lecocq (2011a). On the confusion on the borders of the world, see Schneider (2004).

towards the future Christian Eastern Paradise. But Manilius was the only one to give to the migration of the phoenix a new destination: other writers had sometimes changed its Arabian birthplace and abode, but they kept its western journey toward Egypt.

Ovid, for his part, acclimatized the bird to the Latin literature and the Roman world, evoking it in two separate works. In the *Metamorphoses*, he repeated the Herodotean tradition of travel, but here from Assyria (as historic conqueror of Phoenicia, or rather as a simple poetic doublet of “Syria”, neighbour to Phoenicia),<sup>26</sup> and without explicit mention of Egypt as the final destination.

*Haec tamen ex aliis generis primordia ducunt.  
Vna est, quae reparet seque ipsa reseminet, ales:  
Assyrii phoenica uocant [...]  
Perque leues auras Hyperionis urbe potitus  
Ante fores sacras Hyperionis aede reponit.<sup>27</sup>*

Now all these things get their life's beginning from some other creature; but there is one bird which itself renews and reproduces its own being. The Assyrians call it the phoenix. [...] <He> piously bears his own cradle and his father's tomb through the thin air, until, having reached the city of the Sun, he lays the nest down before the sacred doors of the Sun's temple.<sup>28</sup>

In a worldly poem of the *Amores* on the death of Corinne's pet parrot, he placed the phoenix in the pagan Paradise of the underworld, the Elysian Fields, together with the “pious and innocent birds”: swans, doves, and peacocks, with no preeminent rank.

*Colle sub Elycio nigra nemus ilice frondet,  
Vdaque perpetuo gramine terra uiret.  
Siqua fides dubiis, uolucrum locus ille piarum  
Dicitur, obscenae quo prohibentur aues.  
Illi innocui late pascuntur olores  
Et uiuax phoenix, unica semper auis;  
Explicat ipsa suas ales Iunonia pinnas,  
Oscula dat cupido blanda columba mari.  
Psittacus has inter nemorali sede receptus  
Conuertit uolucres in sua uerba pias.<sup>29</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Probably preferred for metric reasons. The first foot of the meter must be long, and *Syria* begins with a short-wovel syllable. Same probable reason for Martial, *Epigrams* 5.7.1: *Qualiter Assyrios renouant incendia nidos*, “Even as fire renews Assyrian nests” of the phoenix (translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey [The Loeb Classical Library 94], Cambridge, MA 1993). We can see the same thing also for Statius (see n. 33), and in the poems on the phoenix of Lactantius (l.1 and 164) and Claudian (l.101).

<sup>27</sup> *Metamorphoses* 15.391–393 and 406–407.

<sup>28</sup> Translated by Frank Justus Miller, revised by C. P. Goold (The Loeb Classical Library 43), Cambridge, MA 1916.

<sup>29</sup> *Amores* 2.6.49–58.

At the foot of a hill in Elysium is a leafy grove of dark ilex, and the moist earth is green with never-fading grass. If we may have faith in doubtful things, that place, we are told, is the abode of the pious winged kind, and from it impure fowl are kept away. There far and wide feed the harmless swans and the long-lived phoenix, bird ever alone of its kind; there the bird of Juno spreads for her own eye her plumage, and the winsome dove gives kisses to her eager mate. Our parrot, welcomed among them to this woodland seat, attracts to himself by his words the feathered faithful.<sup>30</sup>

Knowing that the phoenix is unique and dies only to be immediately reborn, meeting it in the world of the dead is strange:<sup>31</sup> is it awaiting a reincarnation, like the souls of Virgil's *Aeneid*, because there is always only one phoenix living at a time on earth?

But in the *Amores*, unlike the *Metamorphoses*, the phoenix does not belong to a scientific demonstration. We need not look for logic or for a variant source of the myth; it is probably an invention of the poet, parodying at the same time the world of the human beings and Homer and Virgil's epics, although not without consequences.

In the *Metamorphoses*, King Numa, a follower of Pythagoras, gave the phoenix as an example of the wonderful variety of the modes of reproduction in nature, preluding the evocation of the fate of Rome. In the *Amores*, on the other hand, it looks like an animalistic pastiche of the parade of great men in Hades, as in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*: these sacred birds are the *alter ego* of the noble heroes. So, the explanation for the invention is to be found out of the myth of the phoenix. But the topic of the *locus felix* (another name of the rhetorical *topos* of the *locus amoenus*, here the Elysian Fields replacing *Arabia felix* as the abode of the bird) was yet to have still more importance in the myth. It is here a forested hill with evergreen trees bathed in water, more or less an oasis like Elim in Ezekiel the Tragedian.

At approximately the same time, the assonant pun *phoenix – felix* can also be seen on an inscription of a mural painting in Pompeii, the first to depict with absolute certainty our bird in Italy.<sup>32</sup> The species is indefinable, but its tuft and beard make it look supernatural, like in the depictions of the divine snakes; interestingly,

<sup>30</sup> Translated by Grant Showerman, revised by G. P. Goold (The Loeb Classical Library 41), Cambridge, MA 1914.

<sup>31</sup> Egyptian iconography, however, shows the *benu* as a symbolic figure of the daily sun travelling on a small boat for its nocturnal trip from west back east in the underworld that is also the world of the dead. When the grey heron is seen on a perch in the heavenly paradise named the Field of Reeds, it symbolizes the flood of the Nile and its consecutive abundance.

<sup>32</sup> This painting was neither studied nor listed by van den Broek (1972), although discovered in 1953 and published soon after, see Jaschinski (1967). For the Greek and Roman culture, the phoenix is a kind of heron, or sometimes a pink flamingo (*phoinicopterus* in Greek and Latin), only on the imperial coinage; in the texts, on mosaics, and on frescos, it is an undetermined species between eagle, rooster, pigeon, and peacock. R. van den Broek, M. Dulaey, and I have compiled more than hundred images of the bird from antiquity (van den Broek 1972; Dulaey 2013; Lecocq 2009a). I do not believe that some small birds, characterized only by a tuft on paintings and mosaics, and dating from the beginning of the 1st century, are phoenixes: see Lecocq (2019a) 277–294.

it is already shown in a frame of blooming greens, ribbons, and other fowls like peacocks, as later in many Christian representations of Paradise.

In the funerary poem for Corinna's bird, Ovid does not explicitly call the phoenix *felix*, but the dead parrot is dubbed *infelix*: *Infelix, auium gloria, nempe iaces!*<sup>33</sup> The “Indian bird” was firstly the parrot: India is effectively its native homeland, as it is for some multicolored birds such as the peacock; this country is also indirectly associated with the phoenix by Pliny the Elder.<sup>34</sup> Soon, and till the end of antiquity, the circumlocutions ἵνδικός ὄρνις, “Indian bird”, and *gangeticus ales*, “bird of the Ganges”, will refer to the phoenix instead of the parrot and the peacock, in poetry, in novels, and in some rhetorical works.<sup>35</sup>

India is not only the land of the rising sun symbolized by the young phoenix, but also, amongst other imaginary animals and fabulous treasures, the country of the true cinnamon, native of Ceylon: *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*. In the Roman material, we find this becoming the emblematic aromatic plant of our bird, because of a confusion of Pliny the Elder with another legendary creature: the “cinnamon bird”, originally the only bird building its nest with that material, and that at the top of a high cliff.<sup>36</sup> India, as imagined by Greeks and Romans, presented many commonalities with the myth of the phoenix. Ethiopia, being according to the geography of the time at the border of Egypt, sometimes, in the novelistic corpus stands as an alternate to India for homeland for the bird. In fact, it offered almost the same main characteristics: remoteness and exoticism, sun and aromatics. So the phoenix, most of the time invisible to mortals, moved further in the ancient mind away to a Far East fantasized as a *paradeisos*: a natural garden in an eternal spring, with a plentiful vegetation and precious productions, particularly spices. An exceptional creature must live in an exceptional environment. One does occasionally find the phoenix West, in some mythical places of a similar meaning, like the Fortunate islands, or the Islands of the Blessed, near another wonderful garden: the Hesperides. India, at

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<sup>33</sup> Ovid *Amores* 2.6.20: “ah, hapless one, glory of birds, you surely are no more!” (translated by G. Showerman, revised by G. P. Goold [The Loeb Classical Library 41], Cambridge MA 1914). One can see the same vocabulary and topic in the final lines of the epitaph of another parrot in Statius (silv. 2.4.33–37): [...] *At non inglorius umbris / Mittitur: Assyrio cineres adolentur amomo / Et tenues Arabum respirant gramine plumae / Sicanisque crocis; senio nec fessus inertis / Scandet odoratos phoenix felicior ignes*, “But not without glory is he sent to the shades. His ashes burn with Assyrian spice and his slender feathers are fragrant with Arabian incense and Sicilian saffron. Unwearied by sluggish age, he shall mount the perfumed pyre, a happier Phoenix.” (translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, revised by Christopher A. Parrott [The Loeb Classical Library 206], Cambridge MA 2015).

<sup>34</sup> *Natural History* 10.3, see p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ἰνδικόν ὄρνεον in Aristotle (*History of Animals* 8.597b), ἵνδικός ὄρνις in Aelius Aristides, *Orationes* 45.107, cf. Ovid, *Amores* 2.6.1, where the parrot is named *ales ab Indis*. *Gangeticus ales* is to be found for the phoenix in Ausonius (*Idyll 16: A Riddle of the Number Three*, and *Letters* 20.9), but in Columella, *gangetica auis* is the peacock (*On Agriculture* 8.8.10). See Lecocq (2011a).

<sup>36</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 12.85; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.111; Aristotle, *History of Animals* 9.616a 6–13. See Lecocq (2011c).

the borders of the world, was thought by Christians to exist in direct connection with heaven, because the Ganges, or “Gihon”, one of the four rivers of Paradise, flows through there.<sup>37</sup>

But we have to wait a little bit longer before the phoenix enters Paradise, even though it has already become a Christian symbol. At first, it was the pagan proof of the bodily resurrection, according to Clement of Rome;<sup>38</sup> then it became an allegedly scriptural proof, according to Tertullian and Ambrose.<sup>39</sup> But Lactantius has the doors of the Garden of Eden only half-open for the bird, if Avitus let it enter the place, whereas certain rabbis let the phoenix live in Paradise.

## II The Paradisiacal Abode of the Phoenix in Christian and Rabbinic Texts

Few ancient authors have spoken about the phoenix, very few at length. And while it was a longstanding and common school exercise to glorify the bird,<sup>40</sup> only two writers told its complete story. They did so lately, a century apart: the Christian Lactantius and the pagan Claudian, in long poems of 170 and 110 lines respectively.

It was not his poems (the few others are lost) that made Lactantius famous. This professor of rhetoric, private tutor of the sons of emperor Constantine at the end of his life, is mainly known for his dogmatic and apologetic works, *The Divine Institutes*, where he mocks the nonsense of pagan mythology. However, scholars today agree in recognizing him as the author of the *Carmen de aue phoenice*.<sup>41</sup> This elegy has been very much discussed: countless studies have been dedicated to it; its lines have been scrutinized for the critical edition of the text, for the search for the sources, and for the meaning. The poem is considered to be crypto-Christian, because Christian allusions are certain.

I am only interested here in the description of the two abodes of the phoenix: these appear at the beginning of the poem, which shows the *locus felix* where the bird lives, i.e. the grove of the Sun (lines 1–32), and in the later passage which portrays its place of death (lines 63–77). Death being not-existent in the *locus felix*, Lac-

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<sup>37</sup> On the terrestrial locations of Paradise, see Scafì (2006).

<sup>38</sup> 1 Clement 25, without scriptural reference: the narrative is a mix of Herodotus' and Manilius' texts via Pliny (*Natural History* 10.4); it is the bird of the temple of Heliopolis. There was a strong scepticism about the authenticity of the letter when first published during the Renaissance precisely because of the presence of the phoenix (see Himuro 1998, 530 and 535).

<sup>39</sup> See Lecocq (2014b).

<sup>40</sup> The phoenix, as well as the peacock, was a traditional topic for rhetoric exercises, from Hellenistic Egypt to the end of the Roman empire: we have the testimonies of Libanios (*Ekphrasis* 24), of Augustine (*On the Soul and its Origin* 4.20.33), and of some papyri (see Colomo 2013).

<sup>41</sup> See Bryce (1989).

tantius, by an internal logic, peculiar and appropriate to his work, invented a double abode, choosing Syria as the site of death and resurrection.

*Est locus in primo felix oriente remotus,  
 Qua patet aeterni maxima porta poli,  
 Nec tamen aestiuos hiemisue propinquus ad ortus,  
 Sed qua sol uerno fundit ab axe diem.  
 Illic planities tractus diffundit apertos,  
 Nec tumulus crescit nec caua uallis hiat,  
 Sed nostros montes, quorum iuga celsa putantur,  
 Per bis sex ulnas eminet ille locus.  
 Hic Solis nemus est: et consitus arbore multa  
 Lucus perpetuae frondis honore uirens.  
 Cum Phaethonteis flagrasset ab ignibus axis,  
 Ille locus flammis iniuliatu erat,  
 Et cum diluuium mersisset fluctibus orbem,  
 Deucalioneas exsuperauit aquas.  
 Non huc exsangues morbi, non aegra senectus,  
 Nec mors crudelis nec metus asper adest,  
 Nec scelus infandum nec opum uesana cupido  
 Aut ira aut ardens caedis amore furor:  
 Luctus acerbus abest et egestas obsita pannis  
 Et curae insomnes et uiolenta fames.  
 Non ibi tempestas nec uis furit horrida uenti  
 Nec gelido terram rore pruina tegit,  
 Nulla super campos tendit sua uellera nubes,  
 Nec cadit ex alto turbidus umor aquae.  
 Sed fons in medio <est>, quem uiuum nomine dicunt,  
 Perspicuus, lenis, dulcibus uber aquis,  
 Qui semel erumpens per singula tempora mensum  
 Duodecies undis irrigat omne nemus.  
 Hic genus arboreum procero stipite surgens  
 Non lapsura solo mitia poma gerit.  
 Hoc nemus, hos lucos ausi incolit unica Phoenix,  
 Vnica, sed uiuit morte refecta sua.*

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15  
20  
25  
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There is a happy spot, retired in the first East, where the great gate of the eternal pole lies open. It is not, however, situated near to his rising in summer or in winter, but where the sun pours the day from his vernal chariot. There a plain spreads its open tracts; nor does any mound rise, nor hollow valley open itself. But through twice six ells that place rises above the mountains, whose tops are thought to be lofty among us. Here is the grove of the sun; a wood stands planted with many a tree, blooming with the honour of perpetual foliage. When the pole had blazed with the fires of Phaethon, that place was uninjured by the flames; and when the deluge had immersed the world in waves, it rose above the waters of Deucalion. No enfeebling diseases, no sickly old age, nor cruel death, nor harsh fear, approaches hither, nor dreadful crime, nor mad desire of riches, nor Mars, nor fury, burning with the love of slaughter. Bitter grief is absent, and want clothed in rags, and sleepless cares, and violent hunger. No tempest rages there, nor dreadful violence of the wind; nor does the hoar-frost cover the earth with cold dew. No cloud extends its fleecy covering above the plains, nor does the turbid moisture of water fall from on high; but there is a fountain in the middle, which they call by the name of living; it is clear, gentle,

and abounding with sweet waters, which, bursting forth once during the space of each month, twelve times irrigates all the grove with waters. Here a species of tree, rising with lofty stem, bears mellow fruits not about to fall on the ground. This grove, these woods, a single bird, the phoenix, inhabits, single, but it lives reproduced by its own death.<sup>42</sup>

The poem opens with the display of a conventional *locus felix*, with no other geographical precision than “Middle East” (*primo oriente*, l. 1): a landscape resembling at the same time the *topos* of the Golden Age, dear to the Augustan poets, and Virgil’s underworld; echoes of the classical tradition have long been traced and studied. The wonderful and generous nature of an eternal spring is a model of the Christian Paradise, but it also possesses some philosophical connotations.<sup>43</sup> Lactantius described it briefly in the same way in his *Divine Institutes*.<sup>44</sup> But, if the style and the vocabulary are very classical indeed, some original details in Lactantius contain Christian allusions or formulations, about twenty over the course of the whole poem, particularly notable in the commanding of the soul.<sup>45</sup>

The *locus felix* of Lactantius’phoenix, replacing the traditional Arabia or India,<sup>46</sup> is a high plateau seemingly out of human time and space. The sacred Grove of the Sun (*Solis nemus*, 1.9) is unprecedented in the myth of the bird: it may originate in the famous Egyptian oracle of Jupiter Hammon visited by Alexander the Great in the oasis of Siwa, with its numerous trees, its eternal spring, and its “fountain of the Sun”.<sup>47</sup> Ezekiel the Tragedian already put the phoenix in an oasis of palm

<sup>42</sup> Translated by W. Fletcher (Ante-Nicene Fathers 7), Buffalo, NY 1886.

