

THORSTEN FÖGEN

ὄρνιθων ὠραιότατος and *rara avis*
The Peacock in Greek and Latin Literature

Summary – This paper offers an overview and analysis of the main sources on peacocks and their interactions with humans, as portrayed in Greek and Latin literature. Based upon a brief scrutiny of Aristotle’s *Historia animalium* as an important Greek testimony, it takes into account scientific and miscellany literature such as Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia* and Aelian’s *De natura animalium* as well as the work of Roman agricultural writers (in particular Varro’s *De re rustica*, Columella’s *De re rustica* and Palladius’ *Opus agriculturae*). Closely connected to agricultural approaches are sources on the use of these birds in Roman cuisine (e.g. Petronius’ *Satyrica*). Light is also shed on the symbolic function of peacocks, especially in the context of poetry; one particularly interesting case in this regard are Martial’s *Epigrams* (13,70, 14,67 and 14,85, plus 3,58 and 5,37). Furthermore, the occurrence of peacocks in the genre of the fable (esp. in Aesop, fab. 219, Phaedrus, fab. 1,3 and 3,18, and Babrius, fab. 65) is examined. From the diversity of these sources, a complex and differentiated picture of the perceptions of peacocks among the Greeks and Romans and of their interactions with them emerges.

1. Introduction

In a glamorous catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art”, which was on view in the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers (New York) from October 2014 until January 2015, the foreword offers the following musings:

“Is there a more transgressive form than that of the peacock? ... I think not ... Emblematic in so many different cultures, powerful in its associations, yet we know it almost entirely visually. The peacock has none of the nobility of the eagle, the courage of the hawk, the nurturing nature of the nesting bird ... The peacock has forced its way into its exalted position because it is an extraordinarily successful single-purpose machine constructed, in every sense, to be the center of attention. And so it is. When we have need of this attribute, whether for our thrones, our costumes, our rooms, our dress, our jewelry, or our networks, even the simplest graphic borrowing of its image is deeply encoded with a message – the message of the diva, the star. What is so remarkable is that the peacock’s power as a signifier is entirely based on its visual form. The bird, itself, brings no characteristics of domination, power, triumph, wisdom, or sacrifice to the issue. It is the design of the plumage and the presentation of it that drive the symbol and its effect.”¹

¹ See Botwinick, Foreword, 14.

While this is certainly an interesting and thought-provoking assessment of the peacock, it is mainly oriented towards visual material. However, these unusual birds also occur in textual sources, both ancient and modern – and both literary and scientific or scholarly.²

This paper sheds some light on approaches to peacocks in ancient Greek and Latin literature, especially (1) in zoological and related accounts as represented by Aristotle's *Historia animalium*, Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* and Aelian's *De natura animalium*, (2) in agricultural treatises such as Varro's *De re rustica*, Columella's *De re rustica*, Palladius' *Opus agriculturae* and the Byzantine *Geoponica*, (3) in texts on Roman cuisine such as Petronius' *Satyrica* and various other testimonies, (4) in the Graeco-Roman fable as represented by authors such as Aesop, Phaedrus and Babrius, and (5) in the Roman poet Martial's epigrams. Special attention will be given to the description of their outward appearance, forms of behaviour and character as well as their symbolic value, depending on different perspectives and contexts. This also includes a closer look at the relationship, or forms of interaction, between peacocks and humans, as portrayed by individual sources. This will elucidate not only the various forms of their perception and usage by humans, but also their status, especially in comparison to other animals. Aspects of literary genre, especially generic expectations and constraints, will be taken into account wherever necessary.³ Texts in which peacocks play no more than a marginal role, e.g. in the form of an occasional aside or brief simile, cannot be considered in this paper – mainly because such passages would contribute relatively little to a more in-depth analysis of human-animal relationships, as envisaged here.

² The same catalogue has a chapter on the peacock in literature (see Fritzer, *Peacock*), but it is unfortunately rather superficial and devotes altogether less than a full page to the peacock in ancient Greek and Roman literature. For the most part, it focuses on authors from the twentieth century, and even there it is highly selective.

³ The peacock in ancient art is beyond the scope of this paper. See Keller, *Tierwelt* 2, 152–154; Steier, *Pfau*, 1419f.; Toynbee, *Animals*, 251–253; Arnott, *Birds*, 237f.; Monreal – Witte – Zanella, *Pfau*, 497–500 for a succinct overview and references to secondary literature; see also Tammisto, *Birds in Mosaics*, see index (s.v. “Peacock”); Watson, *Birds*, 388f.; and Reimbold, *Der Pfau*. Specifically on peacocks in ancient Christian art, see Lothar, *Der Pfau*, and Monreal – Witte – Zanella, *Pfau*, 505–510. As von der Osten-Sacken, *Untersuchungen*, 386, writes, there are “keine Darstellungen des Pfaus in der klassisch griechischen Kunst und auch in hellenistischer Zeit sind sie rar. Erst in römischer Zeit wird der dekorative Vogel häufiger abgebildet ... In der frühchristlichen Ikonographie erscheint er gerne in Paradiesdarstellungen.”

For various reasons, it is challenging to say something about the initial stages of the evolutionary background of the peacock. In her book “Peacock”, Christine E. Jackson has formulated this as follows:

“The earliest history of peacocks cannot be definitively established, mainly because bird skeletons do not lend themselves well to the process of fossilization. The fossil records for the Galliformes, the bird order to which peacocks belong, are incomplete. They show that fowl-like birds were differentiated and well established as a group early in Tertiary times, 26 million years ago.”⁴

The focus here is on the Blue or Indian Peafowl, or *Pavo cristatus* in Linnean terminology,⁵ whose origins are to be located on the Indian subcontinent.⁶ Probably around the seventh or sixth century BC, it was introduced to Palestine via Babylon and to Samos via Iran and the Middle East.⁷ In fifth-century BC Athens, the politician and diplomat Pylilampes was keeping birds and used peacocks to pay the women with whom his friend Pericles consorted.⁸ Another source reports that in classical Athens peacocks had been a rarity for a long time and that there were exhibitions of them, for which visitors, referred to as “friends of the beautiful” (φιλόκαλοι), had to pay an admission fee.⁹

These birds belong to the family of the Phasianidae and are their largest and heaviest representatives, with the males weighing between 4 to 6 kilograms

⁴ See Jackson, Peacock, 15.

⁵ There are two other rather rare species: the Green Peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) and the African or Congo Peafowl (*Afropavo congensis*), who were unknown to ancient authors. On the Green Peafowl, see Johnsgard, Pheasants, 362–365; Jackson, Peacock, 125–147; Madge – McGowan, Pheasants, 342–344; on the Congo Peafowl, see Johnsgard, Pheasants, 366–371 and Madge – McGowan, Pheasants, 344f.

⁶ The connection with India is already apparent from Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 9,1,13: *Hinc per deserta ventum est ad flumen Hiarotim. Iunctum erat flumini nemus opacum arboribus alibi inuisitatis agrestiumque pavonum multitudine frequens*. The river Hiarotis (or Hydraotis) mentioned here is called Ravi today and runs through modern India and Pakistan (with a length of 725 km). See also Lucian, *Nav.* 23 (ταὼς ἐξ Ἰνδίας) and Aelian, *nat. anim.* 5,21 fin.; 11,33; 13,18 and 16,2 (discussed below in section 2.3).

⁷ See Pollard, *Birds*, 91–93; Richter, *Pfau*, 680; and Jackson, Peacock, 86–96. As Jackson, Peacock, 86, writes, “[t]he biblical account of King Solomon importing peacocks about 950 BC is the first record of the presence of peacocks being taken westwards.” But see Steier, *Pfau*, 1415, and von der Osten-Sacken, *Untersuchungen*, 388.

⁸ Plutarch, *Per.* 13,10: δεξάμενοι δὲ τὸν λόγον οἱ κωμικοὶ πολλὴν ἀσέλγειαν αὐτοῦ κατεσκεδάσαν, εἷς τε τὴν Μενίππου γυναῖκα διαβάλλοντες, ἀνδρὸς φίλου καὶ ὑποστρατηγοῦντος, εἷς τε τὰς Πυριλάμπους ὄρνιθοτροφίας, ὃς ἐταῖρος ὢν Περικλέους αἰτίαν εἶχε ταῶνας ὑφίεναι ταῖς γυναῖξιν αἷς ὁ Περικλῆς ἐπλησίαζε.

⁹ Aelian, *nat. anim.* 5,21: καὶ χρόνου πολλοῦ σπάνιος ὢν εἶτα ἐδείκνυτο τῶν ἀνθρώπων τοῖς φιλοκάλοις μισθοῦ, καὶ Ἀθήνησι γε ταῖς νομηνίαις ἐδέχοντο καὶ ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖκας ἐπὶ τὴν ἱστορίαν αὐτῶν, καὶ τὴν θέαν πρόσσοδον εἶχον.

and having a total length of 2 metres or more.¹⁰ In ancient Greek the bird is called ταῶς (with the variants ταῶς, ταῶν and ταῶν) and in Latin *pavo* (gen. *pavonis*) or *pavus* (gen. *pavi*), both derived from an unidentifiable Eastern source.¹¹ According to Varro, the word *pavo* is onomatopoeic, i.e. based upon the sound of the cries that these birds produce; it is grouped together with bird names of a similar origin.¹² *Pavus* is also used as a personal name in Italy, as is attested by a fragment from the satirist Lucilius (second century BC).¹³ During the period of the late Roman Republic, Varro refers to Fircellius Pavo of Reate.¹⁴

2. Zoological and Related Accounts

2.1. Aristotle: *Historia animalium*

Towards the end of the first chapter of Book 1 of his *Historia animalium*, Aristotle offers a list of typical characteristics and habits of animals, including their disposition or nature (ἦθος). In this section, the peacock is mentioned for the first time in this work. It serves as an example of an animal that is jealous and fond of effect or ostentatious, and together with several other animals, it is contrasted with humans who are presented as the only creatures possessing the gifts of deliberation and recollection of past events at will.¹⁵

¹⁰ See Jackson, Peacock, 24f.: “The train in full breeding plumage projects from 100 to 120 centimetres (sometimes more) beyond the end of the true tail. The 100–150 raised train feathers, supported behind by the 20 still tail feathers, radiate out to form a huge arc 180 to 210 centimetres in width that is arched forwards towards the female.”

¹¹ See Frisk, *Wörterbuch* 2, 862; Liddell – Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1763; Walde – Hofmann, *Wörterbuch* 2, 267; Thompson, *Glossary*, 277; André, *Noms d’oiseaux*, 121f. There is also the feminine form *pava* for the peahen; see Ausonius, *epigr.* 76,1–4 (ed. Evelyn-White) [= 72,1–4 (ed. Green)] on sex changes: *Vallebanae (nova res et vix credenda poetis, | sed quae de vera promitur historia) | femineam in speciem convertit masculus ales | pavaque de pavo constitit ante oculos.*

¹² Varro *ling.* 5,75: *Deinde generatim: de his pleraeque ab suis vocibus ut haec: upupa, cuculus, corvus, hirundo, ulula, bubo; item haec: pavo, anser, gallina, columba.* Similarly Isidore, *orig.* 12,7,9: *Avium nomina multa a sono vocis constat esse composita: ut grus, corvus, cygnus, pavo, milvus, ulula, cuculus, graculus et cetera. Varietas enim vocis eorum docuit homines quid nominarentur.* See also Isid. *orig.* 12,7,48: *Pavo nomen de sono vocis habet ...* On onomatopoeic Latin bird names, see André, *Onomatopées*, and André, *Noms d’oiseaux*, 11.

