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Editors' Foreword

Non-human animals have long occupied a central place in human attempts to understand reality: they have been our companions, sharing our homes and habitats; our alter-egos in myths, folk tales, and literature; and a means of human sustenance and advancement of medicine. In the last decades, scholarly interest in the relationship between human and non-human animals has grown and promoted interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the ancient Greek and Roman world, from the Bronze age to the Byzantine period, spanning archaeological, anthropological, art history, iconographic, numismatic, architectural, literary, historiography, mythology, philosophical, scientific, medical, and veterinary studies.

This *New Classicists* themed issue is the journal's second dedicated to animal studies, and includes three papers read at the international conference *Through the Animal Prism* (TAP) organized by Prof. Ken Kitchell, Dr Guendalina Taietti, and Dr Katia Margariti,[1] as well as one presented at the fourth *Save Ancient Studies Alliance* (SASA) annual Virtual Conference *Opening the Ancient World*, entitled "Representations of the Past in Ancient and Modern Times".[2]

[1] The three papers read at TAP are: András Patay-Horváth's *Birds, heroes and toponyms*; Carlo Canna's *The Neades of the Island of Samos (Greece, Eastern Aegean): An Analysis of Speculative Reconstruction on the Mysterious Beasts described in an Ancient Greek Myth*; Marcela Alejandra Ristorto and Silvia Susana Reyes' *The Role of Dogs in the Erotic Magic of the Greek Magical Papyr*i. TAP was held via Zoom (University of Liverpool, UK) on the weekends of November 2-3, 2024 and January 11-12, 2025. More information here: https://www.academia.edu/124497085/INTERNATIONAL_ONLINE_CONFERENCE_UNIVERSITY_OF_LIVERPOOL_Through_the_Animal_Prism_Seeing_Ancient_Greece_Rome_and_the_Ancient_Mediterranean_Through_their_Animals_Theriomorphic_Hybrids_and_Monsters_Conference_Abstracts [last accessed: 17 April 2026].

[2] Justin Winslett's *The History of the Strange: The Nature of an Historical Consciousness in Tang Tales*. For the fourth SASA annual Virtual Conference, *Opening the Ancient World*, entitled "Representations of the Past in Ancient and Modern Times" and held on July 21-22, 2024, see: https://www.saveancientstudies.org/virtual-conference-annual and https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z5kC8zYAJjXGxwYd_BDDNna_vf3n7Y9F/view [last accessed: 17 April 2026].

The studies gathered in this volume demonstrate how myth, history, and the natural world often intertwined in antiquity, and they explore this relationship across diverse cultural contexts—from the ancient Greek world to Tang China. They reveal story-telling patterns and intellectual approaches shared by the ancients over time and places: narrative, symbolism, and animals are used to render the unfamiliar intelligible and the present meaningful through the past.

András Patay-Horváth's paper *Birds, heroes and toponyms* discusses the relationship between myth-making, bird names, and toponyms. Faced with obscure place names, ancient communities often constructed genealogies and invented eponymous heroes, using paretymologies within their story-telling. Patay-Horváth maintains that in several cases toponyms were derived not from a hero's name but from an animal, either because the eponymous hero associated with a place underwent a metamorphosis, or because the geographical features resembled the animal. He thus suggests that King Saron took his name from the Saronic Gulf, and that the toponym originally derived from a bird's name, *psar/psaros*, meaning 'starling'. In this way, the natural world—particularly the avian sphere—serves as a bridge between observation and popular imagination, reinforcing the deep interconnection between environment, language, and identity.

Carlo Canna's paper applies a geomythological approach to the Neades of Samos, offering a speculative reconstruction of this mythological animal, imagined by the Greeks as resembling an elephant or a hyena. Canna compares ancient literary sources with paleontological evidence, and stresses the role of the physical environment in the creation of the Neades myth: fossil remains, seismic activity, and unusual geological formations contributed to shaping the Neades as monstrous, gigantic animals with an unusual roar capable of splitting the earth. The Neades myth represents an interpretive response to natural phenomena and to a dynamic, often threatening landscape; though fantastical in form, it preserves kernels of historical truth, zoological knowledge, and environmental awareness.

In their paper, Marcela Alejandra Ristorto and Silvia Susana Reyes examine the role of dogs in the erotic magic of the *Greek Magical Papyri* (*PGM*). In antiquity, the dog was an ambivalent figure, being considered both humans' best friend and a deceitful creature; it was situated at the intersection of the domestic sphere and the Underworld, given its association with the goddess Hecate and its use in sacrifices. In the *PGM*, language, divine associations, and material offerings contribute to enhancing the chthonic, forceful power of erotic magic; accordingly, both Hecate and her dogs tend to be described in negative tones.