<sup>43</sup> Beyond specifically literary references and homages, L. Gosserez, following Fontaine (1990), has studied the historic and philosophic cross-references to Ennius and to Stoicism, perceptible by the quotation of the words of the famous epitaph of Scipio the African (Gosserez 2013a). See also Stock (1965).

<sup>44</sup> *The Divine Institutes* 2.12.15: *Deus hominem [...] posuit in paradiso, id est in horto secundissimo et amoenissimo; quem in partibus orientis omni genere ligni arborumque conseuit*, “God placed man [...] in paradise, that is, in a most fruitful and pleasant garden, which He planted in the regions of the East with every kind of wood and tree.” Translated by W. Fletcher, see n. 42. See the list of the *loci similes* between the poem and the *Divine Institutes* in Walla-Schuster (1965) 184–188.

<sup>45</sup> The expression “this world where reigns death”, l. 64; the utterance “commends its soul”, referring to the last words of the Crucifixion and to the specific liturgy of the dying: the *commendatio animae* (l. 93); the mention of eternal life as a benefaction of death in the last line (l.170). See Lecocq (2014a).

<sup>46</sup> These two countries are mentioned only for their aromatics: *Quos legit Assyrius, quos opulentus Arabs, / Quos aut Pygmeae gentes aut India carpit / Aut molli generat terra Sabaea sinu* (l.81–83, “Hence she collects juices and odours, which the Assyrian gathers from the rich wood, which the wealthy Arabian gathers; which either the Pygmæan nations, or India crops, or the Sabæan land produces from its soft bosom.” The ostrich becomes here the “Arabian bird”: *Magnitatem terris Arabum quae dignitur ales / Vix aequare potest [...]*, “the winged creature which is produced in the lands of the Arabians, [...] can scarcely equal her magnitude.” (v. 145–146, *ibid.*, translated by W. Fletcher, see n. 42).

<sup>47</sup> According to Quintus Curtius, *The History of Alexander* 4.7; see Berger (2002).

trees, as previously seen. No name is given to the trees of the place, but their description may be seen to fit the palm tree homonym of the bird.

Lactantius' description refers as much to Virgil's and Ovid's Hades<sup>48</sup> as to Eden: its characteristics are common to the pagan legend of the cosmogony and of the Golden Age, and to the narrative of the biblical Genesis,<sup>49</sup> as well as to those of some apocalyptic texts.<sup>50</sup> The repeated figure twelve in the story of the phoenix (l. 8, 28, 37, 38), already present in Ezekiel, has scriptural referents (e.g. the twelve tribes of Israel in the *Old Testament*, the twelve apostles in the *New Testament*) but it also has pagan credentials: the twelve months of the solar year symbolized by the cyclic phoenix, or even the twelve centuries predicted for the duration of the Roman Empire, called "the time of the phoenix", as we will see. But two other details evoke the biblical Paradise unequivocally. Firstly, "the fruits which will not fall" from the trees of this wood (l. 29–30) remind us, in a negative image, of the "apple" causing the fall of Adam and Eve. Secondly, the absence of a snake in the palm tree where the phoenix is nesting (l. 72) is a reminder of the devilish tempter in the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the "lively spring" (l. 38), in "pious" waters (l. 37), where the bird takes ritual baths, can refer to the fountain of the Genesis (2.6) as well as to the rite of baptism.

So, the *locus felix* is a place outside our world, set at an inaccessible remove for mortals. The phoenix leaves it when it has to come to earth to die – like did Christ, the incarnate son of God.

*Cumque renascendi studio loca sancta reliquit,  
Tunc petit hunc orbem, mors ubi regna tenet.  
Dirigit in Syriam celeres longaeua uolatus,  
Phoenices nomen cui dedit ipsa uetus.  
Secretosque petit deserta per auia lucos.  
Sicubi per saltus silua remota latet.  
Tum legit aero sublimem uertice palmarum,  
Quae Graium phoenix ex aue nomen habet.  
In quam nulla nocens animans prorepere possit,  
Lubricus aut serpens aut auis ulla rapax.  
Tum uentos claudit pendentibus Aeolus antris,  
Ne uiolent flabris aera purpurum  
Neu concreta noto nubes per inania caeli  
Submoueat radios solis et obsit auis.  
Construit inde sibi seu nidum siue sepulcrum.<sup>52</sup>*

**48** For example, Lactantius' line 10 on the evergreen wood is clearly inspired by Ovid's *Amores*, 2.6.49–50.

**49** The three biblical passages describing the Paradise are: Genesis 2, Ezekiel 47.12, Apocalypse 22.1, see van den Broek (1972) 311–324.

**50** See Apocalypse of St. John, and the apocryphal Apocalypse of Peter.

**51** Conventionally, the countries producing spices were described as infested with snakes and other dangers (Herodotus, *Histories* 3.110; Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 9.5.2).

**52** *Carmen de aue phoenice* 63–77.

And when she has left the sacred places, through a desire of being born again, then she seeks this world, where death reigns. Full of years, she directs her swift flight into Syria, to which herself has given the former name of Phoenice, and through trackless deserts she seeks the retired groves in the place, where a remote wood lies concealed through the glens. Then she chooses a lofty palm, with top reaching to the heavens, which has the Greek name of phœnix from the bird, and where no hurtful living creature can break through, or slimy serpent, or any bird of prey. Then Æolas shuts in the winds in hanging caverns, lest they should injure the bright air with their blasts, or lest a cloud collected by the south wind through the empty sky should remove the rays of the sun, and be a hindrance to the bird. Afterwards she builds for herself either a nest or a tomb.<sup>53</sup>

The terrestrial abode is identified as Syria, one of the many names of Phoenicia, country of the palm trees (l. 65–66),<sup>54</sup> which also includes Lebanon. Lebanon is another place of death for the phoenix, or for the harvest of aromatics in some Christian texts,<sup>55</sup> and its Greek name Λίβανος also means, as a common noun, “incense”, one of the many aromatics of the bird since Ovid (*Met.* 15.394). In the time of Ezekiel the Tragedian, Phoenicia, poetically taken in a broad sense, was only the country of the Jews, but in the time of Lactantius, it had also become the country of Christ. The bird roosts on the homonymous palm tree; but Lebanon, famous for its cedar trees, is remarkable for its possession of the same trees as those of the Garden of Eden, and that Paradise was sometimes located on its mountains.<sup>56</sup> Besides, Pliny the Elder has listed a city of Syria named *Paradisus*.<sup>57</sup> Real topography and symbolic geography evidently are not without links. Etymologically, the word παράδεισος comes from an Avestic term, passed in old Persian: *pairidaeza*, indicating an “enclosure”, then later a leisure-time garden with its attendant animals, that is a royal park; the word was adopted into Hebrew to indicate an orchard.<sup>58</sup>

So, at the time of its death, the phoenix joins a secret place on earth, far away from people, because in no narrative has the miracle of its revival any witness. That place appears to be a mirrored copy of the Sun Grove: constantly bathed by the beams of the day star, it is not subjected to bad weather, and it knows no pests. The bird also settles on a date palm: Lactantius, after the equivalence bird = country, constructs the equivalence bird = tree. The Greek pun about the bird and the tree is the oldest pun of the myth, going back, paradoxically, not to a Greek author, but to a

<sup>53</sup> Translation by W. Fletcher, see n. 42, text and translation amended by me (one must read uetus instead of Venus l. 66, and Graecum instead of gratum l. 70).

<sup>54</sup> For example, in his *Panegyric on Majorian* (*Carmen* 5), Sidonius Apollinaris enumerates the specialties of the regions of the empire: dates are typically the product of Phoenicians (l. 44: *Phoenix palmas*).

<sup>55</sup> In the Latin *Physiologus* for example. See Alexandre (1988), and Scafì (2014).

<sup>56</sup> According to the Prophet Ezekiel (31.15–18). Johannes Lydus added the cedar to the list of the aromatics, besides amber and fennel (*De mensibus* 4.11). See van den Broek (1972) 307–309. Today, a nature reserve in Lebanon is named Ehden, and the advertising naturally makes it a “Paradise of nature” (*Horsh Ehden*).

<sup>57</sup> *Natural History* 5.82; he also mentions a river of Cilicia with that name (*Natural History* 5.93).

<sup>58</sup> See Mawet (1992); Carroll (2003).

Roman one (Ovid, addressing a bilingual audience)<sup>59</sup> for the polysemy does not exist in his own language (“palm tree” in Latin is *palma*, whereas the name of the bird in Latin is transliterated from the Greek language, as we can see from the accusative *phoenica*).<sup>60</sup> In the case of Lactantius, the intern logic is that the bird gave its name to the country and to the tree, because it was itself older than the creation of the world.

The distinction between the two abodes of the phoenix disappears from the short summary of the poem by Gregory of Tours, which is aimed at simplification; here the life and death of the bird take place in the same paradisiacal abode.

*Petit locum omnibus locis mundanis celsitudine praeminentem, in quo habetur locus uiridi coma uerno hibernoque perdurans, in cuius medium fons est magnus et ubertate profluus et lenitate praeclarus. Huius in litore arbor nobilis reliquas luci arbores proceritate praecellens, in huius arboris uertice haec auis de diuersis pigmentorum generibus construit sibi [...] nidum.<sup>61</sup>*

It reaches a spot dominating all earth by its height, where is a place with a green foliage lasting during spring and winter; in the middle, a large spring abundantly flowing, famous for its sweetness. On its edge, a noble tree dominating by its tall size all other trees of the wood; at the top of this tree, the bird builds for itself a nest made of all kinds of spices.<sup>62</sup>

The phoenix, a “marvel” of nature (Θαυμαστόν in Greek, *mirabile* in Latin) for the pagans and for the first Christians who borrowed the bird from the former’s mythology, becomes characteristically in Gregory a divine miracle.<sup>63</sup> If the Christian allusions could pass unnoticed for a heathen reader, they were obvious for the readership familiar with the new religion. The creature coming down to earth to die and be reborn in Phoenicia, i.e. Judea, would immediately be seen as a figure of Christ, son of God, who was embodied, died, and resurrected in the Holy Land, coming from Paradise and returning to Paradise. Moreover, the phoenix is pure, asexual, without material needs, like the inhabitants of the cosmogonical Eden and of the eschatological Paradise.<sup>64</sup> The Christian reading of the *Carmen de aue phoenice* seems certified *a posteriori* by its imitation in an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem, and *a contrario* by Claudian’s poem, coming a century after Lactantius.<sup>65</sup>

In the *Old English Phoenix* of the Exeter Book, attributed to a follower of Cynewulf, dated at the latest to the 11th century, all Christian allusions become explicit.

<sup>59</sup> On the many puns, some of them bilingual, informing the myth of the phoenix, see Lecocq (2016).

<sup>60</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.391.

<sup>61</sup> *On the Course of the Stars* 12. The difference of length and contents between Lactantius’ poem and Gregory’s narrative (explainable by the very nature of an abstract), led Hubaux and Leroy to modify the order of the verses! See Leroy (1932), and Hubaux/Leroy (1939). See also Orbán (1991) on the replacement of Paradise by a simple *locus amoenus*.

<sup>62</sup> My own translation.

<sup>63</sup> L.151: *Huc uenit Aegyptus tanti ad miracula uisus*, “Egypt comes hither to such a wondrous sight” (translated by W. Fletcher, see n. 42). See Perrin (2004).

<sup>64</sup> See Lecocq (2013).

<sup>65</sup> See Lecocq (2014a).

Conversely, there the rare pagan references are eliminated, except that to the Sun god, but he also becomes a figure of Christ. This very long poem of 677 lines consists in two parts: the story of the phoenix, then its religious interpretation; in fact, the Christian god is named as early as line 6, and the allegory is already present in the first part, where the color of the bird becomes a whitish gray like the dove of the Holy Spirit (l.121), and where the ball of funeral myrrh, Herodotus' "egg", is rendered "apple" (l.230), like the fruit of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Paradise: could it be the symbol of the human sins carried by Christ? In the second part, the author also bases his narrative partially on the remarks of St. Ambrose about the phoenix in his *Hexameron*, as we will see later. As for our subject, in a description longer by four times (l.1–119), Lactantius' paradisiacal plateau becomes an island similar to the sacred wood of the phoenix surrounded by the ocean in the poem of Claudian<sup>66</sup>, to the Fortunate islands of the Greek and Celtic mythologies, and to the island of Enoch and Elias in the apocryphal Jewish literature.<sup>67</sup>

It was already significant that every Christian reference of Lactantius had been systematically eliminated in Claudian's poem, written one century after Lactantius. A pagan poet at the court of Honorius, he resumed the same topic, not in order to redo Lactantius' elegiac apology for the pure and chaste life of a mystic being, its appropriate end in death (maybe as a martyr), and its subsequent resurrection. What Claudian was interested in was to use the phoenix, in an epic style, to effect the hardly veiled praise of his protector Stilicho, general-in-chief of the armies and regent of the empire, described as a Parthian king.<sup>68</sup> Claudian thus replaces the crypto-Christian bird with the imperial phoenix,<sup>69</sup> assimilating it to a Persian rooster<sup>70</sup>. For this reason, there is no more "Paradise"; the poet quickly depicts a sacred wood close to the palace of Aurora, on an island far away from mankind and exempt from any stain. The bird does not make any journey other than the one it makes towards Egypt after its revival, as in the oldest tradition.