¹³ Lucilius, *fr.* 467/468 Marx (= *fr.* 499/500 Warmington): *Publius Pavus Tuditanus mihi quaeost Hibera | in terra fuit lucifugus nebulo, id genus sane.*

¹⁴ See Varro *rust.* 3,2,2; 3,5,18 and 3,17,1.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *hist. anim.* I 1 488b24–27: τὰ δὲ φθονερά καὶ φιλόκαλα, οἷον ταῶς, βουλευτικὸν δὲ μόνον ἀνθρωπῶς ἐστὶ τῶν ζώων. καὶ μνήμης μὲν καὶ διδασχῆς πολλὰ κοινῶνεῖ, ἀναμνήσκεσθαι δ’ οὐδὲν ἄλλο δύναται πλὴν ἀνθρώπος. On animal “jealousy”, see Zucker, *Animal ‘Envy’*.

In Book 6 of the same treatise, Aristotle deals with birds.¹⁶ In the first chapter, peacocks are listed as an example of birds producing so-called wind-eggs (ὕπηνεμια).¹⁷ Later on in the same book, a separate section is reserved for a more cohesive treatment of peacocks. It provides information on their maximum age, reproduction, hatching and breeding; special attention is given to the way in which farmers, called οἱ τρέφοντες here (i.e. “breeders”), should take care of peafowl eggs.¹⁸ There is only a very brief reference to their appealing outward appearance which is directly combined with a remark about the age when they start to reproduce, namely at about three years.¹⁹ As Aristotle concludes, he is mainly concerned here and in previous sections with the manner of conception (κύησις) and generation (γένεσις) of birds.

Altogether, Aristotle does not devote a great deal of space to peacocks. While his *Historia animalium* is mainly written from the perspective of a scientist interested in zoology, biology and anatomy, he does include some details which are of relevance to the farmer or breeder of these birds, but explicit economic considerations do not form part of the discussion at all, as they would have gone beyond the scope of his approach.

2.2. Pliny the Elder: *Naturalis historia*

Pliny the Elder, who wrote in the first century A.D. and dedicated his massive work to the future emperor Titus (A.D. 79–81), devoted four of the 37 books of his *Naturalis historia* (Books 8–11) to animals. Book 8 deals with land animals, Book 9 with water animals, Book 10 with birds and Book 11 with insects.²⁰ Three paragraphs of Book 10 are specifically reserved for peacocks (*nat. hist.*

¹⁶ On the role of ornithology in Aristotle, see Kádár, *Klassifikation*, and Hammerschmidt, *Ornithologie*, the latter of whom also provides an alphabetical list of all the types of birds mentioned by the Greek author (Hammerschmidt, *Ornithologie*, 50–70). Hammerschmidt, *Ornithologie*, 72, expresses some reservations about Aristotle’s achievements in this area: “In der Vogelkunde hat er genau genommen, nur durch seine Forschung über die Bildung des Eies und Entwicklung des Hühnchens im Ei eine hervorragendere Leistung zu Tage gefördert. Was er sonst von den Vögeln zu sagen weiß, übersteigt wohl nur selten die Höhe volkstümlichen Wissens und erhält seinen Wert vornehmlich durch die systematische Anordnung.”

¹⁷ Aristotle, *hist. anim.* VI 1 559b29f.: γίγνεται δ’ ὑπηνέμια πολλῶν, οἷον ἀλεκτορίδος, πέρδικος, περιστερεῶς, ταῦνος, χηνός, χηναλώπεκος. Wind-eggs of peacocks are also referred to in *hist. anim.* VI 9 564a31: τίκτουσι δ’ οἱ ταῦ καὶ ὑπηνέμια.

¹⁸ Regarding the reference to breeders of peacocks, Lunczer, *Vögel*, 120, assumes that “ganz offensichtlich bestand also eine gewisse Nachfrage nach diesen Exoten.”

¹⁹ Aristotle, *hist. anim.* VI 9 564a25–27: γεννᾷ δὲ τριετῆς μάλιστα, ἐν οἷς καὶ τῆν ποικιλίαν τῶν πτερῶν ἀπολαμβάνει.

²⁰ On Pliny the Elder’s *nat. hist.* 8–11, see Fögen, *Pliny the Elder’s animals*, and Fögen, *Wissen*, 230–234, with detailed references to further secondary literature.

10,43–45). They belong to the class of plumage-birds (*alites*) as opposed to song-birds (*oscines*) and are differentiated by their size. Because of their extraordinary tail-feathers, they spearhead Pliny's list of plumage-birds. His reference to their beauty is directly intertwined with an intriguing remark about their consciousness and pride in it (nat. hist. 10,43; transl. Harris Rackham):

... omnesque reliquas in his pavonum genus cum forma tum intellectu eius et gloria. Gemmantes laudatus expandit colores, adverso maxime sole, quia sic fulgentius radiant. Simul umbrae quosdam repercussus ceteris, qui et in opaco clarius micant, conchata quaerit cauda omnesque in acervum contrahit pinnarum quos spectari gaudet oculos.

"... and among them before all the rest will come the peacock class, both because of its beauty and because of its consciousness of and pride in it. When praised it spreads out its jewelled colours directly facing the sun, because in that way they gleam more brilliantly; and at the same time by curving its tail like a shell it contrives as it were reflexions of shadow for the rest of its colours, which actually shine more brightly in the dark, and it draws together into a cluster all the eyes of its feathers, as it delights in having them looked at."

This passage is a striking example of animal psychology read into the behaviour of the bird. Pliny's wording presupposes that peacocks understand the praise and admiration they get from humans and feel compelled to behave accordingly.²¹ The reader gets the impression that these birds know exactly how to amaze their viewers and use specific techniques for that purpose; it is almost as if their *raison d'être* is predominantly defined through the spectacle they are putting on for others.²² This is in line with the subsequent statement that peacocks hide in shame and sorrow when they moult their feathers in the autumn season and do not reappear until springtime when their plumes have regrown.²³

Further details have been taken over from Aristotle, namely the maximum age of peacocks and the age at which they develop their colourful feathers as well as their supposedly ostentatious and spiteful character. However, Pliny the Elder expresses his doubts about whether it is justified to ascribe these traits

²¹ The word *gloria* is also applied to farmyard cockerels who are said to be almost as proud as peacocks (nat. hist. 10,46): *Proxime gloriam sentiunt et hi nostri vigiles nocturni, quos excitandis in opera mortalibus rumpendoque somno natura genuit.*

²² On the impact of light on the perception of the colours of the peacock's feathers, see Lucretius 2,806–809: *caudaque pavonis, larga cum luce repleta est, | consimili mutat ratione obversa colores; | qui quoniam quodam gignuntur luminis ictu, | scire licet, sine eo fieri non posse putandum est.* See also Seneca, nat. quaest. 1,5,6. On the Pliny passage, see De Saint-Denis, Nuances, esp. 220.

²³ Pliny the Elder, nat. hist. 10,44: *idem cauda annuis vicibus amissa cum foliis arborum, donec renascatur alia cum flore, pudibundus ac maerens quaerit latebram.*

to birds; even stylistically, he makes sure to distance himself from authors who have made such claims, but he does not name them explicitly in this passage.²⁴

The final paragraph, dedicated to the use of peacocks for culinary purposes and the money that can be made with them, is clearly inspired by a passage from Varro's *De re rustica* which shall be discussed in the subsequent chapter.²⁵ Suffice it to say here that both Aristotle and Varro are listed among several other authors as Pliny's sources in his index.

A later section in the same book, which is also indebted to Aristotle, describes the mating of peacocks and the peahens' production of eggs, the number of which varies with age (*nat. hist.* 10,161). The same source may be identified for Pliny's paragraphs on wind-eggs (*nat. hist.* 10,166; see Aristotle, *hist. anim.* VI 1 559b29f.) and on friendship among certain birds (*nat. hist.* 10,207; see Aristotle, *hist. anim.* VIII (IX) 1 610a9–13). However, in the latter case, Pliny's account differs somewhat from his supposed model who does not explicitly mention peacocks.²⁶

Beyond Book 10, there is a passage on birds' crests in Book 11 where peacocks are also mentioned as wearing "bushy tufts".²⁷ But as in Book 10, it is difficult to get a proper idea of the exact details of their shape and outward

²⁴ Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 10,44: *vivit annis XXV. colores fundere incipit in trimatu. ab auctori-bus non gloriosum tantum animal hoc traditur, sed et malivolum, sicut anserem verecundum, quoniam has quoque quidam addiderunt notas in his, haud probatas mihi.* The adjectives *gloriosum* and *malivolum* are used to render Aristotle's phrase τὰ δὲ φθονερά και φιλόκαλα (*hist. anim.* I 1 488b24; see above). See also Capponi, *Le fonti*, 112–114, and Rink, *Mensch und Vogel*, 92.

²⁵ Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 10,45: *Pavonem cibi gratia Romae primus occidit orator Hortensius aditali cena sacerdotii. saginare primus instituit circa novissimum piraticum bellum M. Aufidius Lurco, exque eo quaestu reditus HS sexagena milia habuit.* Hortensius is also mentioned in conjunction with animals in *nat. hist.* 8,211 (*vivaria eorum ceterarumque silvestrium*) and 9,170 (*piscium vivaria*).

²⁶ Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 10,207: *Rursus amici pavones et columbae, turtures et psittaci, merulae et turtures, cornix et ardiolae contra volpium genus communibus inimicitiis, harpe et milvus contra triorchin. quid, non et adfectus indicia sunt etiam in serpentibus, inmitissimo animalium genere?* See Aristotle, *hist. anim.* VIII (IX) 1 610a9–13: κορώνη δὲ και ἐρωδιός φίλοι, και σχουίων και κόρυδος, και λαεδός και κελεός: ὁ μὲν γάρ κελεός παρὰ ποταμὸν οἰκεῖ και λόχμας, ὁ δὲ λαεδός πέτρας και ὄρη, και φιλοχωρεῖ οὗ ἂν οἰκῆ. και πίφηξ και ἄρπη και ἰκτίνος φίλοι, και ἀλώπηξ και ὄφις (ἄμφο γάρ τρωγλοδύται), και κόττυφος και τρυγών. See also Capponi, *Le fonti*, 258f.

²⁷ Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 11,121f.: *Caput habent cuncta quae sanguinem. in capite paucis animalium nec nisi volucris apices, diversi quidem generis, phoenici plumarum serie e medio eo exeunte alio, pavonibus crinitis arbusculis, stymphalidi cirro, phasianae corniculis, praeterea parvae avi quae, ab illo galerita appellata quondam, postea Gallico vocabulo etiam legioni nomen dederat alaudae.*

appearance.²⁸ In Book 29, they briefly occur in the context of remedies for eye diseases where several recipes based upon ingredients from birds such as gall, fat and dung have been collected. In passing Pliny mentions that peacocks allegedly swallow their own dung because they begrudge humans its benefits. This serves as a disconnected explanation as to why these animals have been called “spiteful” or “envious” (φθονερός and *malivolus* respectively) by certain writers, especially Aristotle. However, as before, Pliny signals that this is not his own opinion and that he simply reports other scholars’ views – presumably for the sake of comprehensiveness which he also tries to achieve elsewhere in his massive work.²⁹

2.3. Aelian: De natura animalium

In Aelian’s work Περὶ ζώων ιδιότητος (*De natura animalium*), peacocks occur in seven chapters (*nat. anim.* 3,42; 5,21; 5,32; 11,18; 11,33; 13,18; 16,2). They may not figure among those species that the author thematises particularly frequently, but they nonetheless lend themselves as a topic to Aelian who takes a strong interest in the unusual.

The first reference (*nat. anim.* 3,42) is part of a section on the purple coot (πορφυρίων) which is described as very beautiful, jealous and unable to fly high; it is said to be popular among humans, in particular in wealthy households, but may also live in temples as a sacred creature.³⁰ In the second half of this chapter, the purple coot is then compared to a peacock with which it shares its attractive outward appearance. However, the difference between them is that, unlike peacocks, purple coots are not served as food. It is interesting to note that this custom is associated with people described as ἄσωτοι (“profligate”) and ἀκρατέστατοι (“uncontrolled”); hence, the consumption of peacocks is not seen as a normal eating habit, but as something out of the ordinary and morally questionable, practised by people who do not have themselves under control.