Justin Winslett's *The History of the Strange* explores the concept of historical consciousness in Tang dynasty tales. Rather than treating history as a detached record of past events, premodern Chinese writers employed narrative as a tool for moral reflection and social commentary. Supernatural accounts—such as those featuring the apparition of foxes, dragons or spirits—are not marginal or purely fictional, but instead adopted historiographical conventions to articulate concerns rooted in contemporary political and ethical realities. In this context, the past becomes a medium through which the present is interpreted, and myth operates not as an escape from reality but as a reframing of it. Winslett's paper focuses on a sample of 558 tales, eighty-three of which are contained in nine chapters devoted to foxes *hú* 狐, and fourteen in two chapters devoted to yaksha (*yècha* 夜叉, nature spirits/demons).

Taken together, the contributions in this *New Classicists* animal-themed issue challenge ancient and modern dichotomies between history and mythology, rational explanation and folk storytelling, human and non-human animals. Across cultures and contexts, animals offer humans an adaptive framework for understanding and shaping the world they inhabit.

Best regards,

Dr Guendalina D.M. Taietti and Dr Jordon Houston

Birds, heroes and toponyms*

By András Patay-Horváth

Abstract

This paper focuses on birds' names, some of which are undoubtedly used as personal names and others as toponyms. *Merops* (bee-eater) and *ortyx* (quail) belong to both categories and it is argued that the islands called Meropia and Ortygia were named not after the mythical persons but the human characters were invented only in the process of popular etymology as an explanation for the placenames. Finally, it is suggested that King Saron resulted in a similar way from the name of the Saronic Gulf and that the toponym originally derived from a bird's name, *psar/psaros* meaning starling.

Introduction

Onomastics is a complex discipline on its own and even if the present author is not trained as a linguist and cannot claim to be a specialist in this field, a very short introduction to proper names and naming is attempted here.[1] Individual names can be given and indeed are usually given not only to humans but to settlements, rivers, mountains, islands, smaller or larger regions, etc. The study of these placenames, toponomastics, can yield some interesting results, even if their exact interpretation is often ambiguous.[2] Geographical features can be named after humans (individuals or groups), animals, plants, or any characteristic feature (form, size, color),[3] and it is

* I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this journal for calling my attention to a series of shortcomings in the initial manuscript and for invaluable suggestions and help in improving the text; for amicable advice and expert knowledge in linguistic matters I thank Zsolt Simon (Barcelona). All the remaining mistakes are, of course, mine.

[1] For more details see e.g., Hough 2016.

[2] See esp. the hydronyms studied intensively in many countries (e.g. Greule 2014), but with controversial results concerning especially their paleo-(Indo)-European origins.

[3] For an overview of naming practices and the evolution of toponymic typology see Tent and Blair 2011. For the toponyms of the ancient Mediterranean see Risch 1965; García-Ramón 1998.

therefore not surprizing to find that there are some toponyms all over the world which are named after birds. In this paper, I will try to show that a similar practice is discernible in antiquity as well; the only difference being that the relationship between toponyms and zoonyms is obscured by creating heroic personal names in order to account for the placenames.

Toponyms are used by many speakers often belonging to different language families and over a long period of time; since they can perfectly fulfil their primary function to identify certain localities without being correctly understood, they are often distorted. Their original meaning becomes obsolete and their form, resulting from the distortions, gives rise to misinterpretations. Some speakers, especially well-educated ones realize that they do not understand a certain word and try to make some sense of it. This process of altering otherwise incomprehensible words, in order to give them a semblance of meaning is usually called popular etymology or paretymology.[4] It is perhaps important to add that before the emergence of modern linguistics, it was almost impossible to find out the real origins of a word, i.e., its etymology, since comparisons with other related languages were not practiced and the notion of language families did not exist either. In antiquity, incomprehensible toponyms were usually explained by aetiological tales and by creating mythical eponymous characters. As a typical example for both phenomena, the case of Mycenae might be cited here (Paus. 2.16.4-5):

[4] Both terms denote linguistic misinterpretation of proper names or nouns in general. There is ample literature on popular etymology in general: Olschansky 1996 is a thorough monographic treatment; Liberman 2005, chapter 5 a good introduction for everyone with a few examples. Ashley 1985 has many more, but all are discussed very briefly. See also Mackensen 1927; Koch 1963; Bebermeyer 1974; Sanders 1975 for famous German examples. Paretymology is another term for denoting false etymology and in the context of place names, it is called 'toponymic paretymology', discussed at length by Perono Cacciafoco and Cavallaro 2023, 64-75 who distinguish between *bona fide* paretymology (which is generally unbiased, and is produced by the "local speakers in order to provide an explanation for their place names") and scholarly paretymology, when the propagator or inventor of a given explanation has some other goal, e.g. would like "to 'ennoble' a place or to 'belittle' it by enhancing or decreasing local 'prestige', to provide false evidence for a genealogy", etc.