*Oceani summo circumfluus aequore lucus  
 Trans Indos Eurumque uiret, qui primus anhelis  
 Sollicitatur equis uicinaque uerbera sentit  
 Vmida roranti resonant cum limina curru,  
 Vnde rubet uentura dies longeque coruscis  
 Nox adflata rotis refugo pallescit amictu.  
 Haec fortunatus nimium Titanius ales  
 Regna colit solisque plaga defensus iniqua  
 Possidet intactas aegris animalibus oras*

<sup>66</sup> *Carmina minora* 27.1.

<sup>67</sup> See Braga (1960), and Clarke (2006).

<sup>68</sup> See Lecocq (2011b), and Coombe (2014).

<sup>69</sup> See Lecocq (2001). See also in Gosserez (2013a) another political interpretation: the figure of Scipio the African stands out behind Lactantius' phoenix, and, as a counterpoint to the Roman general, the god Hercules on the pyre, as well as behind Claudian's bird.

<sup>70</sup> See Lecocq (2011b).

*Saeua nec humani patitur contagia mundi,  
 Par uolucer superis, stellas qui uiuidus aequat  
 Durando membrisque terit redeuntibus aeuum.  
 Non epulis saturare famem, non fontibus ullis  
 Adsuetus prohibere sitim, sed purior illum  
 Solis feruor alit uentosaque pabula libat  
 Tethyos, innocui carpens alimenta uaporis.*

[...]

[...] *Tum conscius aeui  
 Defuncti reducisque parans exordia formae  
 Arentes tepidis de collibus eligit herbas  
 Et cumulum texens pretiosa fronde Sabaeum  
 Conponit, bustumque sibi partumque futurum.  
 Hic sedet et blando Solem clangore salutat  
 Debilior miscetque preces ac supplice cantu  
 Praestatura nouas uires incendia poscit.*

[...]

*Protinus ad Nilum manes sacrare paternos  
 Auctoremque globum Phariae telluris ad oras  
 Ferre iuuat.<sup>71</sup>*

There is a leafy wood fringed by Ocean's farthest marge beyond the Indies and the East where Dawn's panting coursers first seek entrance; it hears the lash close by, what time the watery threshold echoes to the dewy car; and hence comes forth the rosy morn while night, illumined by those far-shining wheels of fire, casts off her sable cloak and broods less darkly. This is the kingdom of the blessed bird of the sun where it dwells in solitude defended by the inhospitable nature of the land and immune from the ills that befall other living creatures; nor does it suffer infection from the world of men. Equal to the gods is that bird whose life rivals the stars and whose renascent limbs weary the passing centuries. It needs no food to satisfy hunger nor any drink to quench thirst; the sun's clear beam is its food, the sea's rare spray its drink – exhalations such as these form its simple nourishment. [...] Then, realizing that his span of life is at an end and in preparation for a renewal of his splendour, he gathers dry herbs from the sun-warmed hills, and making an interwoven heap of the branches of the precious tree of Saba he builds that pyre which shall be at once his tomb and his cradle. On this he takes his seat and as he grows weaker greets the Sun with his sweet voice; offering up prayers and supplications he begs that those fires will give him renewal of strength. [...] His first delight is to consecrate his father's spirit by the banks of the Nile and to carry to the land of Egypt the burned mass from which he was born.<sup>72</sup>

However, it is probable that the phoenix of Lactantius also carried a political meaning, by the sole choice of this topic (but not by its treatment), and by its historical context: the author was a poet living at the time of the rise of the court of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. The latter was at first a follower of the cult of *Sol invictus*. Did Lactantius in his poem promise to the emperor, converted and baptized only on his deathbed in 337, resurrection and eternal life in Paradise? Was he some-

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71 L.1–16, 40–47, 72–74.

72 Translated by M. Platnauer, (The Loeb Classical Library 135), Cambridge, MA 1922.

how equating him to Christ, the savior? Or did he promise immortality even to the Roman Empire, the Sibylline Oracles announcing its end after twelve centuries of existence, “when the term for the time of the phoenix would come”?<sup>73</sup> The key to the answer could be in the date of the poem, but it is unknown,<sup>74</sup> as is the exact date of the death of Lactantius (between 320 and 325?).

The phoenix takes an additional step towards Paradise when Ambrose, bishop of Milan at the end of the 4th century, mentions for the first time the phoenix in the context of the creation of the world in six days, in his *Hexaemeron*, a commentary on Genesis 1:1–26 in the form of homilies.<sup>75</sup>

For sure, in the previous centuries already, great Christian writers had taken the example of the phoenix as a natural proof of God’s omnipotence, a proof expressly borrowed from the general pagan knowledge of their audience,<sup>76</sup> as evidenced by Pope Clement the First, or from their religious opponents, as we find in Origen.<sup>77</sup>

Ambrose, adapting the work of the Greek Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea (the founder of the genre *Hexaemeron* a few decades earlier, towards 370), added the phoenix to the basilian list of animals, and essentially repeated the narrative of Clement.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, the bird had long since found a place in the Christian bestiary of the *Physiologos*, a popular work written in Greek in the 2nd century and then translated into Latin and diverse other languages. This text places the phoenix more or less at the top rank of the animals allegorically symbolic of Christian creeds or virtues.<sup>79</sup>

There is a mutual influence between Ambrose and the *Physiologos*, but a theologian has not the same license as the anonymous *Physiologos* addressing the general public. This is why Ambrose only indirectly moves the phoenix closer to Paradise. He mentions it on Maundy Thursday, the day before Easter, commemorative of the resurrection of Christ, regarding the animals created of the 5th day (according to Genesis 1): fish and birds.<sup>80</sup> He also provides this natural example of resurrection in the funeral oration for his brother Satyrus.<sup>81</sup> He did not deny the existence of the phoenix, any more than his predecessors: they could not do this because it was a fruitful example, if not their only widely-accepted proof, of the possibility of the material re-

<sup>73</sup> "Ἐνθεν ὅτ' ἀν φοίνικος ἐπέλθη τέρμα χρόνοιο (my translation), *Sibylline Oracles* 8.139f, ed. Aloisius Rzach, Vienna – Leipzig, 1891, 147.

<sup>74</sup> For Walla-Schuster (1965), the poem was written during the Diocletian persecution, in 303–304.

<sup>75</sup> See Gosserez (2008), (2009), and (2011).

<sup>76</sup> See Klostergaard (2003), and Deproost (2005).

<sup>77</sup> 1 Clement 25; Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.98.

<sup>78</sup> *Hexaemeron* 5.23.79–80 (CSEL 32, p. 197–198, Migne, PL 14), with a variation (*Aethiopia* instead of *Arabia*), and a strange misreading (*Lycaonia* instead of *Heliopolis*).

<sup>79</sup> See Zucker (2007).

<sup>80</sup> According to a tendency visible in several studies, explainable by the posterity of the myth, the importance of the phoenix for this author, generally speaking, and for this passage, in particular, is overvalued (e.g. Gosserez 2013a, 161).

<sup>81</sup> *De excessu fratris sui* 2.58–59.

surrection of bodies. Ambrose did not say that the phoenix was in Paradise: for him, it was a terrestrial being, as real as the other animals mentioned in the same chapter,<sup>82</sup> but in his work the idea begins to appear that, if the phoenix is, like all the other birds, a creature of God *auctor et creator avium*, it must be listed in the Bible: Tertullian already seemed to say this in a quotation of the Psalms in which he made a voluntary, rather than involuntary, misinterpretation between the bird and the palm tree.<sup>83</sup> Ambrose used an ambiguous formulation: *scripturarum auctoritas*, harking back certainly to the epistle of Clement, which enjoyed in this time a more or less scriptural status, but is not part of today's biblical canon.<sup>84</sup>

However, even without biblical reference, the phoenix became a theological stake in close connection with Paradise: Lactantius first asked the question of the sex of the bird,<sup>85</sup> echoing the doctrinal issue concerning the sexual differentiation of the inhabitants of the two Paradises, the cosmogonical Eden at the time of Adam's creation, and the eschatological Paradise at the end of times, where the resurrected mankind will live an angelic life.<sup>86</sup>

At the end of the Roman empire, the phoenix of the poets still lives at the margin of Paradise. In his narrative on the creation of the world, Avitus, bishop of Vienna at the beginning of the 6th century, has the phoenix to collect aromatics for its pyre not in Syria or Sabea (the biblical Kingdom of Queen of Sheba),<sup>87</sup> as Lactantius had done (l.44), but in the Garden of Eden, i.e. the terrestrial Paradise.

*Ergo ubi transmissis mundi caput incipit Indis,  
Quo perhibent terram confinia iungere caelo,  
Lucus inaccessa cunctis mortalibus arce  
Permanet aeterno conclusus limite, postquam  
Decidit expulsus primaevi criminis auctor.  
[...]  
Hic, quae donari mentitur fama Sabaeis,*

**82** Ambrose adds three other natural proofs of resurrection in his chapter on the resurrection: *the silkworm, the chameleon, and the hare*, all real animals. He is followed by Ps. Eustathius quoting in his commentary to the *Hexaemeron* Ezekiel's fragment on the phoenix (Migne, PG 18:729 C).

**83** *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 13, quoting Psalm 92:12 “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree”, for Hebrew *tamar* or *tomer* (Strong 8558), according to the vocalization (translation by the King James Version). The verse is continued so: “he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon”, speaking of a second tree. Instead of translating φοίνιξ as *palma*, Tertullian simply made a transliteration, transforming the tree into the bird, *phoenix* in Latin.

**84** *On the Death of Satyrus* 2,59: *Atqui hoc relatione crebra et scripturarum auctoritate cognouimus*, “Now, from the many oral and authoritative reports written on this matter we know that” (translated by J. J. Sullivan / M. R. P. Maguire [The Fathers of the Church 22], Washington DC 1953). See Lecocq (2014b).

**85** *Sive mas, sive femina, sive neutrum*, l.164; see Lecocq (2013), where I reject the conjecture *sive utrumque* for the missing words of that line, and, subsequently, the supposed hermaphroditism of the phoenix.

**86** See Deprost (2005) 113–138.

**87** See Retsö (2000) and (2003); Breton (1999).

*Cinnama nascuntur, uiuax quae colligit ales.*

[...]

*Eductum leni fontis de uertice flumen*

*Quattuor in largos confestim scinditur amnes.<sup>88</sup>*

And so, beyond the Indies, where the world begins, where they say the horizon joins earth to heaven, there upon a mountaintop remains a grove inaccessible to all mortals, fenced off by an everlasting boundary after the perpetrator of that original sin fell from grace and was expelled. [...] There, the cinnamon, which false tradition attributes to the Sabaeans, grows and is gathered by that life-conceiving bird [...]. The river that rises from the gently flowing source of that fountain is quickly divided into four broad streams.<sup>89</sup>

The phoenix, not named, is recognizable by the use of the Ovidian circumlocution *uiuax ales*;<sup>90</sup> it is a visitor, if not an inhabitant of Paradise. The same idea is found in the Byzantine *Physiologos* of the Pseudonymous Basil (between the 5th and the 11th century), where the bird makes three journeys towards Paradise (instead of India or Lebanon),<sup>91</sup> and also in the Coptic Sermon on Mary in the 6th century, where the bird picks there three twigs for its nest and pyre.<sup>92</sup>

Finally the phoenix enters Paradise and even enters the commentaries on the *Old Testament*. Contrary to the popular belief expressed in the *Physiologos*, the integration would never become officially sanctioned by Christian theologians; figures such as St. Augustine openly doubt the existence of the bird 4.20.33.<sup>93</sup> On the Jewish side, only certain rabbis took the liberty to give the phoenix a place in the narratives on the creation of the world and on Noah's Ark, while Lactantius located the phoenix in a place explicitly out of reach of the Flood (1.14 – 15). According to these rabbis, our bird was either the only animal to refuse the apple offered by Eve, or the only animal not looking to Noah for food while on board the ark. For one or the other of these reasons, it obtained from God the reward of immortality:

*Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* (3rd c.)

Genesis 3.6 (19.4 – 5): And when the woman saw that the tree was god for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit

<sup>88</sup> *The Creation: the Beginning of the World* 1.218 – 222, 238 – 239, 258 – 259. Avitus was a relative of Sidonius Apollinaris who also wrote about the eastern abode of the bird, placing it near the palace of Aurora (*Carmina* 2.407 – 418)

<sup>89</sup> Translation by G. W. Shea, (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies 17.2), Tempe, Arizona 1997.

<sup>90</sup> 1.239, see Ovid, *Amores* 2.6.54.

<sup>91</sup> *Physiologos* of Pseudo-Basil 21: 'Ο φοῖνιξ ὄρνεον ἔστι, φύσις δὲ αὐτῷ αὕτη· κατὰ τρεῖς χρόνους ἀπέρχεται ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ καὶ αἴρει ἀπὸ τῶν ευόσμων ξύλων καὶ μυρισμάτων τῶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ, γεμίζων τὰς πτέρυγας καὶ τοὺς πόδας, καὶ ἀπέρχεται ἐν τῷ ναῷ Αἰγύπτου [...], "The phoenix is a bird, here is its nature: three times it goes to Paradise and chooses from the scented woods and perfumes that are in Paradise, loading its wings and feet, and it goes to the temple of Egypt." (my translation).

<sup>92</sup> Text, translation, and comments in van den Broek (1972), 44 – 49 and 172 – 173, signaling that the role of the bird is played by the eagle in another Coptic text.

<sup>93</sup> See *On the Soul and its Origin* 4.20.33.

thereof, and did eat, and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat [...].

There follows the commentary:

Anthology: (15.) *She gave also... Also* is an extension; she gave the cattle, beasts and birds to eat of it. All obeyed her except a certain bird maned *hôl* (phoenix), as it is written : *Then I said, I shall die with my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the phoenix* [Job 29:18].<sup>94</sup>

The rabbis provide Job 29:18 as the scriptural reference for the phoenix, a reference confirmed by, or rather coming from, the Massoretic exegetes. This identification comes at the price of the invention of a hapax sense for the Hebrew word *hôl*, or *chol* (Strong 2344), usually meaning “sand”. Neither the Greek Septuagint nor the later Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome ever had this reading: both saw in this text not the sand, but a palm tree: φοῖνιξ and *palma*, the Greek word being specified by “trunk” to avoid the ambiguity with the bird.<sup>95</sup>

The phoenix of Noah’s ark is considerably more anecdotal.

As for the phoenix, my father discovered it lying in the hold of the ark. “Dost thou require no food?” he asked it. “I saw that thou wast busy,” it replied, “so I said to myself, I will give thee no trouble.” “May it be (God’s) will that thou shouldst not perish,” he exclaimed; as it is written, Then I said, I shall die in the nest, but I shall multiply my days as the phoenix.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> See Blidstein (1997).