²⁸ See also Capponi, *Ornithologia Latina*, 390: “Dalla descrizione pliniana non è facile rilevare elementi morfologici reali.”

²⁹ Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 29,124: *qua in mentione significandum est pavones fimum suum resorbere tradi invidentes hominum utilitatibus*. As in *nat. hist.* 10,44 (quoted in n. 24), he uses the passive form of *tradere* to distance himself from this belief. On the relationship of “Totalitätsstreben und Selektion” within the *Naturalis historia*, see Fögen, *Wissen*, esp. 227 n. 73 and 232–234.

³⁰ Wember – Lunczer, *Flamingo und Purpurhuhn*, demonstrate that the term πορφυρίων has different meanings in antiquity and is not limited to one and the same type of bird. They nevertheless come to the conclusion that “[d]er Name *porphyrion* hatte sich spätestens seit Plinius als Bezeichnung für das Purpurhuhn durchgesetzt.”

The theme of the peacock as a typically proud bird aware of its beauty is taken up in *nat. anim.* 5,21, but with the added remark that it may use its feathers to scare others – an impact further increased by its shrill voice which is compared to the clang of a hoplite’s armour.³¹ The bird’s warrior-like impression is enhanced by its crest which is likened to a triple-plumed helmet (τριλοφία).³² However, the main part of this chapter is devoted not only to how the peacock uses its feathers to protect itself against heat and to produce a cooling effect, but also to the extraordinary character of its tail which it is more than willing to show to others. Its feathers are related to a flowery meadow (ἔοικεν ἀνθηρῶ λειμῶνι) and a colourful painting (γραφή πεποικιλμένη πολυχροία τῆ τῶν φαρμάκων), though Aelian adds that painters will find it very challenging to portray them accurately.³³ The idea behind this remark is that capturing the

³¹ One may compare Eupolis, fr. 41 Kassel – Austin [= 36 K.] (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 9 397b–c): μή ποτε θρέψω | παρὰ Φερσεφόνῃ τοιόνδε ταῶν, ὃς τοὺς εὐδοντας ἐγείρει. For a fuller discussion of this fragment, see Olson, *Eupolis*, 167–170. On the voice of peacocks from the perspective of modern biology, see Johnsgard, *Pheasants*, 358: “The calls of the Indian peafowl are numerous and are still only rather poorly described. Johnsingh and Murali (1980) listed 11 possibly distinct calls, of which three or four are associated with various enemies, one with parent-young relationships, and one with sexual behavior and related aggressive behavior.”

³² Aelian, *nat. anim.* 5,21: Ὁ ταῶς οἶδεν ὀρνίθων ὠραιότατος ὄν, καὶ ἔνθα οἱ τὸ κάλλος κάθηται, καὶ τοῦτο οἶδε, καὶ ἐπ’ αὐτῷ κομᾶ καὶ σοβαρὸς ἐστί, καὶ θαρρεῖ τοῖς πτεροῖς, ἅπερ οὖν αὐτῷ καὶ κόσμον περιτίθησι, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἔξωθεν φόβον ἀποστέλλει, καὶ ἐν ὥρᾳ θερείῳ σκέπην οἰκοθεν καὶ οὐκ ἠτημένῃ οὐδὲ ὀθειαν παρέχεται. ἐὰν γοῦν θελήσῃ φοβῆσθαι τινα, ἐγείρας τὰ οὐραῖα εἶτα διεσείσατο καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ἦχον, καὶ ἔδεισαν οἱ παρεστώτες, ὡς ὀπίτου τὸν ἐκ τῶν ὄπλων πεφοβημένοι δοῦπον. ἀνατείνει δὲ τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ἐπινεύει σοβαρώτατα, ὥσπερ οὖν ἐπισείων τριλοφίαν.

³³ For a comparison of the peacock’s feathers to a meadow, see also *Ach. Tat.* 1,16,3: ταῦτη νῦν οὕτος τὸ κάλλος ἐπιδείκνυται λειμῶνα πτερῶν. ὁ δὲ τοῦ ταῶ λειμῶν εὐανθέστερος, πεφύτευται γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ χρυσὸς ἐν τοῖς πτεροῖς, κύκλω δὲ τὸ ἀλουργὲς τὸν χρυσὸν περιθεῖε τὸν ἴσον κύκλον, καὶ ἐστὶν ὀφθαλμὸς ἐν τῷ πτερῷ. For the imagery of an almost personified meadow challenging the peacock to vie with it in its beauty, see *Lucian, Dom.* 11: ὁ δὲ ταῶς ἦρος ἀρχομένου πρὸς λειμῶνά τινα ἐλθὼν, ὁπότε καὶ τὰ ἄνθη πρόεισιν οὐ ποθεινότερα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὡς ἂν εἶποι τις ἀνθηρότερα καὶ τὰς βαφὰς καθαρώτερα, τότε καὶ οὗτος ἐκπετάσας τὰ πτερά καὶ ἀναδείξας τῷ ἡλίῳ καὶ τὴν οὐρὰν ἐπάρας καὶ πάντοθεν αὐτῷ περιστήσας ἐπιδείκνυται τὰ ἄνθη τὰ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ ἔαρ τῶν πτερῶν ὥσπερ αὐτὸν προκαλοῦντος τοῦ λειμῶνος ἐς τὴν ἄμιλλαν ... It must be added that in his epilogue Aelian describes the variegated nature of his work in terms of a meadow: δεῦτερον δὲ τῷ ποικίλῳ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως τὸ ἐφοικὸν θηρῶν καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῶν ὁμοίων βδελυγμίαν ἀποδιδράσκων, οἰοεὶ λειμῶνά τινα ἢ στέφανον ὠραῖον ἐκ τῆς πολυχροίας, ὡς ἀνθεσφόρων τῶν ζῶων τῶν πολλῶν, ὧθήθη δὲ τὴν ὥρᾴ τε καὶ διαπλέξαι τὴν συγγραφὴν. On the significance of ποικιλία in his *De natura animalium*, see *Kindstrand, Claudius Aelianus*, 2962–2964; *Smith, Man and Animal*, 47–66; and *Hindermann, Aelian und die ποικιλία*.

specific character of nature (τῆς φύσεως τὸ ἴδιον) through art is not an easy task; this implies that the peacock is a unique product of the natural world which deserves to be written about – an important element that forms part of Aelian’s literary agenda. The rest of this chapter refers very generally to the bird’s origin and its introduction into Greece as well as its initial rarity and value; it briefly mentions the anecdote about Hortensius being the first to serve peacocks as a meal and connects it with the story about Alexander the Great admiring their beauty in India and threatening the severest penalties for those who killed them.³⁴ Although Aelian’s account comprises different types of information, it is obvious that he pays a lot of attention to the bird’s attractive appearance and repeatedly anthropomorphises it through an approximation of its behaviour to that of humans.³⁵

The very short overview on some biological aspects in *nat. anim.* 5,32 is to be seen as an appendix to 5,21, but Aelian finds it important to emphasise that such details are worth mentioning because they are part of this animal’s specific characteristics (συμφυᾶ καὶ ἴδια) that readers need to know. The author is thus keen to offer a differentiated picture of every species that he presents in his work.

The same impression is conveyed by the beginning of *nat. anim.* 11,18 where it is presented as a peculiarity (ἴδια) of the peacock that it seeks out a root of flax as a kind of natural amulet to avoid being bewitched or disparaged. It is thus portrayed as an animal that seems to know by nature how to use certain remedies in order to protect itself.³⁶

³⁴ On Alexander the Great in Aelian’s *De natura animalium*, see Smith, *Man and Animal*, 170–172 and 177, who rightly observes (171) that Alexander is “conceived by Aelian as a sympathetic witness to the natural world”.

³⁵ Similarly Lewis – Llewellyn-Jones, *Culture of Animals*, 276f., who also evaluate the credibility of the Alexander anecdote: “the reference to Alexander the Great’s admiration for peacocks at the end of the passage is found only here, and seems implausible; it is unlikely that the Macedonians encountered peacocks for the first time in India when the birds had been known in Greece for a century or more, and when the Macedonians had furthermore passed through Persia, taking control of the Persian king’s palaces.”

³⁶ Aelian, *nat. anim.* 11,18: Ἴδια δὲ ἄρα τῶν ζώων καὶ ταῦτά ἐστιν. ὁ ταῶς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βασκανθῆναι λίνου ρίζαν οἰονεὶ περιάπτων τι φυσικὸν ἀναζητήσας, ὑπὸ τῆ ἐτέρα πτέρυγι βύσας περιφέρει. The verb *βασκαίνειν* has different meanings: “to bewitch by the evil eye”, “malign” or “disparage”, and “envy” or “grudge”. They can all be subsumed under the category of bad effects initiated by others. – On the self-healing power (or the natural gift of self-protection) of other animals, see e.g. Aelian, *nat. anim.* 2,43 (hawks), 5,46 (dogs), 6,3 (bears) and 7,14 (goats); see in particular the final part of *nat. anim.* 2,18 (elephants): ἀλλὰ τούτων γε τῶν σοφισμάτων ἢ φύσει οὐδὲν ἐδεῖτο· καὶ κατηγορεῖ ὁ ἐλέφας. ὅταν γοῦν εἰς αὐτὸν ἔλθῃ δόρατα καὶ βέλη πολλά, ἐλαίας πάσας ἄνθος ἢ ἔλαιον αὐτό, εἶτα πᾶν τὸ ἐμπεσὸν

A longer anecdote about a particularly large and attractive Indian peacock kept by an Egyptian king is narrated in *nat. anim.* 11,33. This bird is said to have been so splendid that the king decided to dedicate it to Zeus Polieus rather than keep it with the rest of the flock. A wealthy and dissolute young man, for whom the adjective ἄσωτος is used once again (see *nat. anim.* 3,42), is eager to have it as a meal and bribes one of the temple attendants to get hold of the peacock. When the bird escapes and settles on the centre of the temple, the young man vainly reclaims his money from the attendant and starts an undignified fight with him, but then departs. The story ends rather abruptly with a reference to the young man painfully dying from a bone of another bird and to the attendant being punished by the governor of the city (ὁ τῆς πόλεως ἄρμοστής) for sacrilege. The focus is therefore on two forms of human wrongdoing: irreverent greed in the case of the young man for whom it provides some kind of titillation to incur danger and high expenses in order to get whatever he wants,³⁷ and the violation or even desecration of the temple in the case of the attendant. The peacock, as a sacred creature, is powerfully contrasted with the two villains: Through its elevated position on the temple (ἐπί τι μέσον τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ νεώ), its status is clearly signalled; it ranges above the two humans, is unattainable and even looks at them in such a way as to indicate its superiority: εἰς αὐτοὺς ἀτρέπτως ἐώρα, οἷον ὑποφαίνων ὅτι ἄρα τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς τῆς ἐκείνων κρείττων πέφυκε, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτοῖς ἐλεῖν αὐτόν (*nat. anim.* 11,33). The animal here serves as a means to illustrate human transgression and even blasphemy.³⁸ At the same time, its close association with a religious context provides

ἀπεσεῖσατο, καὶ ἔστιν αἴθις ὀλόκληρος. See also Hübner, *Mensch*, 161, and Bouffartigue, *L'automédication des animaux*.

³⁷ The language used for the description of the young man's character is very negative (*nat. anim.* 11,33): αἰεὶ γὰρ τῆ γαστρὶ ἐχαρίζετο καὶ ἐξ ἀπάσης αἰτίας ὁ ἄσωτος οὗτος, τὸ ποικίλον τῆς τροφῆς καὶ τὸ σὺν κινδύνῳ πορισθὲν καὶ τὸ ἐωνημένον πολλῶν ὄνων λαίμαργίας καὶ βδελυρίας ὑπερβολῆ κέρδος ἠγοούμενος εἰς ἡδονήν. The imperfect tense of ἐχαρίζετο, combined with the temporal adverb αἰεὶ (placed at the very beginning of the sentence), underscores that his despicable behaviour was of a permanent nature. Moreover, the sentence revealingly ends with the keyword ἡδονήν. One might be inclined to identify Stoic ideas on the nature of emotions in this passage; on the role of Stoicism in Aelian's work, see Kindstrand, *Claudius Aelianus*, 2967f., 2990, and Smith, *Man and Animal*, 100–120, but see already Schöner, *De Claudio Aeliano*, 18–46, who concisely points out the following (28): “Cum Stoicis consentit in laude animi contenti et moderati, in vituperatione luxuriae libidinis avaritiae.”

