

Patricia A. Johnson, Attilio Mastrocinque, Sophia Papaioannou (Eds.). *Animals in Greek and Roman Religion and Myth*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. 523 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4438-9487-6

Grumentum, the old Roman city known today as Grumento Nova in the Basilicata region of Southern Italy, was the place chosen to hold the symposium “The Role of Animals in Ancient Myth and Religion”. Between the 5 and 7 of June 2013, scholars from diverse backgrounds maintained a dialogue about the different roles that were given to animals during Ancient Greece and Rome.

Patricia A. Johnston, Attilio Mastrocinque and Sophia Papaioannou collect in the book *Animals in Greek and Roman Religion and Myth* the various papers presented during the symposium at Grumento Nova. The chapters of the book are separated into three parts, that were already contemplated in the Call for Papers for the symposium: “Animals and Communication with the Divine”, “The Religious Significance of Individual Animals in Greece and Roma” and “Animals in Greek and Roman Myth”. These three parts represent the different ways in which animals were used in Ancient Greece and Rome: “as a medium between men and gods, as religious symbols, and as poetic symbols” (excerpt is taken from the editors’ Call for Papers).

The papers in the first part of the book, “Animals and Communication with the Divine”, deal with the different ways in which animals are used as a means of communication. Humans often sacrifice animals as a way of interacting with their gods: the result of the sacrifice will then be interpreted as an omen from their gods.

Dimitrios Mantzilas, in his paper “Sacrificial Animals in Roman Religion: Rules and Exceptions”, writes how sacrifice operated as an act of communication. While the main rule for sacrifices was that each god should be honoured through the sacrifice of an animal of the same sex, this rule was not always followed. Mantzilas explains how these exceptions can only be possible if they “originated from an ancient era before the gods had a specific gender” or if “the sacrifice was made in accordance with Greek sacrificial rules” (35).

Humankind in Ancient Rome was not always fond of sacrifice and Lucretius was one of the poets who wrote against it. Giampero Scafoglio explains the views of Lucretius regarding animals and sacrifice in the article “Men and Animals in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*”. The poet saw animals as a positive example in contrast to humans, which were considered vile creatures, deprived of dignity because of their ambitions; to regain this dignity; humans should live in accordance with nature, in a way of life that, Scafoglio argues, draws parallels with Epicureanism, even though Lucretius’ fondness for animals was not taken from it.

In “*Vox Naturae: The Myth of Animal Nature in the Late Roman Republic*”, Fabio Tutrone establishes the opposition between humans and animals –nature and culture– and how it is explored in texts by Sallust, Cicero and Lucretius. This debate,

that was already taking place during the last years of the Republic, is seen by Tutrone as one of the defining features of Western mentality.

Daniele Federico Maras' article, "*Numero Avium* traebant: Birds, Divination, and Power amongst Romans and Etruscans" deals with the political implications of bird omens. In particular, he studies an old controversy between two priestly castes that practised divinatory rituals: the *augures* and the *haruspices*. Maras explains how Cicero, being an *augur* himself, considers that the Etruscan *haruspices* that deal with birds' omens are "deceptive and misleading" (105), while, on the other hand, the *augures* were considered in "compliance to the will of the gods" (85).

In "Between Gods and Men: The Role of Animals in Human Creation and God Representation", Giuseppina Paola Viscardi uses the goat as an example of the ways in which the Gods communicate using the animal as an intermediary. In the ritual, the goat is only a container that "conceals the real nature of what it contains": the perishable meat is destined for the men while the white bones are destined for the gods (125).

Thomas Galoppin ends this part of the book with a paper entitled "How to Understand the Voices of Animals", where he explains the reasoning behind the divination and magic. He focuses on a ritual where the consumption of snake organs was used as a means to gain the ability to see the future; in another version, a similar ritual was used in order to understand the language of animals and, as a result, access the divine world that was identified with them.

The second part of the book, "The Religious Significance of Individual Animals in Greece and Rome", is devoted to the symbolic meaning of certain animals in religion and culture. Emiliano Cruccas opens this part with the first of four papers dedicated to the cock, "Ὁ περσικὸς ὄρνις: The Symbolology of the Rooster in the Cult of the Kabiroi". Cruccas focuses on the Kabiric cult, linked with Semitic, Tyrrhenian and Greek religions, and the archaeological evidence that points to the importance of the rooster in Kabiric rituals, which involved "rites of passage, involving young women and men [...], as viewed from the standpoint of a sacred union between the sexes" (182).