<sup>95</sup> Ezekiel the Tragedian, at the approximative time of the Septuagint, also used στελεχή φοινίκων to say “palm trees” (Fragment 16, 251). Only Jerome’s disciple Philippus Presbyter, in the 5th c., indicated the possibility that Job spoke about the bird phoenix (*Commentary in Iobum* 2.12, to Job 29:18), see Lecocq (2014b). That passage of Job is also quoted in a Gnostic text mentioning three phoenixes in Paradise, the first immortal, the second living thousand years, the third meant to be eaten (like the Jewish monstrous bird Ziz) at the end of time; the translators hesitate for some occurrences of the word between the sense of “bird” and “tree”: “[...] So that in their world it might pass the thousand years in Paradise, a soul-endowed living creature called “phoenix”. It kills itself and brings itself to life as a witness to the judgment against them, for they did wrong to Adam and his generation, unto the consummation of the age. There are [...] three men, and also his posterities, unto the consummation of the world: the spirit-endowed of eternity, and the soul-endowed, and the earthly. Likewise, the three phoenixes <in> Paradise, the first is immortal; the second lives 1,000 years; as for the third, it is written in the Sacred Book that it is consumed.” (Translated by H.-G. Bethge / B. Layton, in McConkey / Robinson [2000] 359). The treatise is dated around the end of the 3rd century; see Tardieu (1973) and (1974), and Painchaud /Funk (1995).

<sup>96</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 108b, where the bird is named *urshina* (or *avarshinah*). The contradiction between these two explanations and contexts of the immortality of the phoenix in the rabbinical narratives (justifying neither the uniqueness of the bird, nor its periodically death and rebirth) was noticed by Yefeh Toar in his commentary on *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 19:5 (Venice, 1597–1601), but Toar added to the confusion by speaking about the invulnerability of the bird to arrows, a feature more or less borrowed from the pagan cinnamon bird. This is not about exegesis, but about folklore. Toar is more convincing when he comments on the phoenix of the ark as being allegorical. See Slifkin (2006) 237.

That Jewish phoenix has no great significance,<sup>97</sup> and in rabbinic texts the power of the imperial myth or of the Christian myth of the bird is reduced to a childish story<sup>98</sup>, the incoherence of which was soon to be demonstrated by the Byzantine theologians.<sup>99</sup>

After the culture of the Middle Ages accepted the wonderful bird and its place in Paradise, as did the *Old English Phoenix*, from the Renaissance onward only poets continued to accept the phoenix as a creature of God, like Du Bartas in his *Sepmaine*, and Torquato Tasso in *Il monde creato*, both inspired by Lactantius and Ambrose.<sup>100</sup> But almost all the great scholars and lectors of the Bible rejected the presence of the phoenix in the Bible and even its real existence, like Samuel Bochart did in listing the biblical animals in his *Hierozoïcon*, Ulisse Aldrovandi in his book of natural history *Ornithologiae*, or Don Calmet as a commentator of the Book of Job. Today, only some translations of the *Book of Job*, especially Jewish ones, but rarely Christian, maintain “phoenix” rather than “sand” for translating the Hebrew word *chol*.<sup>101</sup>

### III The Christian Iconography of the Phoenix in Paradise

I pointed out, in my studies on the iconography of the phoenix, that texts and images do not always, but rather rarely correspond.<sup>102</sup> So, the pagans, who originated the pun between the bird and the palm tree, never visually depicted the bird on the homonymous tree, while the two often appear together in Christian iconography. Likewise, never do we find any texts explaining the choice of such an image, no more than we do for the Roman imperial coinage. This also obtains for the topic of Para-

<sup>97</sup> According to Wazana (2009), that bird *Ziz* is the Sumerian *Anzu*. I reject the assimilation of *Ziz* and the phoenix made in the rabbinic writings and in the Greek *Apocalypse* of Ps. Baruch and accepted by Niehoff (1996) 260 – 262. The name of “phoenix” is used by Ps. Baruch for an hybrid creature mixed with another mythical bird: a cosmic cock “runner of the Sun” (*heliodromos*), as said explicitly twice in the text; see Lecocq (2019b).

<sup>98</sup> Another childish story is the fairy tale of Hans Christian Andersen, who relates the birth of our creature in Paradise (*The Phoenix Bird*, 1850; the phoenix is also briefly mentioned in *The Garden of Paradise*, 1839).

<sup>99</sup> Here is the sophistic reasoning of Maximus Confessor: if God created the phoenix, then the bird was saved from the Flood by Noah; Noah took in the Ark only couples of animals; yet the phoenix is unique, then it cannot exist as a biblical creature (*Epistle 13* = PG 91:517 D-519 E). See Holman (2008) 95.

<sup>100</sup> See Basile (2004) on Tasso, and Gosserez (2013b) on Du Bartas.

<sup>101</sup> See Lecocq (2014c).

<sup>102</sup> See Lecocq (2009a) and my article “Les réinterprétations textuelles et symboliques des attributs iconographiques du phénix, de l’Égypte ancienne à Rome,” in: Yona Dureau / Sandrine Coin-Longeray (eds.), *Images sources de textes / Textes sources d’images* (Les Cahiers d’Allhis 6), Paris, forthcoming.

dise: some artists went further than authors and theologians by placing the phoenix in Eden and even in the eschatological Paradise. This makes perfect sense,<sup>103</sup> but no written document, to my knowledge, makes the bird an inhabitant of this place.

Since the 3rd c., the Christian phoenix can be seen more often on different kinds of media. For one thing, it appears in funerary context: on murals, frescoes, drawings, and graffiti in the catacombs (about ten examples), on tombstones and sarcophagi (a dozen cases). On the other side, it appears in ecclesiastical contexts, on mosaics decorating the floors, archs, apses or domes of churches, in Italy, North Africa and Syria-Palestine (about twenty examples are known). Our phoenix is recognizable, amongst other birds, by its nimbus, often on a palm tree, and sometimes in the midst of flames. Its size and location in the scene are variable.

These compositions keep some features of the pagan iconography of the phoenix. For example, the church of Halawa depicts, in the center of its pavement, the nimbed phoenix on a hillock of rocks, as it is on the imperial coins of the Constantiniens,<sup>104</sup> or on the Isiac tunic of Saqqara, or on the famous mosaic in Daphne.<sup>105</sup> In Syria, we see Adam, instead of Orpheus, in the popular scene where the musician is charming the animals with the song of his lyre.<sup>106</sup>

On the picture of the cosmogonical Paradise of Halawa, on both sides of the phoenix surmounting a big pomegranate tree with enormous fruits there appear quadrupeds and birds, separated by greenery and trees:<sup>107</sup> so it is not only meant to be the “real” bird created by God, existing amongst an inventory (or zoo) of animals of the divine creation, as we have seen it in Ambrose’s *Hexaemeron*. Its central position proves its symbolic value: the promise of resurrection. The bird on the hillock (here probably reinterpreted as the mountain of Paradise)<sup>108</sup> is distinguished in the middle of the composition as the king of the garden of delights, where and when all existed or will exist in peace and harmony. In the Justinian basilica of Sabratha (Libya), a large phoenix occupies the central mandorla in a composition of birds sep-

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**103** See Tardieu (1973) 130 and 139.

**104** See Merrony (1988); Lecocq (2009a).

**105** See Labrique (2015); according to her, the nine rocks of the mosaic of Daphne probably refer to the Egyptian divine Ennead of Heliopolis. This famous and gigantic Syrian mosaic of the 6th c. (Paris, Louvre), in a private house of Daphne in Syria, shows a unique subject in the phoenix perched on the top of a rocky pyramid, with a background carpeted with rose buttons and a ram’s head border. It is generally considered not to be Christian. She also sees the phoenix perched upon rocks on the Isiac tunic of Saqqara, while I see plants, specifically papyrus, as it will be demonstrated in a future article.

**106** See Bisconti (1988).

**107** See Balty (1977) 146; (1984) pl. XIII, fig.2; (1991) fig. 8; (1995), 46–47, and Canivet (1987) 209. This iconic type is also met in the church of Voskhori, Macedonia, see Sodini (1970) 737. For the mosaic of Houad, see Dulaey (2013) 95–96. In Tayibat (as said further), the bird under the tree loaded with fruits is the peacock, another symbol of eternity.

**108** Like, for example, the small phoenix on rocks between palm trees, in the border of the dome mosaic in Chapel of San Giovanni in Fonte, Napoli (van den Broek 1972, 313–320 about the Paradise mountain, and pl. XXIII).

arated by intertwining vine-stems, but the presence of a caged bird gives a symbolic meaning to the scene;<sup>109</sup> on the mosaic of the St. George church in Houad (Syria, 568 AD), we have an exotic bestiary, but the symbolic lion, eagle and phoenix occupy prominent places.<sup>110</sup>

The phoenix of the eschatological Paradise, or the Heavenly Jerusalem, is more an allegorical feature expressing the concept of the eternal resurrection of the flesh, as also the peacock often does;<sup>111</sup> beasts as well as plants are chosen according to a hierarchy of symbols. There are two remarkable sets of mosaics showing the paradiacal phoenix, one well-known in Italy and the other in Syria. The first set is distributed amongst four Roman churches: the Basilica of Santi Cosma e Damiano, the Basilica of St. Praxedes, the Church Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, and the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran<sup>112</sup>. The first three offer on their apse mosaics a similar imagery, dating from the 6th to the 9th c.: the phoenix, as a symbol of the resurrection, is partaking in the scene of the *Parousia* (or *Aduentus in gloria*), when Christ makes his Second Coming at the end of time.

The bird is perched on the left date palm (fig. 1), exactly as in one quarter of the scenes of the transmission of the New Law to St. Peter by Christ (*Traditio legis*). Centuries later, but probably following an early Christian model, the central image of the apsidal mosaic in St. John Lateran depicts, in a piling of symbols, the wood of the Holy Cross rooted in the ground where an angel guards the door of the New Jerusalem; behind the door, a palm tree as the Tree of Life, with the phoenix perched on the top of it, in the middle of the four Rivers of Paradise flowing from the bottom of the cross around the city. A dove and pairs of stags and sheep are the other symbolic animals of the scene. That composition is an alternative to pictures like those in Santi Cosma e Damiano, where the Lamb of God is standing on a hill between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the cities of Christ's birth and death respectively, i.e. the sites of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.<sup>113</sup>

In Syria, a large mosaic in the Holy Martyrs' Church of Tayibat al-Imam also shows the phoenix in the Heavenly city, but another mosaic, very distinctive, found in the Church of the Michaelion, in Huarte, shows the bird with Adam (fig. 2). The mosaic of Tayibat Al-Imam (442 A.D), discovered in 1985, depicts, on the *bema* of the church (a raised platform or tribunal, horseshoe shaped), a scene with only animals, and a double phoenix. It is original for many reasons: most of the time placed in the apse, the theme is here treated as a pavement,<sup>114</sup> and the

<sup>109</sup> See Maguire (1987b) 61–66.

<sup>110</sup> See Dulaey (2013) 95.

<sup>111</sup> See for example Abdallah (2014) 300, fig. 3.

<sup>112</sup> See Canivet (1984), and Prigent (2003).

<sup>113</sup> See van den Broek (1972) 445–446, and Dulaey (2013) 97, 108 and 110–114, who recognizes in Santi Cosma e Damiano a depiction of the Ascension, not of the *Parousia*.

<sup>114</sup> See Donceel-Voûte (1988), and Balty/Balty (2004). For an example on a mural mosaic, see the St. George church in Thessalonike (Dulaey 2013, 96).



**Fig. 1.** Representation of the Phoenix bird sitting on a palm tree as part of a scene of the Parousia, apse mosaic (detail), Basilica of St. Praxedes in Rome (Photo courtesy of the editor).



**Fig. 2.** Representation of Adam surrounded by animals including the Phoenix bird (to the right), floor mosaic, Michaelion of Huarte near Apamea (Photo courtesy of Ruberval Monteiro).

other creatures do not always have their usual environment and role.<sup>115</sup> It features, from the vision of the Apocalypse of St. John, in the center, the Lamb on a mountain with the four rivers and the two cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Quadrupeds and birds take place as “mirror-image elements along a central axis”; amongst them “two radiant phoenixes in profile” on the roof of the two pavilions of the life source framing an *aedicula*; on its sides, two fantailed peacocks (specific animals of Paradise).<sup>116</sup> The central place occupied by the phoenix in St. John Lateran is here occupied by a large eagle.<sup>117</sup>

Approximately at the same time, in the Michaelion of Huarte, the mosaic floor with Adam and the phoenix, discovered in 1974, today located in the Apamea museum (fig. 2 and 3), is exceptional in its topic, even if there did exist a similar model in pagan iconography: Orpheus charming the animals, with a bird perched on a tree or on a rock, often a peacock, but a phoenix at Piazza Armerina. Adam “sits prominently in the axis, seated between two cypresses with snakes, among a series of peaceful animals [...]. It is certainly an evocation of the biblical scene where Adam, before the creation of Eve, received mission to give a name to the animals”; the phoenix “occupies a privileged and significant place between one of the cypresses and the cedar, over the eagle”, and instead of the eagle of the Carrand Diptych, for example, showing a similar scene; it expresses the triumph over death, contrary to the griffon symmetrically placed on the other side of Adam, probably signifying the ineluctability of death.<sup>118</sup> This work offers several levels of theological reading: Adam is not naked, but dressed, being at the same time the man living before the fall and after the fall, as well as a figure of Christ, by the presence of the symbol of resurrection and eternity: the phoenix.<sup>119</sup> So the landscape features simultaneously Paradise lost and Paradise regained.

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<sup>115</sup> See Zaqquq/Piccirillo (1999).

<sup>116</sup> Quoted from Farioli Campanati (1999) 175–176. In the same church the phoenix also appears on the mosaic of the central nave, perched on the basin of a fountain, between two sheep, a unique configuration to our knowledge (see Abdallah 2014, 309, fig. 15): more often, one or two peacock are standing at that place, sometimes a guinea fowl. On the symbolism and representation of the peacock and its relationship with the phoenix in Christian iconography, see Demès (2017).

<sup>117</sup> On the eagle in Paradise in that same church, see Wisskirchen (2005–2006).

<sup>118</sup> Quoted from Canivet (1984) 140 and 209 (on the griffin, see Canivet 1984, and 1987, 211 and 297, n. 160). See also Maguire (1987a), Wisskirchen (2002) (especially 138–140, where one finds signaled another Syrian mosaic with the same topic, with the phoenix on the right side, in the Copenhagen National Museum), Gosserez (2005), Monteiro da Silva (2008), and Dulaey (2013) 96–97.

<sup>119</sup> See Tardieu (1974) 232–262. There is also on that mosaic a unicorn with that same symbolism, on which see Canivet (1987) 304–312.



**Fig. 3.** Representation of the phoenix bird, floor mosaic (detail), Michaelion of Huarte near Apamea (Photo courtesy of Ruberval Monteiro).