³⁸ Hübner, *Mensch*, 162, aptly speaks of a contrast between “böse[r] Menschenwelt” and “heile[r] Tierwelt” in such instances; see also Kindstrand, *Claudius Aelianus*, 2964–2968. This is pointedly summarised in the following statement, put into the mouth of the owner of an ill horse (*nat. anim.* 11,31): εἶναι γὰρ τινὰς ἀνθρώπους σφίσι κακῶν αἰτίους ἢ δρᾶσαντάς τι ἀσεβῆς ἢ εἰπόντας τι ἀπόρημον· “ἵππου δέ” ἔλεγε “ποία μὲν θεοσυλία, φόνος δὲ τίς, βλασφημία δὲ

an example of its special status in the ancient world, though it was much more commonly linked with Hera/Juno than with Zeus (see below).

India as the peacocks' country of origin plays a role in the two final texts to be considered here. In *nat. anim.* 13,18 reference is made to the magnificent palace gardens (παράδεισοι) in which tame peacocks and pheasants are kept together with parrots. The description of the grounds, completely geared towards admiration (θαυμάσαι ἄξια), is that of an idyllic and peaceful place, characterised by evergreen trees and a benign climate. The animals perfectly complement and further enrich this scenery with their presence. It is such a serene and blissful location that several birds even came there of their own accord.³⁹ Finally, *nat. anim.* 16,2 is about different types of Indian parrots and several other birds such as doves and cocks. This chapter briefly mentions the existence of peacocks in India which are said to be larger than anywhere else.⁴⁰

As is typical of Aelian's work on animals, he combines zoological and biological information on peacocks with anecdotal material and puts a great deal of emphasis on the specific characteristics of these birds. With their beauty, they are presented as truly unique creatures that are often associated with wealth and luxury. But they are also used as a foil for misguided human behaviour, especially gluttony. Aelian's narrative is thus on a different level when compared to Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, even if it is sometimes recognisable that he has used material from his predecessors for his own approach to animals.

3. Agricultural Treatises

3.1. Varro: *De re rustica*

Among the extant Latin agricultural treatises, Varro's dialogic work *De re rustica* is the first to thematise peacocks. They are discussed in Book 3 which deals with the husbandry of the steading (*pastio villatica*). The sixth chapter comprises six paragraphs which put a great deal of emphasis on the significant

πῶς ἢ πόθεν;" In a later passage, Hübner, *Mensch*, 173, explains the potential origin of this perception as follows: "Die religiös-sentimentale Aufwertung der Tierwelt auf Kosten der Menschen, die bei Aelian ... auftritt, könnte historisch aus dem Heilsbedürfnis jener Epoche erklärt werden. Sie ist andererseits aber auch eine Konstante, die allen historischen Wandel überdauert hat."

³⁹ See Aelian, *nat. anim.* 13,18: ὄρνιθες οὖν καὶ ἕτεροι ἐλεύθεροι καὶ ἀδούλωτοι, καὶ ἐλθόντες αὐτομάτως ἔχουσι κατ' αὐτῶν κοίτας καὶ εὐνάς.

⁴⁰ On the role of India in Aelian's *De natura animalium*, see Smith, *Man and Animal*, 165–178, who writes (177): "Part of the aesthetic appeal of India for Aelian is the polychromatic, variegated quality of many of its animal inhabitants, suggesting a strong association between literary *poikilia* and the imagery of Indian exotica."

material gain that can be made with these birds (rust. 3,6,1; 3,6,3f.; 3,6,6). In between, reference is made to the beauty of male peacocks, to breeding methods, feeding, and the forming of a flock. Furthermore, there is a description of the construction of an appropriate aviary (rust. 3,6,5; transl. William D. Hooper):

Quod tectum pro multitudine pavonum fieri debet et habere cubilia discreta, tectorio levata, quo neque serpens neque bestia accedere ulla possit; praeterea habere locum ante se, quo pastum exeant diebus apricis. Utrumque locum purum esse volunt hae volucres. Itaque pastorem earum cum vatillo circumire oportet ac sterqus tollere ac conservare, quod et ad agri culturam idoneum est et ad substramen pullorum.

“This building should be made of a size proportioned to the number of peafowl, and should have separate sleeping quarters, coated with smooth plaster, so that no serpent or animal can get in; it should also have an open place in front of it, to which they may go out to feed on sunny days. These birds require that both places be clean; and so their keeper should go around with a shovel and pick up the droppings and keep them, as they are useful for fertilizer and as litter for chicks.”

This passage indicates that aspects of proper hygiene and appropriate space are combined with the prevention of peacocks from being attacked by noxious animals.⁴¹ In addition, it seems to imply that a specific farm worker (*pastor*) is in charge of these birds, although it cannot be ruled out that this staff member also deals with other animals.

The final paragraph sheds light on the use of peacocks in Roman cuisine and makes clear that their consumption was commonly associated with luxury (rust. 3,6,6; transl. William D. Hooper):

Primus hos Q. Hortensius augurali adituali cena posuisse dicitur, quod potius factum tum luxuriosi quam severi boni viri laudabant. Quem cito secuti multi extulerunt eorum pretia, ita ut ova eorum denariis veneant quinis, ipsi facile quinquagenis, grex centenarius facile quadragena milia sestertia ut reddat, ut quidem Abuccius aiebat, si in singulos ternos exigeret pullos, perfici sexagena posse.

“It is said that Quintus Hortensius was the first to serve these fowl; it was on the occasion of his inauguration as aedile, and the innovation was praised at that time rather by the luxurious than by those who were strict and virtuous. As his example was quickly followed by many, the price has risen to such a point that the eggs sell for five denarii each, the birds themselves sell readily for 50 each, and a flock of 100 easily brings 40,000 sesterces – in fact, Abuccius used to say that if one required three chicks to every hen, the total might amount to 60,000.”

⁴¹ On pests and vermin in Roman agricultural writing, see Fögen, *Tiere als Schädlinge*, with further literature.

What is intriguing about this excerpt is not only the fact that the introduction of the use of peacocks as food is explicitly linked with a particular individual, the late Republican orator Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (114–50 BC) who was often associated with a luxurious lifestyle, but also that he is contrasted with citizens who are characterised as *severi boni viri* and thus represent a different kind of lifestyle more in tune with traditional Roman values. Moreover, Hortensius is presented here as some kind of trendsetter who is ultimately responsible for a significant increase in the price that people were willing to pay for peacocks and their eggs. The aesthetic delight that these birds offer is certainly mentioned by Varro,⁴² but altogether it plays a much less important role for him than the considerable financial profit that the farmer can gain from the cultivation of peacocks.

3.2. Columella: De re rustica

Economic issues also play a vital role in Columella's treatise *De re rustica*, but there are several instances where the author also draws attention to the decorative function or aesthetic value of certain animals.⁴³ The peacock is probably the most illustrative example (rust. 8,11,1; text from Will Richter's edition; transl. Edward Seymour Forster – Edward H. Heffner):

Pavonum educatio magis urbani patrisfamiliae quam tetrici rustici curam poscit. sed nec haec tamen aliena est agricolae captantis undique voluptates acquirere, quibus solitudinem ruris eblandiatur. harum autem decor avium etiam exteros, nedum dominos oblectat.

“The rearing of peacocks calls for the attention of the city-dwelling householder rather than of the surly countryman; yet it is not alien to the business of the farmer who aims at the acquisition, from every source, of pleasure with which he beguiles the loneliness of country life; and the elegance of these birds delights even strangers, much more their owners.”

This excerpt emphasises that peacocks were not as widely associated with the country farm as with an urban setting. According to Columella, they are mainly used by farmers to offer an enjoyable visual experience which is seen as particularly desirable in a remote setting such as a country estate; this is highlighted by the substantive *voluptates* as well as the two verbs *eblandiatur* and *oblectat*. The chapter offers information on their confinement to islands

⁴² See Varro rust. 3,6,2: *li aliquanto pauciores esse debent mares quam feminae, si ad fructum spectes; si ad delectationem, contra; formosior enim mas. ... Huic enim natura formae e volucris dedit palmam.*

⁴³ For a fuller discussion of the roles and functions of animals in Columella's *De re rustica*, see Fögen, *All Creatures*.

which provide a safe space (rust. 8,11,1), on reproduction and feeding (8,11,2), the substantial amount of care to be provided (8,11,3), appropriate accommodation, especially in the form of a specific peacock-house (8,11,3f.), mating periods and the instigation of their sexual urge through suitable food (8,11,5–8), the production and collection of eggs (8,11,9–13), the maintenance of young peachicks (8,11,14–16), and various remedies for illnesses (8,11,16f.). Embedded within this detailed list of recommendations is another explicit remark about the beauty of peacocks: In the context of mating, there is a reference to the attractiveness of the fanned out tail-feathers of male birds, viewed as a sign of their sexual urge. At the same time, Columella notes that they even appear to be admiring themselves when spreading their tails.⁴⁴

Altogether, the chapter makes it clear that peacocks usually require a great deal of care,⁴⁵ although their usefulness beyond their appealing looks seems to be relatively limited. A comparison with Varro demonstrates that Columella does not explicitly talk about peacocks as a source of food or about the financial gain that a farmer can derive from them. Although he points out their aesthetic value, his enthusiasm is not excessive. It seems that he understood the function of such birds which would have added to the charm of a country estate. Peacocks as well as other enchanting animals would have lured estate owners, who were normally based in the city of Rome, to the countryside more often. The fact that many of them would only spend very little, if any, time on their farms was lamented by Columella in the preface to Book 1 (rust. 1 praef. 11f. and 15–17),⁴⁶ so he must have welcomed a “remedy” in the form of enticing animals. Moreover, the common association of peacocks with the urban sphere suggests that they were regarded as symbols of status and of a civilised lifestyle that was quite removed from the old ideal of the rustic habits of early Rome.⁴⁷

3.3. Palladius: *Opus agriculturae*

In his agricultural treatise entitled *Opus agriculturae*, the late antique author Palladius has also devoted a separate chapter to peacocks (op. 1,28), but with its six paragraphs, it comprises less than half the length of Columella’s treat-

⁴⁴ Columella rust. 8,11,8: *signa sunt extimolatae cupidinis, cum semet ipsum velut emirantem caudae gemmantibus pinnis protegit, idque cum facit, rotari dicitur.*

⁴⁵ Columella rust. 8,11,3: *Sed huius possessionis rara condicio est. quare mediterraneis maior adhibenda cura est.*

⁴⁶ See Fögen, Wissen, esp. 159–162, for details.

⁴⁷ This is pointedly summarised by Jennison, *Animals*, 108: “Columella reckoned the breeding of peafowl rather as a hobby for the cultivated gentleman than as an occupation for the serious farmer.”

ment of these birds. Unlike his predecessor whom he has extensively used as a source,⁴⁸ Palladius introduces his section on peacocks by the statement that they are very easy to rear unless they are threatened by thieves or predatory animals; this applies in particular to brooding females who need to be protected from foxes (op. 1,28,1). He also discusses their keeping, nutrition and reproduction as well as the maintenance of young peachicks and adds a very succinct appendix on health issues. Only briefly does he mention their attractive outward appearance, drawing attention to their distinctive crest (op. 1,28,2: *cristarum ... insigne*) and the curving of their jewelled tail as a sign of their desire to mate (1,28,2: *cupidinem coeundi masculus confitetur, quotiens circa se amictum caudae gemmantis incurvat et singularum capita oculata pinnarum locis suis exerit cum stridore procurrens*). Economic considerations do not play any role in this chapter, although the instructions on the right handling of peafowl eggs and hatched chicks, which take up more than half of the entire section (op. 1,28,3–6), seem to reveal that the farmer should take an interest in profit maximisation.