Augusto Cosentino writes about "Persephone's Cockerel" and the ambiguous meaning that the cockerel had when portrayed with Persephone. "In the collective imagination", Cosentino writes, "the cock evoked different and often contradictory meanings": the cock, an animal that sings when the sun shines, was depicted in the Underworld, and symbolises Persephone's transition from the Maiden Kore to the bride of Hades.

Understanding the symbolic meaning of the cock when it is related to matters of love is the aim of Attilio Mastrocinque with his paper "Birds and Love in Greco-Roman Religion". Mastrocinque notes a connection between depictions of the cock and artefacts used in rituals related to marriage, childbirth or even erotic violence. Mastrocinque suggests the possibility that the erotic subtext of the symbol may have originated in Egypt, but, he reckons, it is difficult to prove. What can be affirmed is that cocks "were thought of as sharing the power of some gods" and that "human beings, tame birds and gods were interconnected" (222).

Claudia Zatta offers to us the last paper on birds, "Flying Geese, Wandering Cows: How Animal Movement Orients Human Space in Greek Myth", where she expands on the subject of birds –and animals in general– acting as intermediaries between gods and humans. Zatta's argues that the role of birds in culture transcend-

ed the realms of religion and had a practical role: they pointed explorers to undiscovered lands, where they would later create new cities and civilizations. This fact underlines the contrast of nature and animals on one side and humans and culture on the other; in Greek myth, animals “guide humans to unfamiliar places, they initiate a topography of the sacred. In one Word, animals territorialise” (235).

Marie-Claire Beaulieu takes us to the sea with “The Dolphin in Classical Mythology and Religion”, where she explores the different meanings that were associated to this animal, such as the pleasure for music or respect for the dead. “Dolphins appeared so dedicated to their friendship with humans that they were considered sacred and could not be hunted or eaten”, writes Beaulieu (237). As other animals, they also were linked to the gods, more prominently, Poseidon and Apollo, mediating between humans and gods and between life and death.

In “Unusual Sacrificial Victims: Fish and Their Value in the Context of Sacrifices”, by Romina Carboni, we stay at sea but return to one of the themes of the first chapters of the book: sacrifice. Carboni explains how Greek sacrificial victims were not *worth* the same since there were certain favourite sacrificial victims, such as bulls, sheep or goats. Fish, as the title of the paper suggests, was considered a strange sacrifice for the ancients. Carboni offers various sources that deal with fish sacredness: since they were far away from human society, they were considered to be connected with the gods and were often related to birth and the Underworld. Despite the sacredness of the animal, there is clear evidence that points towards sacrifices of fish on a small scale, and it is a matter that warrants more study from scholars.

Bulls, as I have already mentioned, were one of the noblest sacrificial victims; Patricia A. Johnston writes “The Importance of Cattle in the Myths of Hercules and Mithras” where she examines the role of bulls in these two myths. Hercules is sometimes portrayed slaying the Bull of Crete and Mithras is also depicted slaying a bull with a dagger. Both animals had divine connections: the Cretan Bull “has been identified as either the bull that carried away Europa and fathered Minos, or as the bull from the sea with which Pasiphae fell in love and which fathered the Minotaur” (281) and the tauroctony of Mithras “has been explained as an astrological allegory” (282).

Gérard Freyburger explains a curious case in “Lament on the Sacrificial Bull in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.120-42”, a fragment where Ovid writes a powerful text against the sacrifice of the bull and, as a consequence, against Roman society and gods, whom he calls “partners of their crime”. Freyburger describes three issues that could make the fragment less critical: the first, that “is deliberately presented as being delivered by Pythagoras”; the second, that “Ovid could [...] be making the point that he does not always stand by Pythagorean doctrine” and the third one, that “at Rome a poet would enjoy a certain freedom of expression and opinion” (301). But it can be taken the other way around, and Freyburger quotes scholar F. Bömer on this matter, who do not doubt that Ovid speaks truly under Pythagoras’ mask. The article concludes with a clear assertion: Ovid’s text “is a precious witness of sensitivity towards the poor animals” (306).