## Conclusion

At the hands of ancient authors, the Greek and Roman myth of the Arabic bird sacred to Egypt undertook a long flight towards Paradise, at first the pagan Paradise: the phoenix found association with Hades in Ovid, and later with the Christian Eastern Paradise. In the world or outside the world, the paradisiacal abode of the bird varies according to different mythologies, times and religions, but also according to different authors and their literary inventions: it can exist underground, terrestrially, celestially, or on the border between earth and sky; it can be coastal or islander, and is usually oriental, Arabic, Syrian, i.e. Phoenician, or Indian. The heathen writers, most of the time, only told briefly the legend of the bird, with the major exception of the

poet Claudian, coming after the Christian author Lactantius; but the Christians looked for symbolic interpretation. Roman imperial power made the bird a state symbol, often perched on a globe. Both Romans and Christians developed an official iconography with partially similar conventions: the solar nimbus as the characterization of the phoenix, more frequent than some attributes such as the homonymous palm tree, the flames of its rebirth, the Roman terrestrial globe or the Egyptian primordial hillock.

These two developments, originally parallel, were to cross and, maybe, sometimes to merge together, in spite of all their differences. While the imperial phoenix celebrated the regular return of a cosmic cycle and the long-lasting bliss it would bring to the world down there, a nod to Roman domination,<sup>120</sup> Christianity returned the bird of the Heliopolitan cosmogony to the origins of the world: the Paradise of Genesis. Christian authors transformed its repetitive cycle into a linear progress of time, consequently taking the phoenix from the creation of the world to the end of it, as a promise of the individual resurrection and eternal bliss in the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Christian authors and theologians borrowed from, or partook of a mythology that represented something like the pagan “Old Testament” in recreating the topics and pictures of the wonderful bird: the *locus felix*, seen as an evergreen garden, and the Golden Age, combined together to show and to explain the resurrection of bodies, the Garden of Eden, and the eschatological Paradise. In their written texts, they did not go as far as letting the phoenix live in Paradise (to the contrary of certain rabbis): Lactantius, Avitus, and a version of the *Physiologos* placed the bird only in a kind of anteroom thereto. There are more Christian descriptions of Paradise with no phoenix: by St. Cyprian, St. Jerome, Prudentius, Venantius Fortunatus,<sup>121</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, etc. But iconography took the step and crossed the line, picturing the bird, as a real bird as well as a symbol, either in the paradisiacal bestiary or in the Adamic Paradise, either in the Parousia or in the Heavenly Jerusalem. Coincidentally or not, these pictures of the bird frequently appear in Syria, thought often to be the Phoenician country of its birth and/or of its abode, and/or its harvest of aromatics, and also the region of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, in Judea, as well as the place of the mountain of Paradise, in Lebanon.

There is another amazing fact in the destiny of the phoenix: far from disappearing in smoke or turning into ashes with the development of sciences and of expeditions since the Renaissance, its fate was to live again as a real exotic bird: its magnificent feathers were imported into Europe from New Guinea, its native land, with

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<sup>120</sup> See Hollard/López Sánchez (2014).

<sup>121</sup> On Cyprian and Jerome, see Taisne (1992); on Prudentius, see Fontaine (1970), and Deléani (1992); on Venantius Fortunatus, see Delbey (2005).

the Malaysian name of *manuk dewata*, transcribed *manucodiata* and meaning “God’s bird”, better known as the “bird of Paradise”.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Because the corpses were stripped from their legs for the convenience of shipping, the scholar Carl von Linné in the 18th c. named it *Paradisea apoda*, “the bird of Paradise without legs”. It is a species of passerine; the males possess a very colorful plumage; the legend goes that these birds without legs spent their life permanently air born, and fed on dew – like Lactantius’ phoenix, see Harrison (1960).

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<sup>123</sup> Unfortunately, the article was published with many errors due to the editors; see the original version on line at my page on academia.edu or researchgate.edu.

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Diego De Brasi

## Das Tier, der Mensch und Gott in Laktanzens *De opificio Dei*

In seiner zur Zeit der diokletianischen Christenverfolgung verfassten Schrift *De opificio Dei*<sup>1</sup> setzt sich der christliche Apologet Laktanz ein zweifaches Ziel. Erstens will er seine Mitchristen, die zur Abfassungszeit der Schrift verrufen und verfolgt sind, weiterbilden (opif. 1.1–3). Zweitens beabsichtigt er durch eine eingehende Analyse des Menschen in seiner Beschaffenheit als *compositum* von Körper und Seele die Existenz und die Macht der *diuina prouidentia*, der göttlichen Vorsehung, zu beweisen und zu beschreiben (opif. 1.10–12). Dabei kann er nicht umhin, auf einige Aspekte, die das Verhältnis zwischen Tier und Menschen charakterisieren, einzugehen.<sup>2</sup> Denn, obwohl die Tiere für Laktanz mit Sicherheit dem Menschen unterworfen sind<sup>3</sup> und sich eindeutig vom Menschen unterscheiden, weil sie keine Rationalität und keine Erkenntnismöglichkeit besitzen,<sup>4</sup> lassen sich sowohl hinsichtlich der Körperstruktur als auch des ‚sozialen‘ Verhaltens nicht wenige Ähnlichkeiten zwischen Tieren und Menschen feststellen. Insbesondere führt Laktanz eine Analyse dieser Ähnlichkeiten an zwei

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Ich möchte mich an dieser Stelle bei den Teilnehmern an der Tagung *Animal Kingdom of Heaven* sowie bei den Teilnehmern an dem Forschungskolloquium der Professur für Klassische Philologie/Gräzistik der Philipps-Universität Marburg für die anregenden Diskussionen und die weiterführende Kritik bedanken. Zeitschriften werden nach dem Abkürzungsverzeichnis der *Année Philologique* abgekürzt. Wenn nicht anders angegeben, stammen die Übersetzungen aus dem Lateinischen bzw. aus dem Griechischen von mir.

**1** Vgl. opif. 1.1–3 (*quam minime sim quietus, etiam in summis necessitatibus, ex hoc libello poteris aestimare ... quo philosophi sectae nostrae ... quamvis nunc male audiant castigenturque vulgo*); 1.7 (*nam ille conluctator et aduersarius noster scis quam sit astutus et idem saepe violentus, sicuti nunc uidemus*) und 20.1 (*haec ad te, Demetriane, interim paucis et obscurius fortasse quam decuit pro rerum ac temporis necessitate perorauit...*). Für die unterschiedlichen Datierungsversuche s. die Übersicht in Perrin (1974) 221. Einführend zum Leben und Werk des Laktanz s. Fabrèga (2008) 796–802.

**2** Grant (1999) 107–108 betont, dass Laktanz nicht besonders an Tiere interessiert war. Freilich widmet Laktanz den Tieren nicht die gleiche Aufmerksamkeit und Ausführlichkeit wie z. B. Basilius von Caesarea oder Ambrosius von Mailand (s. dazu z. B. Föllinger 1999, 261–265 u. 269–272; Föllinger 2003, 83–84 und Föllinger 2008). Jedoch ignoriert Grant in seinen Schlussfolgerungen *De opificio Dei* gänzlich und verweist nur auf eine Stelle aus *De ira Dei* (13.9–12), in der Laktanz Cic. nat. deor. 3.2 zitiert.

**3** Lact. opif. 3.16–17: *nam cum fragilis inbecillusque nascatur [scil. homo], tamen et a mutis omnibus tutus est et ea omnia quae firmiora nascuntur, etiamsi uim caeli fortiter patiuntur, ab homine tamen tuta esse non possunt. Ita fit ut plus homini conferat ratio quam natura mutis, quoniam in illis neque magnitudo uirium neque firmitas corporis efficere potest quominus aut opprimantur a nobis aut nostrae subiecta sint potestati*.

**4** S. v.a. Lact. inst. 2.1.14–15: *Nam cum ceterae animantes pronis corporibus in humum spectent, quia rationem ac sapientiam non acceperunt ... Parens enim noster ille unus et solus cum fingeret hominem, id est animal intellegens et rationis capax ....* S. auch unten Anm. 6.

Stellen von *De opificio Dei* aus: in seiner rhetorisch stark polemisierenden Auseinandersetzung mit der Lehre Epikurs (opif. 2–3 und 6) und in seiner Beschreibung der menschlichen Organe (opif. 5, 7–13).

Ziel dieses Beitrages ist es folglich, zunächst die Passagen in *De opificio Dei*, in denen Laktanz seine Ansichten über die Tiere äußert, darzustellen. In einem zweiten Schritt soll anschließend die Bedeutung dieser Aussagen für die Argumentationsstrategie der Schrift erläutert werden. Es wird sich dabei zeigen, dass die Körperstruktur und das Sozialverhalten der Tiere für den gläubigen Christen in nicht geringem Maße zur (natürlichen) Gotteserkenntnis beitragen können, da die gesamte Natur nach ästhetischen Prinzipien gestaltet sei, die auf die schöpferische Tätigkeit Gottes zurückzuführen seien.<sup>5</sup> Da sich im Laufe der Erörterungen herausstellen wird, dass unter den Tieren die Vögel eine privilegierte Stellung bei Laktanz einnehmen, wird schließlich in einem kleinen Ausblick eine mögliche Erklärung für diese Sonderstellung angeboten. Im Gegensatz zu psychologisierenden Interpretationen, die die privilegierte Stellung der Vögel als Ausdruck des Neids, den die Menschen für diese Lebewesen empfinden, deuten, wird hier die These vertreten, dass diese Sonderstellung auf paganes und insbesondere aristotelisches Gedankengut zurückzuführen ist.

## Laktanz über die Tiere

Die Passagen, in denen Laktanz die Natur und die Eigenschaften der Tiere am ausführlichsten thematisiert, können schematisch in drei Rubriken eingeordnet werden:

- 1) in einer ersten Rubrik beschäftigt sich Laktanz mit der Fähigkeit der Tiere, sich vor Witterungsverhältnissen und Angriffen zu schützen;
- 2) in einer zweiten Rubrik wird der Fokus auf das ‚soziale‘ Verhalten der Tiere gerichtet;
- 3) in einer dritten Rubrik behandelt Laktanz die Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede in der Körperstruktur des Menschen und der anderen Tiere.

Die erste Behandlung des Themas, bei der Laktanz sich hauptsächlich der Fähigkeit der Tiere, sich vor Angriffen zu verteidigen, widmet, finden wir zu Beginn eines Abschnittes, in dem die Rationalität explizit als ausschließlich menschliches Attribut gekennzeichnet wird (opif. 2).<sup>6</sup> Laktanz erkennt, dass alle Tiere ausreichend gegen die

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<sup>5</sup> Vgl. dazu insb. Perrin (1981) 224 – 227.

<sup>6</sup> Lact. opif. 2.1–2: *Dedit enim homini artifex ille noster ac parens deus sensum atque rationem, ut ex eo appareret nos ab eo esse generatos, qui ipse intellegentia, ipse sensus ac ratio est. Ceteris animantibus quoniam rationalem istam uim non attribuit, quemadmodum tamen uita earum tutior esset ante prouidit.* Vgl. auch opif. 2.6 – 8: *hominem autem, ratione concessa et uirtute sentiendi atque eloquendi data, eorum quae ceteris animalibus attributa sunt fecit expertem, quia sapientia reddere poterat quae illi naturae condicio denegasset, <et> statuit nudum et inermem, quia et ingenio poterat armari et ratione uestiri...*

Witterungsverhältnisse geschützt sind, während sie sich auf unterschiedliche Weise vor Angriffen verteidigen müssen und können. Dabei unterscheidet er in Anlehnung an den epikureischen Dichter Lukrez zwischen drei grundsätzlichen Verteidigungsstrategien:<sup>7</sup>

- 1) Der ‚Kampf‘. Diese Art der Verteidigung gilt für all die Tiere, die mit „Waffen“ (*tela*) ausgestattet sind und deshalb gegen ihre Angreifer kämpfen können. Hierunter fallen zum Beispiel Tiere mit Stoßzähnen, Hörnern oder Krallen.<sup>8</sup>
- 2) Die ‚Flucht‘. Diese Strategie üben all die Tiere aus, die keine natürlichen Waffen besitzen, aber so geschaffen sind, dass sie problemlos ihren Angreifern entfliehen können (*pernicitate fugiendi*). Beispiele hierfür sind hauptsächlich die Vögel (*uel plumis leuibus in sublime suspensa*) und die Huftiere (*uel suffulta unguis*).
- 3) Die ‚List‘. Diese Strategie ist all den Tieren vorbehalten, die weder natürlichen Waffen besitzen noch besonders schnell fliehen können. Diesen bleibt folglich nur noch die Möglichkeit, ihre Angreifer zu überlisten oder sich irgendwohin zu verstecken (*astu se protegant aut latibulis saepiant*).

Außerdem schafft Laktanz für Tiere, die keine dieser Verteidigungsmöglichkeit aufweisen und deshalb als leichte Beute für Raubtiere gelten, eine vierte Kategorie, so

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*quibus [scil. animalibus] si detrahas uel naturalem sui corporis uestem uel ea quibus ex se armantur, nec speciosa poterunt esse nec tutam...* S. Loi (1970) 58–61.

<sup>7</sup> Lucr. 5.857–859: *nam quaecumque uides uesci uitalibus auris, / aut dolus aut uirtus aut denique mobilitas est / ex ineunte aeuo genus id tutata reseruans.* Mehrere Parallelstellen könnten hier in Betracht gezogen werden, z. B. Cic. nat. deor. 2.121 (*Quarum aliae coriis tectae sunt aliae uillis uestitae aliae spinis hirsutae; pluma alias alias squama uidemus obductas, alias esse cornibus armatas, alias habere effugia pinnarum*); Min. Fel. 17.10 (*quidue animantium loquar aduersus sese tutelam multiformem? alias armatas cornibus, alias dentibus saeptas et fundatas ungulis et spicatas aculeis aut pedum celeritate liberas aut elatione pinnarum?*). S. dazu auch Perrin (1974) 253. Jedoch sprechen m. E. zwei Indizien dafür, dass Laktanz hier Lukrez folgt: Erstens ist Laktanzens Klassifikation identisch, wenngleich in einer anderen Reihenfolge, mit derjenigen, die im fünften Buch von *De rerum natura* vorgenommen wird. Zweitens – und das ist das wichtigste Argument – dieses Kapitel stellt u. a. auch eine Art Einleitung zur Polemik gegen den Epikureismus dar, die in den folgenden Kapiteln 3–4 und 6 durchgeführt wird. Auf diese Weise könnte Laktanz seinem Leser auch die ‚heimtückische Gefahr‘, die der Epikureismus in sich birgt, vorführen. Der Epikureismus, gegen den wenig später in harschen Tönen polemisiert wird, um dessen Unsinnigkeit (*amentia*, opif. 2.10; 3.21; *deliramentum*, opif. 6.7) bloßzu stellen, wird zunächst als dem Autor nahstehende ‚Lehre‘ angegeben („positiv-vereinnahmende Nutzung“), um aber später durch eine eindeutige Kritik seiner Grundsätze abgelehnt zu werden („negativ-abgrenzende Nutzung“). Dadurch möchte Laktanz m. E. hervorheben, dass große Vorsicht bei dem Umgang mit dem Epikureismus geboten ist, da dieser besonders verführerisch sein kann. S. Walter (2006) 32–39 zu Laktanzens Umgang mit paganen Autoren im Allgemeinen und Gatzemeier (2013) 221–302 zu Laktanzens Umgang mit Lukrez. Zu den Gründen, die Laktanz zur starken Polemik gegen Epikur animiert haben können, s. Althoff (1999).