With regard to Palladius' other chapters on aviculture, Moure Casas and Martin have argued that the section on peacocks is the most extensive, precise and original; this has led them to believe that the author must have been a specialist in the cultivation of these birds,⁴⁹ but given the relative brevity in comparison with Columella (who is explicitly referred to in op. 1,28,5), this may be slightly exaggerated.

3.4. The Byzantine Geoponica

The Geoponica are a compilation in twenty books commissioned by the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus (A.D. 905–959). While its first twelve books discuss a wide range of topics related to agriculture and the farmer's tasks, Books 13–20 deal with animals and take up more than one quarter (27.5 %) of the entire text of the work.⁵⁰ Book 14 is specifically reserved for

⁴⁸ See Fögen, Text, for a fuller discussion.

⁴⁹ See Moure Casas, Paladio, 117f. n. 43: “El presente capítulo es el más extenso, preciso y original de los dedicados a avicultura, y parece que Paladio había sido un especialista en la cría de pavos.” Similarly Martin, Palladius, 143: “Il est assez étonnant ... que le chapitre consacré par Palladius aux paons soit le plus long et le plus précis de ceux où il traite d'aviculture; mais il semble ... que l'agronome ait été en quelque sorte un spécialiste de cet élevage: son chapitre 28 est en tout cas un de ceux qui offrent le plus de notations originales.”

⁵⁰ On the role of animals in the Geoponica, see Fögen, Of Mice and Men, with detailed references to further secondary literature on this compilation.

the treatment of pigeons and other birds.⁵¹ Peacocks are considered in a very succinct chapter (geop. 14,18), for which the Greek writer Didymus is indicated as the authority.⁵² The text starts *in medias res* and recommends that these birds are best kept on man-made islands – a suggestion that can also be found in Columella who, unlike the Geoponica, gives a plausible explanation for his advice (rust. 8,11,1). After addressing the peacocks' need for an area with plenty of herbage and parkland, the chapter then focuses on the laying of eggs and feeding. However, it has nothing at all to say on their attractive appearance. Altogether, it offers a very reduced and superficial treatment, as one might expect from a compilation.

4. Texts on Roman Cuisine

As has already been mentioned above, both Varro and Pliny the Elder identified Quintus Hortensius Hortalus as the first individual among the Romans who introduced peafowl for culinary purposes.⁵³

Two letters in Cicero's collection *Ad familiares*, both addressed to his friend L. Papirius Paetus, confirm that these birds were seen as a symbol of extravagant cuisine at least from the late Republic onwards. In *fam.* 9,17(18),3, sent in July 46 B.C., Cicero writes that he has eaten more peacocks than Paetus has consumed young doves.⁵⁴ Shortly thereafter, he uses another letter to talk about hospitality and dining as well as his exceptional appetite that is compelling him to eat significantly more than usual. Jokingly, he associates himself with his former enemy Epicurus, the proverbial symbol of excess. Calling himself gluttonous (*edax*), he claims to have become an expert in feasting who has invit-

⁵¹ Specifically on Book 14 of the Geoponica, see Sommer, Buch 14 und 20 der Geoponica, 5–82, and Meana – Cubero – Sáez, Geopónica, 463–489.

⁵² Didymus is among the most frequently mentioned sources of the Geoponica and also occurs in the list of authors provided in the preface to Book 1 (geop. 1 praef.): Τὰ διαφοροῖς τῶν παλαιῶν περὶ τε γεωργίας καὶ ἐπιμελείας φυτῶν καὶ σπορίμων καὶ ἐτέρων πολλῶν χρησίμων εἰρημένα συλλέξας εἰς ἓν, τοῦτ' ἰ βιβλίον συντέθεικα. συνειλεκται δὲ ἐκ τῶν Φλωρεντίνου καὶ Οὐίνδανωνίου καὶ Ανατολίου καὶ Βηρυτίου καὶ Διοφάνους καὶ Λεοντίου καὶ Ταραντίνου καὶ Δημοκρίτου καὶ Ἀφρικανοῦ παραδόξων καὶ Παμφίλου καὶ Ἀπουληίου καὶ Βάρωνος καὶ Ζωροάστρου καὶ Φρόντωνος καὶ Παξάμου καὶ Δαμηγέροντος καὶ Διδύμου καὶ Σωτίωνος καὶ τῶν Κυντιλίων.

⁵³ On the role of food and eating in Roman literature more generally, see e.g. Gowers, *The Loaded Table*; however, her overview ends with the first and second centuries A.D. See also André, *Essen und Trinken*; Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl*; Tietz, *Dilectus ciborum*; and Wilkins – Nadeau, *A Companion to Food*.

⁵⁴ Cicero *fam.* 9,17(18),3: *extremum illud est, quod tu nescio an primum putes: pluris iam pavones confeci quam tu pullos columbinos.*

ed people like Paetus' friends Verrius and Camillus, known to be connoisseurs, or even Caesar's confidant Aulus Hirtius, but without serving him peacock.⁵⁵ In both letters, the bird is entirely seen as a food item; its beauty is briefly touched upon in a passage of Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum* where its tail is compared to purposeless human body parts and the plumage of pigeons.⁵⁶

That peafowl was regarded as an exceptional kind of meal can also be gathered from a passage in one of Horace's *Satires* where it is mentioned alongside golden cups and turbot, all given as examples of food and drink that one is not looking for in the first place when hungry and thirsty.⁵⁷ The poet speaks of culinary provisions as basically superfluous status symbols which do not fulfil any immediate nutritional requirements. These thoughts are to be viewed in the context of Epicurean philosophy to which Horace feels indebted.⁵⁸

The simple and healthy life is the theme of sat. 2,2, inspired by the farmer Ofellus' exemplary lifestyle. However, Horace is aware of the fact that the frugality of the countryside does not appeal to many people who prefer to indulge in urban delights, as he illustrates with the following lines (sat. 2,2,23–30; transl. Frances Muecke):

*vix tamen eripiam, posito pavone velis quin
hoc potius quam gallina tergere palatum,
corruptus vanis rerum, quia veneat auro
rara avis et picta pandat spectacula cauda:*

⁵⁵ Cicero fam. 9,18(20),2: *Proinde te para; cum homine et edaci tibi res est et qui iam aliquid intellegat* – ὀνυιαθεῖς *autem homines scis quam insolentes sint; dediscendae tibi sunt sportellae et artolagyni tui. nos iam ex arte ista tantum habemus, ut Verrium tuum et Camillum – qua munditia homines, qua elegantia! – vocare saepius audeamus. sed vide audaciam; etiam Hirtio cenam dedi, sine pavone tamen. in ea cena cocus meus praeter ius fervens nihil non potuit imitari.*

⁵⁶ Cicero fin. 3,18: *Iam membrorum, id est partium corporis, alia videntur propter eorum usum a natura esse donata, ut manus, crura, pedes, ut ea, quae sunt intus in corpore, quorum utilitas quanta sit a medicis etiam disputatur, alia autem nullam ob utilitatem quasi ad quendam ornatum, ut cauda pavoni, plumae versicolores columbis, viris mammae atque barba.*

⁵⁷ Horace sat. 1,2,114–116: *num, tibi cum faucis urit sitis, aurea quaeris | pocula? num esuriens fastidis omnia praeter | pavonem rhombumque?* These verses are quoted by Seneca epist. 119,13 and then explained in the following paragraph: *Egregie itaque Horatius negat ad sitim pertinere quo poculo [aqua] aut quam eleganti manu ministretur. Nam si pertinere ad te iudicas quam crinitus puer et quam perlucidum tibi poculum porrigat, non sitis* (epist. 119,14).

⁵⁸ See Gowers, Horace: *Satires Book I*, 113.

*tamquam ad rem attineat quidquam. num vesceris ista,
quam laudas, pluma? cocto num adest honor idem?
carne tamen quamvis distat nil, hanc magis illa
inparibus formis deceptum te petere! esto.*

“All the same, when a peacock has been put before you, I will not find it easy to eradicate your desire to brush your palate with this rather than with a chicken, for you have been corrupted by vanities, because it sells for gold, this rare bird, and puts on a fine show with its colourful tail spread out, as if that had any bearing on the matter. Surely you don’t feed on these feathers that you praise? Cooked, does it keep its beauty? Yet, although there is no difference in the flesh, to think that, deceived by unequal appearances, you have an appetite for this rather than the chicken! So be it.”

The peacock, mainly characterised by its beauty, rarity and high price, is contrasted with a simple chicken whose taste is by no means inferior. The outward appearance of an animal used as food is ultimately irrelevant and has no impact on its flavour. The preference for a peacock is therefore exposed as unfounded and irrational. Horace advocates a sufficiently modest diet as a compromise between two opposite extremes and turns against a lack of proportion.⁵⁹

A massive amount of peafowl eggs is served at the fictitious dinner party given by the boastful parvenu Trimalchio in Petronius’ *Satyrica*, presumably written during the time of the Emperor Nero. That this is not an ordinary dish can also be seen from the way in which it is served: The eggs are arranged underneath a wooden hen sitting in a basket which is carried into the *triclinium* by two slaves to the blaring sound of music; inside the eggs, there are plump fig-peckers coated in peppered egg yolk (sat. 33,3–8).⁶⁰ As a freedman who has gained enormous wealth, Trimalchio is keen to serve his guests a truly opulent feast, but with his more or less complete lack of education, taste and moderation, what he offers goes far beyond the scope of an average Roman *cena*. From the paragraphs on peafowl eggs, it is evident that the pretentious host constantly plays with his guests’ expectations and offers one surprise

⁵⁹ On this text, see the commentaries by Muecke, *Horace: Satires II*, 114–129, and Freudenburg, *Horace: Satires Book II*, 80–106. On the ideas of simplicity and moderation in Horace’s work more generally, see Vischer, *Das einfache Leben*, 147–152, who views sat. 2,2 as “geradezu eine Predigt über die Einfachheit ... , wie sie die Popularphilosophen seiner Zeit gehalten haben müssen” (150). The poem contains Aristotelian, Epicurean and Stoic elements without being strictly dogmatic; see Muecke, *Horace: Satires II*, 115, and Freudenburg, *Horace: Satires Book II*, 80–83.

⁶⁰ On the numerous references to birds and eggs in the *Cena Trimalchionis* and their connection “with an unsettling fusion of life and death”, see Blythe, *Birds*, 64f. Blythe, *The Peacock*, interprets Trimalchio’s peafowl egg dish as an intertextual allusion to Ennius’ dream of Homer in the proem of the *Annales* and ultimately to Pythagorean metempsychosis.

after another; the entire dinner party is organised in the manner of a theatrical performance, with Trimalchio being the stage director.⁶¹ In a later section of the *Satyrice*, peacocks spearhead the brief poetic catalogue of delicacies and precious items which are provided as instances of Rome's inclination to luxury. The text reveals that these birds were kept in cages and specifically bred to be served as food.⁶²

A climax to what Cicero, Horace and Petronius have to say on peacocks can be found in three biographical texts: In his *Life of Vitellius*, Suetonius reports that the emperor, who reigned in the year of A.D. 69, combined excess (*luxuria*) with cruelty (*saevitia*). He was not only fond of highly expensive and lavish meals, but also so incredibly voracious that he disgusted others (Vit. 13,3). On one occasion Vitellius had a platter served that he called "Shield of Minerva, defender of the city"; it contained the livers of sea-fish called *scari* (presumably wrasses), the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the tongues of flamingos and the milk of lampreys – all brought to Rome from faraway places, which is indicative in itself of extravagance, traditionally perceived as something rather un-Roman.⁶³

The second example is the *Life of Elagabal* in the *Historia Augusta* which portrays a ruler as the epitome of excess and depravation. As someone for whom life was nothing but a search for novel pleasures, Elagabal (regn. A.D. 218–222) was constantly inventing new kinds of drinks, dishes and decorations for his banquets.⁶⁴ His fondness for peacocks, among other animals used as food, is illustrated by the following excerpt (Elag. 20,4–7; transl. David Magie):

⁶¹ See also Smith, *Cena Trimalchionis*, 71: "In the course of the *Cena* we find numerous examples of foods which turn out to be not quite what had seemed. In particular various fancifully shaped pastries are mentioned: 40.4 'porcelli ex coptoplacentis facti', 60.4 'Priapus a pistore factus', 69.6 'turdi siliginiei'." Further Goguet, *Des animaux*, 191–193, and Schievenin, *La gallina*, 181–183.