The next paper, “Horse Riders and Chariot Drivers”, by Henry John Walker, stresses the importance of horse-riding that populates Greek literature. Walker quotes a poem by Sappho, which is considered to be the first one in which an author acknowledges that some people admire horses, and then continues to provide some other examples where horses are depicted either as mounts for humans or as lesser

gods. Walker concludes that the idea of horse-riding being a noble activity was only an illusion even in the ancient times.

Tiphaine Moreau continues with the theme of the horse in “The Horse, the Theology of Victory, and the Roman Emperors in the 4th century CE”. The horse, as a symbol, was associated with victory during the Roman era, since it was believed that “gods would have prefigured the future of great kings and emperors through the behaviour of their horses” (351). This meaning was appropriated later by Christians, which also perceived the horse as victory over death.

The last papers of this part deal with the associations between specific animals and certain gods. The first paper, “Fierce Felines in the Cult of Dionysus: Bacchic *mania* and What Else?” by Maja Miziur, explores how the traits that were associated to Dionysus are also embodied by the animals (felines: panthers, lions...) that accompanied the god. Miziur explains how the presence of these animals might be an Eastern borrowing and may be related to the god’s connection to the Great Mother. Dionysus, as the lord of wine, is the “‘Lord of the Wild Beasts’, humans and animals alike”, and is able to soothe the people and calm the ferocious felines with his powers (383).

In “Through Impurity: A Few Remarks on the Role of the Dog in Purification Rituals of the Greek World”, Alessio Sassù analyses the role of the dog in Greek religion. He argues that the traditional understanding of the dog focus of its depictions as an impure animal, connected to death and the Underworld. He quotes Plutarch to offer some examples where the traditional symbolic meaning of the dog is challenged, like ceremonies where dogs were sacrificed in rituals related to childbirth or the fact that it was used as a domestic animal that served as children’s companion.

Diana Guarisco signs the article “Acting the She-Bear: Animal Symbolism and Ritual in Ancient Athens”, where she tries to explain how an old ritual in which young girls imitated she-bears was performed. She writes that, even though the ritual has been widely studied, there are not many works that describe the details of how this imitation was conducted. Guarisco argues that the bear was seen as an ambivalent animal, between the wildness and tameness and concludes that young girls, which were between youth and adulthood, could be understood in similar terms.

In “The Symbolism of the Hornet in the Greek and Roman World”, Marianna Scapini talks about the frenzy-like state of madness that was supposedly caused by the bite of the hornet. This state of madness, she explains, was related with Bacchus and the Maenads, and she quotes various sources that establish that “in the Greek world the hornet was the animal which most represented the Maenadic *mania*” (443). In this case, the boundaries between humans and animals were broken with the sting of the hornet, which caused the human to behave like an animal.

The third and last part of the book entitled “Animals in Greek and Roman Myth” and comprises only three articles. Françoise Lecocq opens with the first one, “Inventing the Phoenix: A Myth in the Making through Ancient Texts and Images”, and explains how the Phoenix was created and, after a few centuries, was already considered a symbol of the Roman Empire. Lecocq describes with detail how each layer of the myth was added to it in different stages and for different reasons and ended up being used as an official symbol in Roman coins and, later, appropriated by Christianity.

Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr. writes the paper “The Language of Animal Metamorphosis in Greek Mythology”, where he focuses on transformation stories. In Ovid’s

Metamorphoses, Rothwell points out “how unusual Ovid’s descriptions were when compared with other metamorphoses in Greek and Latin literature”, since Ovid took special care in describing how the transformation was taking place instead of just stating that the transformation took place; Ovid, in fact, sometimes do not state the end result of the transformation (480). Rothwell continues the paper with other examples of transformations and concludes with the observation that the form of describing these metamorphoses was changing (becoming more explicit and detailed) by the end of the fifth century.

Étienne Wolff writes the last chapter of the book, titled “Animals and Mythology in Vandalic Africa’s Latin Poetry”. He focuses his study on the treatment of animals in the work of the poet Dracontius and the anonymous *Latin Anthology*. In Dracontius’ poetry, the snake is the most important animal and, similarly as other animals mentioned in the book, its meaning as a symbol is “complex, varied and contradictory [...] both a negative and a positive figure” (497). Poems from the *Latin Anthology*, on the other hand, are more diverse: some describe real animals and their symbolic meaning while other focus on mythological beasts.

Adrián García Vidal
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
adriangv@acisgalatea.com
<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5650-1275>