<sup>8</sup> In opif. 4.19 scheint Laktanz noch eine weitere Kategorie, diejenige der Tiere, die sich in Gruppen versammeln, um sich besser von Angreifern zu schützen, in Betracht zu ziehen. Da jedoch diese Tiere den Tieren gegenübergestellt werden, welche die Einsamkeit aufsuchen, weil sie auf ihre Stärke vertrauen, sind diese eigentlich zwei ‚Unterkategorien‘ vom ‚Kampf‘.

dass auch deren Existenz nicht bedroht wird: Solche Tiere leben nämlich entweder in Regionen, die für das Überleben ihrer Fressfeinde nicht geeignet sind, oder sie zeigen eine so hohe Fruchtbarkeitsrate, dass sie keine Gefahr laufen, auszusterben.

In der ersten ausführlichen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Epikureismus (opif. 3) lesen wir weitere Ausführungen, deren Fokus auf dem ‚sozialen Verhalten‘ der Tiere liegt. Laktanzens Hauptziel in dieser Sektion besteht darin, die ‚berühmte epikureische‘ Aussage, die Natur verhalte sich dem Menschen gegenüber als eine Stiefmutter, zu widerlegen.<sup>9</sup> Hier gibt er zunächst die Meinung der Epikureer wieder, nach denen die anderen Lebewesen, anders als der Mensch, gleich nach der Geburt in der Lage sind, die Herausforderungen des Lebens zu bewältigen. Doch erwähnt Laktanz wenig später ein Beispiel, das zeigen soll, wie auch andere Tiere notwendigerweise ihren Nachwuchs ‚erziehen‘ müssen, damit letzterer überlebensfähig ist. Dabei handelt es sich um die Vögel, die genau solche, wenn nicht sogar größere Mühen als der Mensch auf sich nehmen:<sup>10</sup>

*Quid? Aues, quarum ratio diuersa est, nonne maximos suscipiunt in educando labores, ut interdum aliquid humanae intellegentiae habere uideantur? Nidos enim aut luto aedificant aut uirgultis et frondibus construant, etiam ciborum expertes incubant ouis et quoniam fetus de suis corporibus alere non datum est, cibos conuehant et totos dies in huiusmodi discursatione consumunt, noctibus uero defendunt fouent protegunt.*

Was? Nehmen die Vögel, welche eine andere (körperliche) Beschaffenheit haben, nicht die größten Mühen in der Erziehung auf sich, so dass sie manchmal ein wenig an menschlichem Verstand zu haben scheinen? Denn sie bauen Nester mit Schlamm oder sie errichten sie mit Ästen und Laub. Sie brüten die Eier aus, sogar ohne Nahrung zu sich zu nehmen, und – da sie ihre Sprösslinge nicht von ihrem Körper aus ernähren können – besorgen sie (ihnen) Nahrung und verbringen jeden Tag in einem Hin- und Herfliegen dieser Art. Nachts schützen sie sie vor Angriffen und Witterungsverhältnissen und halten sie warm. (opif. 3.7)

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**9** Allerdings ist die Thematik nicht ursprünglich epikureisch: Bereits Platon greift im *Menexenos* einen altbekannten rhetorischen *topos* auf, nach dem das Land, auf dem ein Volk lebt, mit einer ‚Mutter‘ verglichen wird (Tsitsirisidis 1998, 200–201), um die Autochthonie der Athener derjenigen anderer Ethnien gegenüberzustellen (237b7–c1: ἀλλ' αὐτόχθονας καὶ τῷ ὅντι ἐν πατρίδι οἰκοῦντας καὶ ζῶντας, καὶ τρεφομένους οὐχ ὑπὸ μητριῶν ὡς οἱ ἄλλοι, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ μητρὸς τῆς χώρας ἐν ἣ ψκουν). Vgl. auch Plin. nat. 7.1, Sen. benef. 2.29. Laktanz übernimmt den Ausdruck von Ciceros *De republica* (3.1, vgl. auch Buchner 1984, 270–271 *ad loc.*) und ‚vermischt‘ ihn in seiner Darstellung mit Lucr. 5.222–227 mit dem präzisen rhetorischen Ziel, in dem Leser den Eindruck zu erwecken, dies sei eine ausschließlich epikureische These. S. dazu Perrin (1974) 259 *ad loc.*; Bakhouche/Luciani (2009) 195 Anm. 47.

**10** Vgl. auch opif. 3.9–10: *quid quod aiuum fetus multo fragilior est quam hominis, quia non ipsum animal edunt, sed id quod materni corporis fotu et calore tepefactum animal efficiat? Quod tamen cum spiritu fuerit animatum, id uero inplume ac tenerum non modo uolandi, sed ambulandi quoque usu caret. Non ergo ineptissimus sit si quis putet male cum uolucribus egisse naturam primum quod bis nascantur, deinde quod tam infirmae, ut sint quaeasitis per laborem cibis a parentibus nutriendae? Sed illi [scil. philosophi qui Epicurum secuntur, opif. 2.10] fortiora eligunt, inbecilliora praeterunt.* Zum Verhältnis zum ciceronischen Modell (nat. deor. 2.129), s. Perrin (1974) 262.

Der zu Beginn dieser Passage gezielt gesetzte Hinweis auf die Andersartigkeit der körperlichen Beschaffenheit der Vögel (und allgemein der anderen Tiere) gegenüber dem Menschen repräsentiert den roten Faden der dritten Rubrik, in der, wie oben erwähnt, Laktanz sich mit dem Problem der Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede in der Körperstruktur des Menschen und der Tiere beschäftigt.

Obwohl die Passagen, die zu dieser Rubrik gehören, sich über mehrere Kapitel von *De opificio Dei* erstrecken, lässt sich ihr Inhalt aufgrund der häufigen Wiederholungen leicht zusammenfassen. Laktanzens Ansichten in diesem Bereich lauten in ihren Grundzügen in etwa, wie folgt: Menschen und Tiere – wobei nach meiner Kenntnis Fische bei Laktanz nicht erwähnt werden<sup>11</sup> – wiesen eine beinahe identische körperliche Grundstruktur auf, die aus Kopf, Rumpf und vier aus diesem sich ausbildenden Gliedern bestehe (opif. 5.1–2, vgl. opif. 7.3–4). Ferner lasse sich feststellen, dass auch die Anordnung der verschiedenen Gliederteile – zum Beispiel Nase, Ohren, Augen, Mund und Zähne im Kopf – bei Menschen und Tieren festgesetzt sei (opif. 7.5). Aus dieser Perspektive können die doch nicht geringen Unterschiede zwischen den Arten systematisch erklärt werden, indem man auf ihre Funktionalität und Ästhetik eingeht, wobei der Rhetoriklehrer Laktanz dies mit dem jeweils passendsten Stil tut. So ist der Unterschied zwischen Vierfußlern und Menschen nur mit knappen Worten physiologisch darin begründet, dass Erstere ihre Glieder nur brauchen, um sich fortzubewegen, während Letzterer mit den Händen etwas herstellen und festhalten kann.<sup>12</sup> Hingegen hebt Laktanz die ästhetischen Aspekte durch pointierte rhetorische Fragen

<sup>11</sup> Dies lässt sich vielleicht dadurch erklären, dass Fische und im Allgemeinen Wassertiere seit Platon als die in der *scala naturae* am unteren Rand stehenden und dümmsten Tiere gelten (Ti. 92a–c: τὸ δὲ τέταρτον γένος ἔνυδρον γέγονεν ἐκ τῶν μάλιστα ἀνοητοτάτων καὶ ἀμαθεστάτων, οὓς οὐδὲ ἀναπνοῆς καθαρᾶς ἔτι ἡξίωσαν οἱ μεταπλάττοντες, ὡς τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπὸ πλημμελείας πάσης ἀκαθάρτως ἔχόντων, ἀλλ’ ἀντὶ λεπτῆς καὶ καθαρᾶς ἀναπνοῆς ἀέρος εἰς ὕδατος θολεράν καὶ βαθεῖαν ἔχωσαν ἀνάπνευσιν· ὅθεν ιχθύων ἔθνος καὶ τὸ τῶν ὄστρέων συναπάντων τε ὄσα ἔνυδρα γέγονεν, δίκην ἀμαθίας ἐσχάτης ἐσχάτας οἰκήσεις εὐληχτών. καὶ κατὰ ταῦτα δὴ πάντα τότε καὶ νῦν διαμείβεται τὰ ζῷα εἰς ἄλληλα, νοῦ καὶ ἀνοίας ἀποβολῇ καὶ κτῆσει μεταβαλλόμενα). Vgl. auch unter den christlichen Autoren des 4. Jh. n. Chr. Bas. Caes. hex. 8.1, 127.9 – 128.2 De Mendieta/Rudberg: λογιζόμεθα τοίνυν, ὅτι τῶν μὲν νηκτῶν ἡ φύσις ἀτελεστέρας πως δοκεῖ ζωῆς μετέχειν [...] οὐτε τις μνήμη παρ' ἔκεινοις, οὐτε φαντασίᾳ [...] τὰ δὲ ἔνυδρα οὐ μόνον ἄφωνα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀνήμερα, καὶ ἀδιδακτα, καὶ πρὸς πᾶσαν βίου κοινωνίαν ἀνθρώποις ἀμεταχείριστα.

<sup>12</sup> Die Bedeutung, die Laktanz den Händen zusisst, steht in enger Verbindung mit der Thematik des *status rectus*, wie die Unterstreichung der Tatsache zeigt, dass dort, wo *ratio et manus* präsent sind (also beim Menschen), weder ein funktionales noch ein ästhetisches Bedürfnis nach einem Schwanz besteht (opif. 7.7–8). Bei Laktanz hat die Thematik des *status rectus* jedoch eine präzise theologische Bedeutung: Der aufrechte Gang ist zum einen funktional für die Ausübung des religiösen Kultes (vgl. Włosok 1960, 221–222), zum anderen ist er ein Zeichen der menschlichen Gottebenbildlichkeit (vgl. Loi 1970, 137–139). In opif. 8.2–3 ist dies am deutlichsten formuliert: *cum igitur statuisse deus ex omnibus animalibus solum hominem facere caelestem, cetera uniuersa terrena, hunc ad caeli contemplationem rigidum erexit bipedem constituit, scilicet ut eodem spectaret unde illi origo est, illa uero depresso ad terram [...] hominis itaque solius recta ratio et sublimis status et uultus deo patri communis ac proximus originem suam fictoremque testatur.*

hervor, auf welche meistens eine Reihe absurder Beispiele folgt. So fragt er, ob es nicht göttlich sei (*diuinum*), dass jedes Tier in seiner Art das schönste sei (*unum quodque animal in sui generis specie pulcherrimum est*), so dass das Resultat nutzlos und hässlich aussähe, falls man einige Charakteristika unter den verschiedenen Tieren austauschen würde. Um dies besser zu veranschaulichen, fügt er einen Elefanten mit langem Nacken,<sup>13</sup> ein Kamel mit kurzem Hals, eine Schlange mit Pfoten als Beispiele hinzu.

Auch in dieser Rubrik wird den Vögeln eine besondere Stellung zugewiesen: Zum einen stellen sie eine dritte Kategorie neben den Vierfüßlern und dem Menschen dar, da ihre oberen Glieder „Flügel“ sind, „welche, durch reihenweise angeheftete Federn, das Fliegen ermöglichen“ (opif. 5.3). Zum anderen haben sie, glaubt Laktanz irrtümlicherweise, keine Blase (opif. 11.18). Freilich übernimmt Laktanz diese Information aus physiologischen Traktaten, die letztendlich auf Aristoteles' *Historia animalium* zurückgehen (2.16.506b24–28), jedoch ist er der einzige (mir bekannte) Autor, der diese Eigenschaft ausschließlich den Vögeln zuspricht.<sup>14</sup>

Die Besonderheit der Vögel versteht sich allerdings nicht nur im Sinne der von Laktanz hervorgehobenen Unterschiede zwischen diesen und den anderen Tieren, sondern auch im Sinne einer fast ‚exklusiven‘ Nähe zwischen ihnen und dem Menschen, wie die oben zitierte Passage über das Verhalten der Vögel gegenüber ihren Sprösslingen bereits zeigt. Diese ‚exklusive‘ Nähe zwischen Menschen und Vögeln hebt Laktanz durch zwei weitere Beispiele hervor. Das erste Beispiel, das unmittelbar auf eine physiologische Ähnlichkeit zwischen Menschen und Vögeln verweist, ist die Feststellung, dass nur die Vögel ein dem des Menschen ähnlich komplexes Phonationsystem besitzen. Denn:

[*Sed*] haec ad hominem solum pertinent aut aues, in quibus acuminata et uibrata certis motibus lingua innumerabiles cantuum flexiones et uarios sonorum modos exprimit.

dies [d.h. die Frage, ob Zunge oder Zähne am meisten die phonetische Entstehung der Wörter beeinflussen] betrifft allein den Menschen oder die Vögel, bei welchen die Spitze und mit gewissen Bewegungen vibrierende Zunge unzählige Gesangsmodulationen und verschiedene Tonarten ausdrückt. (opif. 10.15)

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<sup>13</sup> Der Elefant ist auch in opif. 5.12 erwähnt, einer Passage, in der Laktanz für die funktionale Ähnlichkeit zwischen Elefantenrüssel und menschlicher Hand argumentiert. Dabei hebt er jedoch nur die Funktion dieses Organs hervor, die in Aristoteles' *De partibus animalium* (2.16.658b33–659a23) als Nebenfunktion des Rüssels bezeichnet wird, während dessen Hauptfunktion nach Aristoteles zu Recht darin besteht, Atmungsorgan zu sein. Zu dieser Passage s. Föllinger (2003) 84–85.

<sup>14</sup> Vgl. kontrastiv Aristot. hist. anim. 2.16.506b24–26 (νεφροὺς δὲ καὶ κύστιν τὰ μὲν χωτόκα τῶν τετραπόδων πάντ' ἔχει· ὅσα δ' φότοκεῖ, τῶν μὲν ἄλλων οὐδὲν ἔχει, οἶον οὔτ' ὅρνις οὔτ' ἵχθυς); ibid. 3.15.519b14–15 (ἔχει δὲ κύστιν οὐ πάντα, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν χωτόκα πάντα, τῶν δ' φότόκων ή χελώνη μόνον); Plin. nat. 11.208 (*infra aliom est a priore parte uesica, quae nulli oua gignantum praeter testudinem, nulli nisi sanguineum pulmonem habenti, nulli pedibus carentium*); Nem. Emes. 4, 46.6–11 Morani (οὐ πᾶν δὲ ζῷον πάντα τὰ μόρια τοῦ σώματος κέκτηται, ἀλλ' ἔστιν ἔνια κολοβά [...] τὰ δὲ κύστιν οὐκ ἔχει ὡς ὅρνιθες καὶ πάντα τὰ μὴ οὐροῦντα).