⁶² Petronius, sat. 55,6 v. 1–3: *luxuriae rictu Martis marcent moenia. | tuo palato clausus pavo pascitur | plumato amictus aureo Babylonico.*

⁶³ Suetonius, Vit. 13,2: *Hanc quoque exsuperavit ipse dedicatione patinae, quam ob immensam magnitudinem clipeum Minervae πολυλόχου dictitabat. In hac scarorum iocinera, phasianarum et pavonum cerebella, linguas phoenicopterum, murenarum lactes a Parthia usque fretoque Hispanico per nauarchos ac triremes petitarum commiscuit.*

⁶⁴ Hist. Aug. Elag. 19, esp. 19,5–7: *denique haec genera pocolorum ante Heliogabulum non leguntur. nec erat ei ulla vita nisi exquirere novas voluptates. primus fecit de piscibus insicia, primus de ostreis et lithostreis et aliis huiusmodi marinis conchis et lucustis et cammaris et scillis. stravit et triclinia de rosa et lectos et porticus ac sic deambulavit, idque omni florum genere, liliis, violis, hyacinthis, et narcissis.*

Hic solido argento factos habuit lectos et tricliniales et cubiculares. comedit saepius ad imitationem Apicii calcanea camelorum et cristas vivis gallinaceis demptas, linguas pavonum et lusciniarum, quod qui ederet a pestilentia tutus diceretur. exhibuit et Palatinis <patinas> ingentes extis mullorum refertas et cerebellis phoenicopterum et perdicum ovis et cerebellis turdorum et capitibus psittacorum et phasianorum et pavonum. barbas sane mullorum tantas iubebat exhiberi, ut pro nasturtiis, apiasteris, et phaselaribus et faeno Graeco exhiberet plenis fabatariis et discis. quod praecipue stupendum est.

“He had couches made of solid silver for use in his banqueting rooms and his bedchambers. In imitation of Apicius, he frequently ate the hooves of camels and also cocks’ combs taken from living birds, and the tongues of peacocks and nightingales, because he was told that one who ate them was immune from the plague. He served to the palace attendants, moreover, huge platters heaped up with the viscera of mullets, and flamingo brains, partridge eggs, thrush brains, and the heads of parrots, pheasants, and peacocks. And the beards of the mullets that he ordered to be served were so large that they were brought out, in place of cress or parsley or pickled beans or fenugreek, in well-filled bowls and disk-shaped platters. Everyone was particularly astonished by this.”

In certain respects one feels reminded of Petronius’ freedman Trimalchio who also sought to cause admiration and amazement among his guests. His *cena* is like a dining show which includes a wide range of exotic dishes, and he often comes across as a very dominant figure who is in control of the entire setting.⁶⁵ Moreover, he is a thoroughly superstitious character, which is emphasised in the text in all sorts of ways. Superstition is a character trait that Elagabal seems to share with Trimalchio: In the above quotation from the Life of Elagabal, the emperor is said to consume the tongues of peacocks and nightingales to protect himself against the plague. Hence, to him the tongues are not so much a delicacy that is to be enjoyed by a real gourmet, but rather some kind of preventive remedy.⁶⁶ What these two aspects have, of course, in common is that both utilisations of the body parts of certain animals – for culinary as well as medical purposes – are clearly presented as something exotic or even bizarre. It generates a picture of Elagabal as a truly extraordinary character, though by no means in a good sense; in the ancient biographical tradition, he is positioned on a similar level as other “bad” emperors like Caligula, Nero and Domitian. What is also revealing in the above passage is the link between Elagabal and the notorious Marcus Gavius Apicius (born around 25 BC), who had a bad repu-

⁶⁵ Scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to the similarities between Trimalchio and the emperor Nero. See e.g. the useful overview in Rose, *The Author*, 82–86.

⁶⁶ On birds used for medicinal purposes, see Pollard, *Birds*, 130–134.

tation as a prodigal gourmet.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the recipe book *De re coquinaria*, transmitted under the name of Apicius, contains a paragraph on various types of mincemeat dishes (*isicia*), with those made of peacock holding the first place.⁶⁸ At any rate, the *Historia Augusta* emphasises that Elagabal spent even more money on sumptuous banquets than both Vitellius and Apicius.⁶⁹

The third example is the Life of Lucius Aelius in the *Historia Augusta*. Lucius Aelius, who had been adopted by Hadrian (regn. A.D. 117–138), but died before him (on 1 January 138) and thus never became emperor, is depicted as an individual of many pleasures which were not really dishonourable, but nonetheless somewhat luxurious. The biographer also ascribes to him the invention of a meal consisting of five dishes (*pentafarmacum*): sow's udder, pheasant, peacock, ham in pastry and wild boar.⁷⁰

It should perhaps be added that the *Historia Augusta* contains a few other references to emperors and peacocks, though not in the context of dining and cuisine. About Alexander Severus (regn. A.D. 222–235) it is said that he had aviaries of peafowl, pheasants, hens, ducks and partridges which provided him with a great deal of pleasure and relief from his public duties.⁷¹

⁶⁷ For Pliny the Elder, Apicius was *ad omne luxuriam ingenium natus* (nat. hist. 9,66). This fits well with nat. hist. 10,133: *Phoenicopteri linguam praecipui saporis esse Apicius docuit, nepotum omnium altissimus gurgis*; see also nat. hist. 8,209. On Apicius' suicide, see Sen. dial. 12,10,8f.: *Cum sestertium milliens in culinam coniecisset, cum tot congiaria principum et ingens Capitolii vectigal singulis comisationibus exsorsisset, aere alieno oppressus rationes suas tunc primum coactus inspexit: superfuturum sibi sestertium centiens computavit et velut in ultima fame victurus, si in sestertio centiens vixisset, veneno vitam finivit*. Right after this passage Seneca harshly criticises Apicius' *luxuria* (Sen. dial. 12,10,10). See also Martial 3,22 and Cassius Dio, hist. 57,19,5.

⁶⁸ Apicius 2,2,6: *Isicia de pavo primum locum habent ita si fricta fuerint ut callum vincant. item secundum locum habent de fasianis, item tertium locum habent de cuniculis, item quartum locum habent de pullis, item quintum locum habent de porcello tenero*. Arnott, *Birds*, 237, renders *isicia* as "rissoles". On the meaning of the word *i(n)sicium*, see Walde – Hofmann, *Wörterbuch* 1,703: " 'Gericht aus gehacktem Fleisch, Wurst' ... : zu *insecāre* 'einschneiden, einhacken' ..."

⁶⁹ Hist. Aug. Elag. 24,3f.: *idem numquam minus centum sestertiis cenavit, hoc est argenti libris triginta. aliquando autem tribus milibus sestertiis cenavit, omnibus supputatis quae impendit. cenas vero et Vitellii et Apicii vicit*. See also Elag. 30,1–6.

⁷⁰ Hist. Aug. Ael. 5,3–5: *huius voluptates ab his, qui vitam eius scripserunt, multae feruntur, et quidem non infames, sed aliquatenus diffuentes. nam tetrafarmacum, seu potius pentafarmacum, quo postea semper Hadrianus est usus, ipse dicitur repperisse, hoc est sumen fasianum pavonem pernam crustulatum et aprunam. de quo genere cibi aliter refert Marius Maximus, non pentafarmacum sed tetrafarmacum appellans, ut et nos ipsi in eius vita persecuti sumus*.

⁷¹ Hist. Aug. Alex. 41,6f.: *habuit sane in Palatio unum genus voluptatis, quo maxime delectatus est et quo sollicitudines publicas sublevabat. nam aviaria instituerat pavonum, phasianorum,*

To conclude this section, a quick glance at a passage from Book 3 of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* is instructive. After quoting Varro's remarks on Hortensius in *rust.* 3,6,6 (see above), the author includes an assessment of the price to be paid for peafowl eggs: Five denarii are seen as excessive and even shameful, but it is added that they are no longer sold at all.⁷² This seems to indicate that the interest in peafowl eggs which was rather widespread in earlier periods must have waned by the fifth century A.D.⁷³

However, the physician Anthimus (fifth/sixth century A.D.) wrote a concise dietetic treatise in 94 paragraphs, entitled *De observatione ciborum* and dedicated to the Frankish king Theuderic I, which contains a short section with instructions on the preparation of peacocks. There, it is pointed out that the nature of their meat makes it necessary to slaughter them five or six days in advance, unless they are younger or have softer meat; the broth in which they are cooked may be seasoned with honey and pepper, depending on personal preferences.⁷⁴

5. The Fable

In comparison to other animal species, the appearance of peacocks in the ancient fable is relatively rare.

The first instance is a piece in Aesop's corpus on the peacock claiming kingship among birds on the grounds of its beauty (*fab.* 219 Perry). In the assembly where the debate is taking place, the jackdaw (κολοιός) intervenes and expresses its concerns about the fact that beauty is insufficient to fight against enemies. The conclusion that is to be drawn from this story is that rulers need to have power and physical prowess (δύναμις) instead of beauty

gallinaeorum, anatum, perdicum etiam, hisque vehementer oblectabatur, maxime palumborum, quos habuisse ut ad XX milia dicitur.

⁷² Macrobius, *sat.* 3,13,2: *ecce res non admiranda solum sed etiam pudenda, ut ova pavonum quin denariis veneant, quae hodie non dicam vilis sed omnino nec veneunt!*

⁷³ This is also the view of André, Essen und Trinken, 111.

⁷⁴ Anthimus, *obs.* 24 (CML VIII 1, p. 12,17–13,5): *De pavonibus vero, si fuerint, illi maxime, qui sunt senioris, ante quinque aut sex dies occiduntur, et capiunt bene, quia talis carnis habent; aut in uno missu aut singulatim in iuscello cocti sumantur ita, ut, cui delectat, mel modicum et piper mittat in ipso iuscello, postea cum coctum fuerit. minoris vero pavonis vel tenerioris ante una die aut biduo occiduntur.* On Anthimus and his treatise, see e.g. Deroux, Anthime, with further references. Deroux, Anthime, 1124 rightly points out: "Pour notre diététicien, la santé dépend avant tout d'aliments bien préparés, c'est-à-dire bien cuits ... Certaines de ses notices sont des recettes de cuisine gastronomique, même si, dans l'ensemble, l'*Epistula Anthimi* est l'œuvre d'un médecin avant d'être celle d'un gourmet."

(κάλλος).⁷⁵ The peacock thus represents the wrong choice of a sufficiently competent leader figure. Read from a socio-political perspective, the text could be interpreted as a warning against using superficial and ultimately meaningless criteria for the election of public decision-makers. Interestingly, the warning comes from an individual bird whose outward appearance differs entirely from the peacock's; also, the jackdaw's reaction is limited to a single rhetorical question, but it is so powerfully disarming that it renders any response superfluous. Hence, the visually unattractive bird is to be envisaged as possessing a high degree of intelligence or wisdom to act as an authoritative counsellor against an unwise resolution.

