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EGYPTIAN MAGIC IN THE LEGEND
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The three important biographical novels on Pythagoras, those of Diogenes Laertius, Porphyrius and of Jamblichus¹ and a number of other sources as well agree in stating that he had made thorough studies in Egypt. It is not our concern here to trace the origins and to examine the reliability of this tradition. In the absence of well established evidence it is impossible, in the present state of our knowledge, to make any decision either in a positive or in a negative sense.²

We focus our attention on one motif among the miraculous gifts ascribed to Pythagoras. It is related in the story of Jamblichus that on one occasion, as he was speaking to his students in Olympia about augury and omens given by gods, he forced an eagle flying above him to come down. He caressed the bird and then allowed him to go.³ αἰτόν τε ὑπεριπτάμενον Ὀλυμπίασι προσομιλοῦντος αὐτοῦ τοῖς γνωρίμοις ἀπὸ τύχης περὶ τε οἰωνῶν καὶ συμβόλων καὶ διοσημειῶν, ὅτι παρὰ θεῶν εἰσὶν ἀγγελίαι τινὲς + καὶ αὐτοὶ + τοῖς ὡς ἀληθῶς θεοφιλέσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καταγαγεῖν λέγεται καὶ καταψήσαντα πάλιν ἀφεῖναι.

In this context the appearance of the eagle was certainly understood as a sign sent by Zeus to demonstrate the veracity of the sage. We shall see, yet, that it was more than a case of augury. The story can be found in other sources too; Porphyrius gives it in the same form.⁴ This must have been the direct source of Jamblichus.

In an earlier work, the *Life of Numa* by Plutarch, Pythagoras is said to have brought down an eagle which was flying overhead by means of voices.⁵ καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος (sc. Πυθαγόρας) αἰτόν τε δοκεῖ πρᾶναι, φωναῖς τισιν ἐπιστήσας καὶ καταγαγὼν ὑπεριπτάμενον . . . There is little doubt that it is the casting of incantations that is meant by the author. Anyhow, a distinct emphasis on the magical element is obvious in this version.

¹ Diog. Laert., VIII, 2-3; Porph., *Vita Pyth.* 8, 11; Jambl., *Vita Pyth.* (II), 11; (IV), 18-19.

² K. von Fritz, "Pythagoras" (*PWRE* s. v.) 186 thinks it possible that P. really visited Egypt. On this problem see also Chr. Froidefond, *Le mirage Égyptien*, Aix-en-Provence 1971, 160 f., 189.

³ Jambl., XIII, 62 (ed. von Albrecht).

⁴ Porph., *Vita Pyth.* 25.

⁵ Plut., *Numa* 8 (ed. Ziegler).

Ammianus Marcellinus⁶ only alluded to the miracle by mentioning the eagle's capacity of talking with an eagle ("... *et cum aquila colloquens subinde visebatur*"). This suggests that the story was widely known in this time, and it was unnecessary to give it in detail.

The legend that Pythagoras was able to act on eagles by magic gains importance if we confront it with a passage in Aelianus⁷ stating that the Egyptians possess the magic power to force down birds from the heaven: *Αἰγυπτίους ἐγὼ πυνθάνομαι μαγεία τινὶ ἐπιχωρίῳ τοὺς ὄρνιθας ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταφέρειν*

The underlying idea of magic influence on animals is common with the sources quoted above, the difference being that Aelianus speaks of birds in general, and he describes this usage as an Egyptian magical practice.

We have tried to prove in an earlier article⁸ the correctness of this statement. Magical fowling is a recurrent element in Egypt, and it can be traced back as far as the early New Kingdom. A passage in the medical Papyrus Ebers runs like this: "Another (means) to prevent a kite (or falcon) from robbing. Acacia branch, set it up. The man shall say: 'Horus plunders for himself in the town and on the field. He got a thirst for the field of the flying (birds). He cooks and eats it.' Recite the words above the acacia branch. Put a cake on it. (This method) will prevent the kite (or falcon) from robbing."⁹

In this text the spell was used at the setting up of a trap. The space of time between Papyrus Ebers and Aelianus is considerable enough, we possess, however, additional evidence from the Graeco-Roman period. In the demotic novel on Setna-Siusire the struggle of two mighty magicians is related, during which the Nubian magician takes on the form of a goose, and tries to escape by flying. He fails all the same, since his Egyptian adversary recites a spell and causes him to fall.¹⁰ It is clearly demonstrated by the Egyptian evidence that actually spells were used and not the luring of the fowl by means of bird-calls is meant.

Thus the chronological difficulties can be removed; the practice was certainly in use in Roman Egypt, and even its survival is attested from the Coptic period.¹¹ Aelianus was aware of the Egyptian character of the motif, and the same can be expected in the case of those authors who were interested in the life of the divine master. Although their ideas about the borrowings of the Pythagorean philosophy from the Egyptian wisdom were necessarily most vague, they made, probably, efforts to lend some Egyptian colour to the alleged doctrines and supernatural powers of the initiator of the movement famous all over the world. We do not know when this motif made its first appearance in the Pythagorean biographical tradition.¹² Whosoever was the author who introduced it, he enriched the more or less

fictitious Egyptian elements of Pythagorean tradition with an original magical practice of the Nile Valley.

The long tradition of the compelling of birds by incantations has some importance concerning the history of magic, too, since it exemplifies how the use of spells for practical purposes turned into a dramatic episode in a literary description of a single combat of two magicians on the one hand and into a spectacular display of the powers of a philosopher, a *θεῖος ἀνὴρ*, on the other.

⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, XXII, 16,22 (ed. Seyfarth).

⁷ Aelianus, *De nat. anim.* VI, 33 (ed. Hercher).

⁸ L. Kákosy, *Acta Orient. Hung.* 13 (1961) 325 ff.

⁹ Pap. Ebers 98, 2 ff. (No. 848). H. Grapow, *Die medizinischen Texte in hieroglyphischer Umschreibung (Grundriss der Medizin der alten Ägypter 5)* Berlin 1958, 527 f.

¹⁰ F. L. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, Oxford 1900, 200.

¹¹ Kákosy, *op. cit.*

¹² The legendary parts are perhaps ancient elements of the tradition, cf. K. von Fritz, "Pythagoreer" (*PWRE* s. v.) 242.