Das zweite Beispiel ermöglicht hingegen nur indirekt, eine Nähe zwischen Menschen und Vögeln festzustellen. Dabei handelt es sich in der Tat eher um einen Beweis, in dem Laktanz Erkenntnisse aus der physiologischen Beobachtung für seine argumentativen Zwecke nutzt. Denn er argumentiert gegen Aristoteles und Varro, welche behaupten, dass das erste Organ, das nach der Zeugung sich herausbilde, das Herz sei: Wie man aus der Beobachtung der von den Vögeln gelegten Eier schließen könne, so Laktanz, beginne die Körperherausbildung vom Kopf her und nicht von irgendeinem anderen Organ (*opif.* 12.6–7).<sup>15</sup>

## Die rhetorisch-argumentative Funktion der Ausführungen über Tiere in *De opificio Dei*

Die eben dargelegten Passagen zeigen, dass Laktanzens Ausführungen in den meisten Fällen auf Argumente zurückgreifen, die Cicero Balbus im zweiten Buch von *De natura deorum* in den Mund legt (vgl. *Cic. nat. deor.* 2.121–132). In der Tat macht Laktanz auch kein Geheimnis daraus, dass Cicero – und insbesondere seine Schriften *De republica* und *De natura deorum* – das Vorbild darstellt, dem er mit seiner Schrift nicht nach-eifern, sondern das er vielmehr vervollständigen und verbessern möchte (*opif.* 1.12–14).<sup>16</sup> Der Art und Weise, in der Laktanz im Hinblick auf seine Darstellung der Tiere eine Vervollständigung und Verbesserung von Ciceros Werk leistet, werden wir uns im Folgenden widmen.

<sup>15</sup> Diesbezüglich ist zu bemerken, dass diese Aussage möglicherweise nur ein zoophysiologisches Pendant zu anderen Aussagen des Laktanz in Bezug auf den Kopf und auf seine prominente Rolle innerhalb des menschlichen Körpers darstellen könnte. So bezeichnet Laktanz den Kopf in *opif.* 8.3 als Ort, in dem der Geist seinen Sitz hat (*eius prope diuina mens quia non tantum animantium quae sunt in terra, sed etiam sui corporis est sortita dominatum, in summo capite conlocata tamquam in arce sublimi speculator omnia et contuetur*). Dies wird in *opif.* 16.4–8 bestätigt, wobei Laktanz hier eine scheinbar fallibilistische Position vertritt (*alii sedem eius in cerebro esse dixerunt. Et sane argumentis probabilibus usi sunt, oportuisse scilicet quod totius corporis regimen haberet, potius in summo tamquam in arce corporis habitare [...] Hi uero aut non multum aut fortasse non errant. Videtur enim mens, quae dominatum corporis tenet, in summo capite constituta tamquam in caelo deus [...] id uero siue ita est ... sin autem non est ita, tamen nihilo minus admirandum est quod diuina nescio quid ratione fiat ut ita esse uideatur*).

<sup>16</sup> Zu Laktanzens Verhältnis zu Cicero in *De opificio Dei* s. Luciani (2007). Roots (1987) überbetont die Parallelen zwischen Laktanz und Cicero und behauptet, *De opificio Dei* sei nur eine christlich gefärbte Adaption von *De natura deorum*. Diese These lässt sich aus verschiedenen Gründen nicht halten, wie Bakhouche/Luciani (2009) 68–71 verdeutlichen: 1) Ciceros Ziel in *De natura deorum* besteht darin, die verschiedenen philosophischen Lehren über die Götter darzustellen, sie miteinander zu vergleichen und somit die eigene skeptische Position zu begründen (*Cic. nat. deor.* 1.13–14). Laktanz richtet hingegen seine Aufmerksamkeit auf die Rolle, welche die göttliche Vorsehung in der Schöpfung des Menschen spielt. 2) Es lässt sich zwar eine inhaltliche Übereinstimmung zwischen *Cic. nat. deor.* 2.133–150 und *opif.* 8–13 feststellen; von dieser aber auf eine strukturelle Analogie von *De opificio Dei* mit dem ganzen ciceronischen Dialog zu schließen, ist unmöglich.

Laktanzens Absichten scheinen auf dem ersten Blick denen Ciceros ähnlich: Wie bereits zu Beginn des Beitrages festgestellt wurde, besteht eines der Ziele des Traktes *De opificio Dei* darin, anhand der Beschreibung des menschlichen Kompositums, die göttliche *prouidentia* zu beweisen und ihre Tätigkeit zu beschreiben. Ähnlich verhält es sich im zweiten Buch von Ciceros *De natura deorum*. Cotta, der im ersten Buch die epikureischen Ansichten des Velleius widerlegt hatte und nun zu Beginn des zweiten Buches von Balbus gebeten wird, seine eigenen Ansichten über die Götter zu äußern, gibt die Bitte an Balbus selbst weiter. Balbus kündigt demnach an, er werde sich mit zwei von vier Aspekten, die in der stoischen Philosophie in Zusammenhang mit der Frage nach dem Wesen der Götter diskutiert werden, beschäftigen: Erstens wird er nachweisen, dass es Götter gibt, zweitens wird er über ihre Beschaffenheit sprechen (Cic. nat. deor. 2.3). In diesem Sinne stellt die Beschäftigung mit Tieren sowohl bei Cicero<sup>17</sup> als auch bei Laktanz nur einen Nebeneffekt zum primären Ziel der Argumentation dar, da die Ausführungen über Tiere hauptsächlich dem Ziel dienen, die Existenz der göttlichen Vorsehung nachzuweisen. Dies zeigen zum einen die wiederholte Betonung, dass die Körperstruktur der Tiere sowohl eine funktionale als auch eine ästhetische Anforderung erfüllt, zum anderen das pointierte Einsetzen dieser Ausführungen in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Lehre Epikurs.<sup>18</sup> In erster Linie wollen also Laktanzens Erörterungen über die Tiere die Möglichkeit der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis unterstützen: Durch die Beobachtung der Natur kann der Mensch zur Gotteserkenntnis gelangen.

Indem Laktanz jedoch seine Schrift ausdrücklich für die Weiterbildung der Christen (*philosophi sectae nostrae*, opif. 1.2) verfasst und nicht wie Ciceros *De natura deorum* als ein Gespräch, in dem verschiedenen Ansichten über die Götter vertreten werden, übertrifft er sein Vorbild Cicero. Die Präzisierung, die Schrift sei für ein christliches Publikum verfasst worden, lässt Laktanzens Ausführungen über die Tiere in einem neuen Licht erscheinen, vor allem wenn die Auffassung, die Laktanz über die Möglichkeit der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis für die paganen Philosophen und Literaten in seinem Hauptwerk, den *Diuinae Institutiones*, vertritt, berücksichtigt wird. Im ersten Buch dieser ausdrücklich apologetischen Schrift<sup>19</sup> betont Laktanz, dass Nicht-Christen zwar annähernd irgendeine Kenntnis über Gott erreichen könnten, die vollständige Gotteserkenntnis sei für sie jedoch ausgeschlossen.<sup>20</sup> Dies mag auf dem ersten Blick als eine recht positive Einstellung gegenüber der paganen Wissenschaft

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<sup>17</sup> Vgl. auch Cic. nat. deor. 2.73: *proximum est ut doceam deorum prouidentia mundum administrari*.

<sup>18</sup> Besonders deutlich wird dies in der die Polemik gegen den Epikureismus einleitenden Passage (opif. 2.10): *unde ego philosophorum qui Epicurum secuntur amentiam soleo mirari, qui naturae operam reprehendunt, ut ostendant nulla prouidentia instructum esse ac regi mundum, sed originem rerum incacilibus ac solidis corporibus adsignant, quorum fortuitis concursionibus uniuersa nascantur et nata sint*.

<sup>19</sup> Vgl. zuletzt Heck (2005).

<sup>20</sup> S. dazu insb. Bender (1983) 20 – 54 und Walter (2006) 46 – 89.

und Philosophie erscheinen.<sup>21</sup> Doch lassen die Formulierungen, mit denen die Begrenztheit der paganen Kultur hervorgehoben wird, kaum Zweifel darüber aufkommen, wo der wahre Ursprung dieser Kenntnisse für Laktanz zu finden ist. Die paganen Autoren konnten die Wahrheit fast erreichen, nicht weil der menschliche Verstand in der Lage wäre, sie zu erblicken, sondern weil die Wahrheit selbst (d.h. Gott), so mächtig und deutlich ist, dass selbst ein Blinder ihr Licht fühlen müsste.<sup>22</sup> Insofern ist die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis auch eine Offenbarung in ‚verborgener Form‘ und einzig die Offenbarung ist die gültige Form der Gotteserkenntnis, wie andere Stellen aus dem Hauptwerk zeigen. Man denke beispielsweise an die Kritik der Philosophenschulen, die sich über das gesamte dritte Buch erstreckt. Hier behauptet der Apologet am Beginn seiner Ausführungen über die Philosophie im Allgemeinen:<sup>23</sup>

*Duabus rebus uidetur philosophia constare, scientia et opinione, nec ulla re alia. Scientia uenire ab ingenio non potest nec cogitatione comprehendi, quia in se ipso habere propriam scientiam non hominis, sed dei est. mortalis autem natura non capit scientiam nisi quae ueniat extrinsecus. idcirco enim oculos et aures et ceteros sensus patefecit in corpore diuina solertia, ut per eos aditus scientia permanet ad mentem.*

Die Philosophie scheint aus zwei Bestandteilen, Wissen und Mutmaßung, und aus nichts Anderem zu bestehen. Das Wissen kann weder aus angeborener Fähigkeit kommen noch durch Überlegung erfasst werden, weil die Fähigkeit, Wissen in sich selbst zu haben, nicht dem Menschen, sondern Gott eigen ist. Die menschliche Natur erreicht hingegen kein Wissen außer demjenigen, das von außen kommt. Deshalb hat die göttliche Einsicht die Augen, die Ohren und die anderen Sinnesorgane im Körper geöffnet, damit durch diese Zugänge das Wissen bis zum Geist durchfließt. (inst. 3.3.1–3)

Dadurch eröffnet sich aber für das Verständnis der analysierten Passagen aus *De opificio Dei* eine weitere Interpretationsmöglichkeit. Denn wenn allein die Offenbarung den Anspruch erfüllen kann, Gott in seinem Wesen als *prouidentissimum artificem* erkennen zu lassen, dann kann die Bedeutung der natürlichen Gotteserkenntnis nur derjenige erkennen, der bereits durch den christlichen Glauben an der Offenbarung teilhat.<sup>24</sup>

Werden die vorausgegangenen Reflexionen auf die Intention von *De opificio Dei* übertragen, ergibt sich die folgende Interpretationsmöglichkeit: Nur weil er sich in *De*

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21 In diesem Sinne z. B. die Interpretationen von Inglebert (1996) 117–144 und Digeser (2000) 84–90.

22 S. z. B. Lact. inst. 1.5.2 (*ueniamus ad auctores, et eos ipsos ad ueri probationem testes citemus, quibus contra nos uti solent, poetas dico ac philosophos. Ex his unum Deum probemus necesse est, non quod illi habuerint cognitam ueritatem, sed quod ueritatis ipsius tanta uis est, ut nemo possit esse tam caecus, quin uideat ingerentem se oculis diuinam claritatem*) und inst. 1.5.28 (*nunc satis est demonstrare summo ingenio uiros attigisse ueritatem ac paene tenuisse, nisi eos retrorsus infucata prauis opinionibus consuetudo rapuisse, qua et deos esse alios opinabantur et ea quae in usum hominis Deus fecit, tamquam sensu praedita essent, pro diis habenda et colenda credebant*).

23 Vgl. zudem die Kapitel 30.6–35.5 der *Epitome Diuinarum Institutionum* und die Analyse weiterer Textpassagen der *Diuinae Institutiones* bei Walter (2006) 90–213.

24 Vgl. in dieser Hinsicht auch Moreschini (2013) 568–571.

*opificio Dei* an Christen richtet, kann Laktanz problemlos auf paganes Gedankengut zurückgreifen und für die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis plädieren. Denn erst durch die Offenbarung versteht der Mensch, die Erkenntnisse aus seinen Beobachtungen richtig einzuschätzen, und damit erhält er die Möglichkeit, die Naturphänomene wahrhaftig zu interpretieren. Dies bedeutet in unserem Kontext wiederum folgendes: Obwohl jeder Mensch virtuell in der Lage ist, aus der Beobachtung der körperlichen Eigenschaften und des sozialen Verhaltens der Tiere zur Gotteserkenntnis zu gelangen, ist nur der gläubige Christ tatsächlich fähig, die in der Natur zerstreuten ‚Indizien‘ zusammenzufügen und die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis zu vollziehen.

## Die besondere Stellung der Vögel in *De opificio Dei*

Wie aus den bisherigen Ausführungen deutlich geworden ist, besteht ein Zeichen von Laktanzens Originalität in der Aufmerksamkeit, die er den Vögeln schenkt. Diese könnte freilich im Sinne einer schärferen Abgrenzung zwischen Menschen und Vögeln interpretiert werden, die in eine Überbetonung der Natur des Menschen als einziges himmlisches Lebewesen mündet, so wie Virginia Burrus und Ingvild Gilhus vermuten.<sup>25</sup> Jedoch bleiben auch bei einer solchen Interpretation die Gründe unklar, die Laktanz zu einer Hervorhebung der Stellung der Vögel in der Schöpfung bewogen haben können. Eine Möglichkeit besteht gewiss darin, wie Burrus und Gilhus vorschlagen, die Gründe für diese Sonderstellung in einer Art ‚Neid‘, den der Mensch gegenüber den Vögeln empfindet, zu sehen: Die Vögel stellen – so die Erklärung der zwei Interpretinnen – wegen ihrer von den Flügeln ermöglichten Ungebundenheit an die Erde eine Gefahr für die prominente Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos dar. Obwohl diese Interpretation auf den ersten Blick plausibel erscheinen mag, ist sie aus meiner Sicht etwas zu spekulativ, da dadurch eine psychologisierende Erklärung geboten wird, die durch literarische und historische antike Quellen nicht unterstützt wird.<sup>26</sup> Weitere Möglichkeiten könnten demnach in Betracht gezogen werden. So könnte Laktanz mehr oder weniger indirekt auf die Rolle der Vögel als Vermittler zwischen der Gottheit und der Menschheit zurückgreifen, die in der paganen Religion in erster Linie in der Mantik hervorgehoben wurde. Oder er könnte auch implizit auf einige biblische Stellen Bezug nehmen, in denen die Vögel eine besondere Rolle als

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<sup>25</sup> Burrus (2000) 29–30; Gilhus (2006) 247–250. Es muss jedoch auch berücksichtigt werden, wie Breuer (2011) 79 zu Recht bemerkt, dass „dieser Aufwertung einer Spezies andernorts eine Abwertung von Menschen korrespondiert: Im Zusammenhang mit der Erörterung der menschlichen Sprechwerkzeuge thematisiert Laktanz Stumme, und bei seiner Erklärung dieser Sprachbehinderung behauptet er, diese Menschen ließen die Stimmluft aus der Nase ausströmen, als ob sie muhten. Durch einen physiologischen Defekt sinken solche Menschen also in Hinblick auf ihre Artikulationsfähigkeit in Laktanzens Beurteilung auf animalisches Niveau hinab“.