Phaedrus' collection contains two fables on peacocks. The first piece (fab. 1,3) is about a vainglorious jackdaw (*graculus superbus*) adorning itself with the feathers of a peacock and trying to become part of the muster of other peacocks.⁷⁶ However, they strip it of those feathers and reject it. When the jackdaw returns to its own tribe that it spurned before, it is also driven away as a revenge for its scorn. The lesson to be learned is expressed at the beginning and the end of the text – in the first case formulated as a neutral reference to an *exemplum* transmitted from Aesop (fab. 1,3,1–3), in the second case put into the mouth of another jackdaw (1,3,13–16): Discontent with one's station in life, going along with the adoption of another identity, pretentious behaviour and disdain for one's kinsfolk, leads to humiliation and failure.⁷⁷ In Roman society, haughtiness (*superbia*), which is foregrounded in this poem in various different ways,⁷⁸ was regarded as a particularly anti-social form of behaviour; in particular the dissociation from one's own relations constituted a major offence, the consequences of which are devastating for the offender who risks becoming a pariah.⁷⁹ Hence, Phaedrus' fable has a strong moral tone and func-

⁷⁵ Aesop, fab. 219 Perry: Τῶν ὀρνέων βουλευομένων περὶ βασιλείας, ταῶς ἡξίου ἑαυτὸν χειροτονῆσαι βασιλέα διὰ τὸ κάλλος. ὀρμωμένων δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦτο τῶν ὀρνέων, κολοιοὺς εἶπεν· “ἀλλ’ ἐὰν σοῦ βασιλεύοντος ὁ ἀετὸς ἡμᾶς διώκη, πῶς ἡμῖν ἐπαρκέσεις;” Ὁ λόγος δηλοῖ ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς δυνάστας μὴ κάλλει ἀλλὰ δυνάμει κεκοσμηθῆαι.

⁷⁶ For a full analysis of this text, see Gärtner, Phaedrus 1, 97–107, who also refers to the reception of this fable in later periods. See also Oberg, Phaedrus-Kommentar, 47f. and Mañas Núñez, Ensayo.

⁷⁷ The same pattern of having a pro- and epimythion at the beginning and the end of the text is followed by the very similar prose version in Romulus' late antique collection Aesopus Latinus (2,15).

⁷⁸ See *gloriarī* (fab. 1,3,1), *tumens* (1,3,4), *inani ... superbia* (1,3,4), *contemnens suos* (1,3,6), *impudenti* (1,3,8) and *despexerat* (1,3,12).

⁷⁹ The dire consequences for the jackdaw are highlighted several times in the text: *pennas eripiunt* (fab. 1,3,8), *fugant* (1,3,9), *male mulcatus* (1,3,9), *maerens* (1,3,10), *repulsus* (1,3,11),

tions as a social corrective.⁸⁰ However, it is much less about peacocks than about the jackdaw as a symbol of someone inappropriately attempting to reach a higher standing in society; the peacocks here represent that higher social level which is unattainable for many. This theme of the limits on social mobility is also present in several other ancient fables.⁸¹

In another fable of Phaedrus' oeuvre, the peacock takes on a central role (fab. 3,18).⁸² Representing its entire species, it complains to the goddess Juno about being disadvantaged by its unattractive voice. Juno reminds the bird of its other qualities: its unchallenged beauty (*forma*) and remarkable size (*magnitudo*), elaborated in three full verses to offer suitable consolation.⁸³ She points out that each bird is given a specific attribute and should be satisfied with it.⁸⁴ What is articulated here with regard to a group of animals can easily be transferred to the human world. The peacock may be read as a disgruntled individual refusing to accept what nature has given to him; this theme is introduced in the very first line (fab. 3,18,1: *indigne ferens*). At the same time, this fable alludes to the peculiar relationship between the bird and the goddess: The peacock was a holy bird in the temple of Hera in Samos.⁸⁵

tristem sustinuit notam (1,3,11), *contumeliam* (1,3,15) and *nec hanc repulsam tua sentiret calamitas* (1,3,16).

⁸⁰ See also Mañas Núñez, *Ensayo*, 230: "Al final ... triunfa la verdad y la realidad, mientras que la mentira y apariencia resultan castigadas."

⁸¹ See Lefkowitz, *Aesop*, 15: "Many fables suggest that there are dangerous consequences when one tries to transgress the natural boundaries of one's character and circumstances by mimicking or appropriating other behaviours (e.g., in Perry 83, 91, 97, 125, 187–8, 203, 233)."

⁸² See Gärtner, *Phaedrus* 2, 235–243, for a full-fledged interpretation of this fable; see also Oberg, *Phaedrus-Kommentar*, 153f.

⁸³ *Phaedrus*, fab. 3,18,6–8: "*Sed forma vincis, vincis magnitudine; | nitor smaragdi collo prae-fulget tuo, | pictisque plumis gemmeam caudam explicas.*" Fittingly, Juno's consolation is rhetorically stylised: In line 6, the chiasmus is combined with a predominance of /i/ sounds in all three verses and an alliteration in the first half of line 8. – On the occurrence of gods in Phaedrus' fables, see Oberg, *Phaedrus-Kommentar*, 24–26.

⁸⁴ The prose version in Romulus' late antique collection *Aesopus Latinus* (4,4) is very similar to Phaedrus, fab. 3,18, but a bit longer. The general promythion (*Quod unicuique concessum est, hoc utatur, sicut haec nobis auctoris fabula narrat*) has a parallel in the epimythion with which Juno concludes her response to the peacock (*omnibus in suo abundat. tu nolo quaeras, quod tibi a diis non est datum*).

⁸⁵ Athenaeus, *deipn.* 14 655a–b: Μηνόδοτος δ' ὁ Σάμιος ἐν τῷ Περὶ τῶν Κατὰ τὸ Ἱερὸν τῆς Σαμίας ἼΗρας φησὶν [FGrHist 541F2]: οἱ ταοὶ ἱεροὶ εἰσι τῆς ἼΗρας. καὶ μήποτε πρότιστοι καὶ ἐγένοντο καὶ ἐτράφησαν ἐν Σάμῳ καὶ ἐντεῦθεν εἰς τοὺς ἔξω τόπους διεδόθησαν. ὧς καὶ οἱ ἀλεκτρυόνες ἐν τῇ Περσίδι καὶ αἱ καλούμεναι μελεαγρίδες ἐν τῇ Αἰτωλίᾳ. διὸ καὶ Ἀντιφάνης ἐν τοῖς Ὀμοπατρίοις φησὶν· "ἐν Ἡλίου μὲν φασὶ γίγνεσθαι πόλει | φοίνικας, ἐν Ἀθήναις δὲ γλαῦκας. ἢ Κύπρος | ἔχει πελείας διαφόρους, ἢ δ' ἐν Σάμῳ | ἼΗρα τὸ χρυσοῦν, φασὶν, ὄρνιθων

Another supposed deficit of the peacock is thematised in a fable of the later Babrius (second century A.D.): Its lack of being able to fly high is contrasted with its handsomeness. The short poem, comprising just eight verses,⁸⁶ is presented as a quarrel between a peacock and a crane (γέρανος), but it is only the crane who gets to speak (fab. 65; transl. Ben Edwin Perry):⁸⁷

Ἦριξε τεφρὴ γέρανος εὐφνεῖ ταῶψ
 σεῖοντι χρυσᾶς πτέρυγας. “ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ ταύταις,”
 ἢ γέρανος εἶπεν, “ὦν σὺ τὴν χρόνιν σκώπτεις,
 ἄστρων σύνεγγυς ἵπταμαί τε κώλύμπου·
 σὺ δ’ ὡς ἀλέκτωρ ταῖσδε ταῖς καταχρύσοις
 χαμαὶ πτερύσσει,” φησὶν, “οὐδ’ ἄνω φαίνει.”
 Θαυμαστὸς εἶναι σὺν τρίβωνι βουλοίμην
 ἢ ζῆν ἀδόξως πλουσία σὺν ἐσθῆτι.

“A crane of ashen hue contended in words of rivalry with a handsome peacock who was flapping his golden plumage. Said the crane in reply: ‘But with these wings of mine, whose colour you deride, I soar on high close to the stars and to Olympus; while you with those gilded feathers flutter about on the ground like a barnyard cock. You are not seen above.’ I would rather be admired in a threadbare coat than live without honour in rich attire.”

Although the peacock remains completely silent,⁸⁸ the text clearly indicates its character: It proudly presents its attractive feathers (fab. 65,2: σεῖοντι χρυσᾶς πτέρυγας) and even ridicules the crane’s grey plumage (65,3: ὦν σὺ τὴν χρόνιν σκώπτεις). But the crane as its poised opponent uncovers the uselessness of the peacock’s plumes because they do not lend themselves to flying properly. Using several emphatic deictic elements in the form of personal and demonstrative pronouns (v. 2: ἐγὼ and ταύταις, v. 3: σὺ, v. 5: σύ and ταῖσδε) to enhance the differences between the two birds, the crane counters the arrogant and offensive behaviour of the peacock with a self-confident response with which

γένος, | τοὺς καλλιμόρφους καὶ περιβλέπτους ταῶς.” διόπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ νομίσματος τῶν Σαμίων ταῶς ἐστίν. See also Toynbee, *Animals*, 251f., and Arnott, *Birds*, 237: “The Peacock’s links with the goddess Hera in Greece and Juno in imperial Rome led to its being featured on the reverse of many coins and medallions, especially from the end of the third century BC onwards.” See further Keller, *Tierwelt* 2, 148f.; Lothar, *Der Pfau*, 40–45; 47–51; Thompson, *Glossary*, 277f.; Pollard, *Birds*, 91; 147; and Monreal – Witte – Zanella, *Pfau*, 494f.

⁸⁶ On the problematic text at the beginning of this fable, see Perry, Babrius, 81, and Holzberg, *Babrius*, 209f.

⁸⁷ It must be noted that Luzzatto’s and La Penna’s Teubner edition (1986) differs from Perry’s text. They write εὐφνεῖ ταῶ(ν)ι at the end of v. 1 and ἵπταμαί τε καὶ κράζω in v. 4. See their apparatus criticus for details (Luzzatto – La Penna, 63).

⁸⁸ This is also the case in the later Avianus’ version of the story (fab. 15). Unlike Babrius, Avianus does not add an epimythion; his text ends with the direct speech of the crane (fab. 15,11–14).

it also conveys its satisfaction with its natural gifts (65,2–6). In the final two lines (65,7f.), the crane’s direct speech is followed by the epimythion which supports the crane’s position. Through the use of two strong oppositional pairs (θαυμαστός vs. ἀδόξως and σὺν τρίβωνι vs. πλουσία σὺν ἐσθῆτι), it humorously subsumes the destiny of the two birds which may effortlessly be transposed to the human world. The peacock comes across as a self-enamoured creature that does not recognise its own deficiencies and ranges itself above others.

6. Martial: Epigrams

Given the plethora of topics that the epigrammatist Martial manages to accommodate in his poems, it is no surprise that animals play a prominent role in them.⁸⁹ The peacock occurs in altogether five epigrams.

In poem 3,58, which is the longest in the entire corpus, two different types of estates and lifestyles, as represented by Martial’s friends Bassus and Faustinus, are satirically compared to each other. Peacocks are part of a catalogue of birds living on a well-functioning and unpretentious farm where a serene and fulfilled existence is guaranteed. Their beauty is indicated by the adjective *gemmei* (3,58,13), but there is nothing beyond this attribute to characterise them. They are surrounded by a large number of other birds which are typically to be found on a farm (3,58,12–19). Though not completely rustic or even Spartan, Faustinus’ country villa is not a space of profuse and artificial luxury where agricultural activities do not have a proper place. On the contrary, what happens there is serious farm work geared towards bountiful harvests. It is diametrically opposed to Bassus’ rather sterile villa which is entirely divested of its intrinsic function: though very neat and beautifully decorated, it does not produce anything at all so that even basic products need to be delivered there (3,58,45–51).⁹⁰ Martial’s text seems to imply that peacocks were not necessarily seen as a prodigality, as Columella is inclined to view them; it is perhaps more in line with Varro who saw them as a desirable source of income. This poem is a continuation of epigram 3,47 where Bassus is shown to be travelling from the city to the countryside, paradoxically carrying various items of food that are produced on a farm.⁹¹ He is an example of a villa owner who has misunderstood its genuine purpose.