<sup>26</sup> Eine gute Darstellung der Bedeutung, welche die Vögel für die Menschen in der Antike hatten, bietet Lunczer (2009).

Vermittler zwischen Gott und dem Menschen zugewiesen wird, wie zum Beispiel die Geschichte Noahs im Alten Testament (Gn 8:5–12) oder die Erzählung über die Taufe Jesu in den Evangelien (Mk 1:9–11; Mt 3:13–17; Lk 3:21–22).

Eine einfachere, weniger spekulative und meines Erachtens plausible Erklärung bestünde hingegen darin, zu vermuten, dass Laktanz in seinen Ausführungen über die Vögel sich einfach an Behandlungen des Themas in paganen Quellen orientiert, die letztendlich auf Aristoteles' *Historia animalium* zurückzuführen sind.<sup>27</sup> Einige ‚Indizien‘ unterstützen diese Annahme. Zunächst ist zu bemerken, dass Laktanzens Formulierungen in den Passagen über die Vögel eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit mit Aristoteles' Erörterungen über diese Tiere aufweisen, wobei einige, wichtige Unterschiede zwischen Laktanzens Text und den Texten anderer, normalerweise als Quelle des Laktanz in Betracht gezogener lateinischer Autoren festzustellen sind.<sup>28</sup> Aristoteles hebt in zwei Passagen des zweiten Buches der *Historia animalium*<sup>29</sup> hervor, dass die Vögel unter den Tieren am meisten (μάλιστα τῶν ζῷων) dem Menschen ähnelten, erstens weil sie zweibeinig seien, zweitens weil sie fähig seien, „Buchstaben-Laute von sich zu geben“ (hist. an. 12. 503b32; 504b1–3). Hier ist die Parallele mit Laktanz, der die Fähigkeit der Vögel betont, verschiedene Tonarten und Gesangsmodulationen zu produzieren (opif. 10.15), geradezu auffällig.<sup>30</sup> Noch auffälliger ist die Nähe zwischen der Passage aus *De Opificio Dei* über die Nestbautechnik und die Erziehung der Sprösslinge, die oben zitiert wurde (opif. 3.7), und der Behandlung der Vögel im neunten Buch der *Historia animalium*. Diese leitet Aristoteles mit den folgenden Worten ein:

ὅλως δὲ περὶ τοὺς βίους πολλὰ ἀν θεωρηθείη μυμάτα τῶν ἄλλων ζώων τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ζωῆς, καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τῶν ἐλαττόνων ἡ μειζόνων ἵδοι τις ὃν τὴν τῆς διανοίας ἀκρίβειαν, οἷον πρῶτον ἐπὶ τῶν ὄρνιθων ἡ τῆς χελιδόνος σκηνοπηγία ...

Im Allgemeinen könnte man in den Lebensarten der anderen Lebewesen viele Nachahmungen des menschlichen Lebens beobachten, und man könnte die Präzision der Überlegung vielmehr bei den kleineren als bei den größeren sehen. Ein Beispiel hierfür ist zuerst bei den Vögeln der Nestbau der Schwalbe... (hist. an. 9. 7. 612b18–19)

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27 Vermutlich eines der in der Spätantike verbreiteten Kompendien. Vgl. Ogilvie (1978) 81–82, der jedoch glaubt, für die wenigen Passagen, in denen Aristoteles namentlich erwähnt wird, eine lateinische Quelle festmachen zu können. Vgl. auch Bryce (1990), der in seiner gesamten Studie feststellt, die Autoren, die Laktanz ‚inspiriert‘ haben können, seien Cicero, Lukrez und Vergil gewesen. Eine etwas ausgewogenere Beurteilung von Laktanzens Umgang mit griechischen Autoren bietet Meinking (2014), wobei ihr Beitrag nur *De ira Dei* in den Blick nimmt.

28 Es ist auffällig, dass selbst Brandt in seiner maßgeblichen Edition von *De opificio Dei* für die Passagen, in denen Laktanz seine Aufmerksamkeit den Vögeln widmet, keine sichere lateinische Quelle feststellen kann.

29 Thema des Buches ist die Behandlung der äußereren und inneren Organe der Bluttiere.

30 Perrin (1974) 330 *ad loc.* bemerkt lediglich: „le chant des oiseaux est fréquemment évoqué dans la littérature latine, mais rien ne se rapproche précisément de ce passage“.

Und in den dieser Passage folgenden Ausführungen geht Aristoteles auf die Mühe ein, die sich Tauben und Turteltauben in der Erziehung ihrer Sprösslinge geben.<sup>31</sup>

Darüber hinaus ist die Präsenz von aristotelischem Gedankengut in *De opificio Dei* an mehreren Stellen nachweisbar. In seiner Behandlung des Geschmacksinnes setzt Laktanz den Vertretern der Meinung, der Gaumen sei das Geschmacksorgan (z. B. Plin. nat. 11.174), seine eigene Position entgegen, dass der Geschmackssinn eigentlich in der Zunge lokalisiert sei (vgl. Aristot. hist. an. 1.11.492b27; part. anim. 2.17.660a14–16). Auch in der Behandlung des Reproduktionssystems nennt Laktanz Aristoteles (und Varro) explizit als seine Quelle, wobei er Aristoteles die eigentlich nicht aristotelische Meinung zuschreibt, die Frau steuere bei der Zeugung Samen bei.<sup>32</sup>

Schließlich lässt sich Laktanzens Behandlung der Vögel mit anderen mehr oder weniger ihm zeitgenössischen Darlegungen vergleichen, die in ähnlicher Weise in der ‚aristotelischen‘ Tradition zu situieren sind. Als Beispiel sei hier nur die achte Homilie des *Hexaemeron* des Basilius von Caesarea genannt, ein Werk, das auch Ingvild Gilhus mit Laktanzens *De opificio Dei* in Parallele setzt. Basilius behauptet, dass eine Art ‚Verwandtschaft‘ zwischen schwimmenden und fliegenden Lebewesen bestehet (hex. 8.2, 130.12–13 De Mendieta/Rudberg: ὥσπερ συγγένειά τίς ἔστι τοῖς πετομένοις πρὸς τὰ νηκτά). Gilhus interpretiert die Passage als Versuch des Basilius, die besondere Stellung der Vögel zu relativieren: Indem Basilius eine Verwandtschaft zwischen Vögeln und Fischen feststelle, spreche er den Ersteren ihre ‚himmlische‘ Natur ab und hebe die Stellung des Menschen als einziges himmlisches Lebewesen im Kosmos hervor.<sup>33</sup> Zwei Textelemente scheinen in meinen Augen dieser Interpretation jedoch zu widersprechen. Erstens folgt Basilius in seiner Behandlung des Themas nur dem ihm vorliegenden biblischen Text, denn Genesis 1:20 liest sich tatsächlich so, als ob auch die Vögel aus dem Wasser ‚geboren‘ werden.<sup>34</sup> Zweitens erklärt Basilius selbst, wie die

<sup>31</sup> Obwohl die Passage bei Laktanz zahlreiche Anklänge an Cic. nat. deor. 2.129 aufweist (*Quid dicam quantus amor bestiarum sit in educandis custodiendisque is quae procreauerunt, usque ad eum finem dum possint se ipsa defendere ... iam gallinae auesque reliquae et quietum requirunt ad pariendum locum et cubilia sibi nidosque construunt eosque quam possunt mollissime substernunt, ut quam facillume oua seruentur; e quibus pullos cum excuderunt ita tuentur ut et pinnis foveant ne frigore laedantur et si est calor a sole se opponant; cum autem pulli pinnulis uti possunt, tum uolatus eorum matres prosequuntur, reliqua cura liberantur*), muss ein wesentlicher Unterschied zwischen Laktanz und Cicero unterstrichen werden. Das argumentative Ziel des Laktanz ist anders als das Ciceros: Während Letzterer nur die Vorsorge der Tiere für ihre Sprösslinge beschreiben will, verwendet Ersterer die zoologischen ‚Fakten‘, um gegen die These Epikurs, der Mensch sei den anderen Lebewesen unterlegen, zu argumentieren (Perrin 1974, 262 *ad loc.*).

<sup>32</sup> Lact. opif. 12.6: *conceptum igitur Varro et Aristoteles sic fieri arbitrantur. Aiunt non tantum maribus inesse semen, uerum etiam feminis et inde plerumque matribus similes procreari, sed earum semen sanguinem esse purgatum: quod si recte cum uirili mixtum sit, utraque concreta et simul coagulata informari...* Zu dieser Stelle s. Perrin (1974) 358–362 *ad loc.* und Bakhouche/Luciani (2009) 212–213 Anm. 190–192.

<sup>33</sup> Gilhus (2006) 249.

<sup>34</sup> Zum Vergleich: Der Text der *Septuaginta* lautet: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός Ἐξαγαγέτω τὰ ὄντα ἐρπετὰ ψυχῶν ζωσῶν καὶ πετεινὰ πετόμενα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κατὰ τὸ στερέωμα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. Die Vulgata bietet

Verwandtschaft von Vögeln und Fischen zu verstehen sei: Flossen und Flügel übten durch ähnliche Bewegungen die gleiche Funktion aus, d. h. seien Fortbewegungsgorgane, so dass das ‚Fliegen‘ als ‚Schwimmen in der Luft‘ gedeutet werden könne.<sup>35</sup> Eben diese Erklärung geht auf frühere Autoren zurück, wie z. B. Philon von Alexandrien und Aristoteles.<sup>36</sup> Insofern ist Basilius’ Behandlung der Fische m. E. von einem genuinen Interesse an Biologie und Zoologie animiert und es findet sich in seinem Text keine Spur eines vermeintlichen ‚Neides‘ gegenüber den Vögeln, der zu einer Herabwürdigung ihrer ‚himmlischen‘ Natur führen sollte. Ein ähnlich genuines biologisches Interesse hat vermutlich auch Laktanz inspiriert, wie die bisher analysierten Äußerungen zeigen, wobei er dies in den Dienst seiner argumentativen Strategie, welche die Existenz der göttlichen Vorsehung und zugleich die Begrenztheit des menschlichen Verstandes beweisen will, stellt.<sup>37</sup>

## Fazit

Obwohl Laktanz im Unterschied zu anderen christlichen Autoren weder eine systematische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Problem der Stellung von Tieren in der Schöpfung noch eine mehr oder weniger allegorische bzw. an der christlichen Ethik orientierte Umdeutung ihrer Charaktereigenschaften durch eine ausführliche Verwendung der Tiermetaphorik in seinen Schriften bietet, lassen die wenigen Äußerungen über diese Lebewesen in *De opificio Dei* zwei Schlussfolgerungen ziehen. Zum einen ist unter Berücksichtigung des spezifischen argumentativen Ziels dieser Schrift bei Laktanz ein relativ ausgeprägtes Interesse an Biologie festzustellen. Dieses In-

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folgende lateinische Übersetzung: *dixit etiam Deus producant aquae reptile animae viventis et volatile super terram sub firmamento caeli.*

<sup>35</sup> Bas. Caes. hex. 8.2, 130.13–17 De Mendieta/Rudberg: καὶ γὰρ ὕσπερ οἱ ἰχθῦς τὸ ὄνδωρ τέμνουσι, τῇ μὲν κινήσει τῶν πτερυγίων εἰς τὸ πρόσω χωροῦντες, τῇ δὲ τοῦ οὐραίου μεταβολῇ τάς τε περιστροφὰς καὶ τὰς εὐθείας ὄρμὰς ἔστοις οἰακίζοντες· οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν πτηνῶν ἔστιν ίδειν διανηρούμενων τὸν ἀέρα τοῖς πτεροῖς κατὰ τὸν ὄμοιον τρόπον.

<sup>36</sup> Philo Alex. opif. mun. 63: εὐθὺς δὲ καὶ τὰ γένη τῶν πτηνῶν ἐδημιούργει ὡς ἀδελφὰ τῶν καθ’ ὄντας – ἐκάτερα γὰρ νηκτά; Aristot. inc. an. 15.713a10: τοῖς μὲν ὄρνισιν αἱ πτέρυγες, τοῖς ἰχθύσι τὰ πτερύγια, τὸ ἀνάλογον μόριον.

<sup>37</sup> Wie Henke (2000) insb. 39–50 zeigt, weist auch Basilius’ Nutzung der paganen biologischen Kenntnisse drei präzise, an der christlichen Lehre orientierte argumentative Ziele auf. Erstens führt Basilius eine Polemik gegen jene philosophischen Schulen, welche die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen Mensch und Tier unterstrichen und dementsprechend den Tieren eine gewisse Form von Rationalität zubilligten. Zweitens verfolgt er das Ziel einer „theozentrische[n] Neuorientierung der paganen Zoologie“, die sich u. a. durch die „paränetische Zielsetzung“ der Schrift ausdrückt. Zentral ist in dieser Hinsicht die von Basilius oft eingesetzte Tiersymbolik, „durch die Basilius seiner Gemeinde die Lehren der christlichen Ethik plastisch und gegebenenfalls drastisch veranschaulichen will“. Drittens „baut Basilius“, indem er Kenntnisse der paganen Biologie in seiner Auslegung der Schöpfungsgeschichte einbaut, „den Heiden eine Brücke, um ihnen das Verständnis christlicher Lehre und damit den Übertritt ins Christentum zu erleichtern“.

teresse geht weit über die Behandlung der menschlichen Anatomie hinaus und schließt Kenntnisse (wenn auch manchmal fehlerhaft) aus dem Bereich der Zoologie mit ein. Insbesondere in seiner Behandlung der Vögel rezipiert Laktanz die Ergebnisse biologischer Forschung und verwendet sie, um die eigenen Ausführungen zur Natur des Menschen zu untermauern. Zum anderen lässt sich die Nutzung dieser Fachkenntnisse nur vollständig erklären, wenn die Intention und das angedachte Publikum der Schrift in Betracht gezogen werden: Biologische Fachkenntnisse ermöglichen den Menschen, in gewisser Weise durch die Beobachtung der Natur zur Gotteserkenntnis zu gelangen. Nur der Christ kann jedoch aufgrund der durch die Offenbarung ‚perfekteren‘ Gotteserkenntnis diese Kenntnisse richtig einschätzen und dement sprechend relativieren: Die biologische Forschung kann zwar die Existenz der göttlichen Vorsehung nachweisen, ihre Natur ist aber für den menschlichen Verstand letztendlich unbegreiflich (opif. 1.11: ... *deo, cuius diuinam prouidentiam perfectissimamque uirtutem nec sensu comprehendere nec uerbo enarrare possibile est*).

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