⁸⁹ See the – admittedly rather brief – treatment by Scourfield, Martial.

⁹⁰ That there is a clear asymmetry regarding the length of the two parts of the poem (3,58,1–44 and 45–51) has been observed by Fusi, *Epigrammaton liber tertius*, 375f.

⁹¹ See in particular Martial 3,47,5f.: *Faustine, plena Bassus ibat in reda, | omnis beati copias trahens ruris*. This sentence is followed by a catalogue of “all the produce of a prosperous farm” (3,47,7–14). On epigram 3,47, see Fusi, *Epigrammaton liber tertius*, 339–346.

The proverbial beauty of the peacock is taken as the basis for a comparison used in one of the Erotion epigrams (5,37). The young girl who died prematurely is said to have been so attractive that even a peacock would have appeared as unsightly when weighed against her (5,37,12: *cui comparatus indecens erat pavo*). The animal thus forms part of an elaborate compliment paid to Erotion,⁹² embedded within a poem that falls under the category of the dirge (*epikedion*). Altogether, Martial lists a whole series of other animals and objects mostly related to animals (swans, lambs, shells, pearls, elephants, sheep, dormice, honey, squirrels, phoenix etc.), with which Erotion is compared in various respects – always to her advantage, as in the case of the peacock. This makes the loss of such a sweet and endearing girl even more lamentable and vigorously heightens the *mors immatura* motif which this poem productively exploits.⁹³

Poem 13,70 diagnoses a contradiction between peacocks as objects of enthusiastic admiration and gastronomic delights. This distich is addressed to an unspecified individual in the form of a bipartite question that draws attention to his incongruous behaviour towards the animal. The reproachful tone is forcefully signalled not only through the vocative *dure* (“you callous man”), but also through the attribute *saevo* (“cruel”) referring to the cook who is supposed to prepare the bird for a meal; the gourmet and his chef constitute a heartless duo of accomplices, as it were.⁹⁴ Rhetorically, this is further enhanced by the sombre sound quality of the second line, resulting from an unmistakable predominance of /o/ and /u/ sounds (13,70,2: *et potes hunc saevō tradere, dure, cocō?*), which are strongly opposed to the cheerful /i/ sounds of the first line (13,70,1: *Miraris, quotiens gemmantis explicat alas*). As is typical of the *Xenia* collected in Book 13, the poem shows that Martial is a very conscious stylist who skilfully exploits the impact of rhetorical elements even on the smallest scale and is able to accommodate a compelling narrative into the shortest

⁹² Monreal – Witte – Zanella, Pfau, 496, state that the peacock is “indirekt als decens bezeichnet (der Vergleich ergäbe sonst keinen Sinn)”. The adjective *decens* has different meanings, e.g. “seemly”, “becoming”, “decent” or “proper”, but it also refers to beauty and can mean “well-formed”, “beautiful” or “noble”; being related to *dignus*, it combines moral connotations with physical aspects. See Walde – Hofmann, Wörterbuch 1, 330f., and De Vaan, Dictionary, 164.

⁹³ Erotion is also the object of two other epigrams in Martial’s corpus: 5,34 and 10,61. Specifically on 5,37, see Howell, Epigrams V, 119–123, and Canobbio, Epigrammaton liber quintus, 356–374, as well as Kenney, Erotion again, and Watson, Erotion.

⁹⁴ See also Leary, Martial Book XIII, 126: “The cook ... is *saevus* because he carries out the pitiless master’s desires in killing and cooking the bird once it has been handed over to him.”

text.⁹⁵ With 13,70 he has accomplished an elegant and witty snapshot that utilises a captivating example from the animal world to expose the inconsistent attitudes of certain humans. However, the question is whether a poem such as this one was written to raise serious ethical concerns. The context of the Saturnalia, and hence of feasting, speaks against such an interpretation; instead, the censure of poem 13,70 should be seen as irony or mockery, though Martial's poetry is by no means completely free from moral considerations.

In the Apophoreta (Book 14), the beautiful tail of the peacock appears in a transformed shape, namely as a feather fly whisk (*muscarium pavoninum*). Though used for the rather mundane task of expelling pesky flies from a meal,⁹⁶ its origin is still fully recognisable – and presumably admirable. The degradation is nonetheless hard to overlook; it is evoked by the contrast between the ugliness of the flies (14,67,1: *turpes ... muscas*) and the formerly elevated status of the peacock (14,67,2: *alitis eximiae cauda superba fuit*). One might even argue that the abuse of the feathers serves as a punishment for the bird's haughtiness, alluded to through the adjective *superba*, though syntactically it is applied to the tail (*cauda*), not to the bird itself (*alitis*).

The final passage is in the same book (14,85) and presents the peacock as the name giver of a bed or couch (a *sponda* called *lectus pavoninus*), presumably because this object is made of citruswood which has a texture similar to the exquisite bird's colourful plumage, whose splendour is emphasised here through alliteration (14,85,1: *pictis pulcherrima pinnis*).⁹⁷ The second line of this epigram brings to mind the well-known connection with Juno to whom the peacock was sacred – interlaced here with the story of Io's guard Argus, who had his one hundred eyes transferred to the bird's feathers by the goddess. Condensed into just one pentameter line, the aetiology of the typical pattern of the peacock's plumage is supplied in this poem (14,85,2: *nunc Iunonis avis*,

⁹⁵ The most recent treatment of Martial's early poems, including the Xenia (Book 13) and Apophoreta (Book 14), which were both written for the festival of the Saturnalia, is offered by Leary, *Martial's Early Works*. See also his two commentaries: Leary, *Martial Book XIV*, and Leary, *Martial Book XIII*.

⁹⁶ A whisk made of peacock feathers was also used in the shrine of the dead emperor Pertinax († A.D. 193) to keep flies away from his wax effigy. See Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 75,4,3: καὶ ἐξ αὐτὴν εἶδωλόν τι τοῦ Περτίνακος κήρινον, σκευῆ ἐπινικίω εὐθροτημένον, ἀνετίθη, καὶ αὐτοῦ τὰς μίας παῖς εὐπρεπῆς, ὡς δῆθεν καθεύδοντος, πτεροῖς ταῶνος ἀπεσόβει.

⁹⁷ See Guillén, *Epigramas*, 608: “Posiblemente, de madera de limonero, con líneas jaspeadas onduladas, comparable a la cola del pavo real.” Details can be found in Pliny the Elder, *nat. hist.* 13,96: *Mensis praecipua dos in venam crispis vel in vertices parvos. illud oblongo evenit discursu ideoque tigrinum appellatur, hoc intorto et ideo tales pantherinae vocantur. sunt et undatim crispae, maiore gratia, si pavonum caudae oculos imitentur.*

sed prius Argus erat). A detailed version of the myth of Argus, Io and Juno is narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1,625–723), which culminates in the removal of Argus' eyes and their attachment to the bird's tail where they shine like glittering jewels.⁹⁸ It is therefore possible to say that with the second half of epigram 14,85 Martial has constructed a highly compressed miniature metamorphosis account. Precisely because it is so reduced to the bare essentials, it presupposes an erudite readership who is thoroughly familiar with the background of the story and who appreciates a highly learned narrative technique of this kind.

7. Conclusions

This paper has presented a wide-ranging panorama of Greek and Latin texts dealing with peacocks from different perspectives, though for reasons of space, no claim is made to a fully exhaustive treatment. Despite the diversity of these literary approaches, the evidence investigated here has a few things in common: In the vast majority of the sources, it is first and foremost the stunning beauty of peacocks that is highlighted. At the same time, these birds are not always portrayed in the most positive way when it comes to their character: They are repeatedly charged with ostentatiousness, narcissism, haughtiness and even jealousy or envy. But these features also constitute the basis for the birds being used as status symbols, especially in the context of dining. One might even contend that the ancient texts suggest that humans serving peacocks at feasts shared their alleged pomposity. At any rate, it is justified to say that these birds have a very peculiar status – both in the Graeco-Roman world and today. This has been adequately summarised as follows:

⁹⁸ Ovid, met. 1,722f.: *excipit hos volucrisque suae Saturnia pennis | conlocat et gemmis caudam stellantibus implet*. See Martial 3,58,13 (*gemmeique pavones*) and 13,70,1 (*quotiens gemmantis explicat alas*). A persuasive interpretation of the Argus story is put forward by Bland, *Peacocks*, 32: “The Roman myth of Juno, Jupiter and Io is at its essentials a tale of sexual jealousy. Juno's watchful servant, the hundred-eyed Argus, fell asleep and was slain while guarding the maiden Io, whom Juno's errand husband, Jupiter, attempted to conceal from her. The goddess unexpectedly gifts the peacock his glory – the ‘eyes’ of Argus to decorate his feathered tail, not because of his own efforts but as the result of a murder. The myth enforces the idea that beauty is skin-deep and that a gift received, without moral or physical exertion is unearned and undeserved.” On Argus, see also Sauvage, *Étude*, 269: “Le thème mythique des yeux d'Argus recueillis sur la queue du paon n'a pas eu une grande fortune poétique: toutefois il n'est pas ignoré de la poésie française de la Renaissance et conduit en droite ligne au ‘paon ocellé’ d'Apollinaire.” – In Ovid's work, the peacock is also referred to as Juno's bird (*Iunonia avis*) in ars 1,627f. and medic. 33f. On these two passages, see Heldmann, Ovid.

“The peacock, painted, may lack the virtues of other personified birds. It does not possess the nobility of the eagle, the regal distance of the swan, the supposed wisdom of the owl, the melodious voice of the nightingale, or the domestic busyness of the sparrow. Instead, the peacock brings something else to the party – movie star glamour. It sashays onto our stage, fanning a kaleidoscope of feathers.”⁹⁹

While this statement was mainly written with modern art of the twentieth and twenty-first century in mind, it can at least to some extent also be applied to an ancient context. However, what it does not take into account is the fact that peacocks in Graeco-Roman antiquity were not only viewed as objects of aesthetic gratification, but also from a functional or utilitarian perspective, including economic considerations – in particular in an agrarian and culinary context. Furthermore, they were used as examples or prototypes of certain forms of behaviour or as emblematic representatives of a certain social status, as is vividly illustrated by the fable.

Although there is plenty of evidence for birds having the role of pets, especially in the ancient Roman world, this does not apply to peafowl.¹⁰⁰ The sources examined here do not exhibit any emotional attachment of humans towards these birds; there are no references to any direct personal relationship with them, as e.g. in the case of Lesbia’s sparrow (Catullus, *carm.* 2 and 3), Corinna’s parrot (Ovid, *am.* 2,6), Atedius Melior’s parrot (Statius, *silv.* 2,4) or Publius’ dog Issa (Martial 1,109). Pointedly speaking, they tended to be objects of a relatively distant form of admiration and did not seem to lend themselves as the targets of sentiments such as love and affection.

In several instances, the different facets of the peacock are difficult to disentangle, as has been shown above. It is indeed a complex animal that was open to various approaches and interpretations in the ancient world – and it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that this is still the case today.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Bland – Vookles, Introduction, 21f.

¹⁰⁰ For definitions of the term “pet”, see the references listed by Fögen, *All Creatures*, 342f. n. 77, to which Ihm, *Haustiere*; Wischermann, *Tiere*, esp. 108–113; and Grier, *Material Culture*, esp. 125 should be added.

¹⁰¹ Shorter versions of this paper were presented at the University of Marburg (14 October 2022) and at Durham University (2 November 2022). The audiences are to be thanked for their valuable comments during ensuing discussions. I am especially grateful to Clemens Lunczer and Keiran Carson for a careful reading of my text and to the anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions.

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Thorsten Fögen
Durham University
Department of Classics & Ancient History
38 North Bailey
Durham DH1 3EU
Great Britain
thorsten.foegen@durham.ac.uk