> Perseus ... founded Mycenae. For on its site the cap (mykes) fell from his scabbard, and he regarded this as a sign to found a city. I have also heard the following account. He was thirsty, and the thought occurred to him to pick up a mushroom (mykes) from the ground. Drinking with joy water that flowed from it, he gave to the place the name of Mycenae. Homer in the Odyssey mentions a woman Mycene in the following verse: "Tyro and Alcmene and the fair-crowned lady Mycene". She is said to have been the daughter of Inachus and the wife of Arestor in the poem which the Greeks call the *Great Eoeae.* So they say that this lady has given her name to the city. But the account which is attributed to Acusilaus, that Myceneus was the son of Sparton, and Sparton of Phoroneus, I cannot accept, because the Lacedaemonians themselves do not accept it either. For the Lacedaemonians have at Amyclae a portrait statue of a woman named Sparte, but they would be amazed at the mere mention of a Sparton, son of Phoroneus. [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

As in many other cases, the toponym Mycenae actually derives from some earlier substrate language and the real, i.e., etymologically correct meaning cannot be recovered any more.[5] But sometimes the meaning is clear even if this was apparently not realized in antiquity, or it can be argued that a toponym had a reasonable meaning which fell somehow into oblivion and/or became distorted and was explained afterwards only by popular etymology. A nice example is the small island called Sphairia ('round') near Troizen, described by Pausanias (2.33.1) and allegedly named after a charioteer of Pelops (called according to local Troizenian folklore Sphairos, who was said to be buried on the island), but well-known toponyms like the Peloponnese, the Hellespont and the Aegean may also belong to this group.[6]

[5] Fick 1905, 131 and following him in every handbook containing some information on the etymology of the toponym (e.g., Karo, G. 1933. s.v. "Mykenai", in *PWRE* Vol.16, 1015-1027). For details see Frisk 1960, 266-267 and Chantraine 1980, 720 s.v. Mykenai).

[6] For the Peloponnese and the Hellespont see Patay-Horváth 2017 and 2024, for the Aegean Janda 2014, 448-459.

Birds and heroes

Bird names are often used as human personal names. This is perhaps well-known, but has rarely received any attention. The list of birds given here[7] clearly demonstrates the point:

i) Mythological characters:

- aēdon (nightingale = Luscinia megarhynchos) – Aēdon[8]
- alkyon (Eurasian kingfisher =Alceo atthis) – Alkyone, Alkyoneus, Alkyonides[9]
- chloris (Greenfinch = Carduelis chloris) – Chloris nymph (loved by Zephyros; Ovid, *Fasti* 5.195ff.) and daughter of Amphion and Niobe, originally called Meliboia (Paus. 2.21.9; 5.16.4)
- dryops (woodpecker = Picus) – Dryops, Dryope, dryopes[10]
- keleos (green woodpecker =Picus viridis) – Keleos, king of Eleusis mentioned already in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. King Keleos has no explicit connection to the bird, but a Keleos of Crete was turned into the corresponding bird by Zeus (Ant. Lib. 19).
- kokalos (variety of domestic fowl according to Hesychius) – Kokalos, king of Kamikos in Sicily (Apollod. *Epit.* 1.13-15)
- korax (raven = Corvus corax) / korone (crow = Corvus cornix) – Korax / Koronis, Koronos[11]

[7] For ornithological information and ancient sources concerning the birds see the respective entries in Thompson 1936 and Arnott 2007.

[8] The mythical character is often called Prokne, her sister Philomela or Chelidon ('swallow'). Tereus, the husband of Prokne and lover of Philomela was transformed into a hoopoe, the sisters into the corresponding birds (Apollod. 3.14.8; Ovid, *Met*. 6.401-674).

[9] Alkyone and Keyx: Apollod. 1.7.4, Ovid, *Met.* 11.410-748; Alkyoneus is the name of several giants, opponents of Herakles: Pindar, *Nem*. 4.44, *Isthm*. 6.45; Apollod. 1.6.1, Alkyonides were the seven (or nine or eleven) daughters of the giant Alkyon transformed into birds: Apost. 2.20. Alkyone was also the name of other mythological characters (e.g., a Pleiad nymph: Apollod. 3.10.1; daughter of Skiron: ps-Probus in Verg. *Georg*. 1.399; Argive priestess: Dion. Hal. 1.22.3) and a historical person, the mother of Diokles at Korinth: Aristot. *Pol*. 1247a.

[10] The bird name occurs only once (Aristoph. *Birds* 404) otherwise the name *dryokolaptes* (vel sim.) is used. Dryops, a Trojan hero (son of Priam) is mentioned in Hom. *Il*. 20.456. The ancestor of the *dryopes* was obviously another character. He was venerated and had a temple in Messenian Asine (Paus. 4.34.11). For Dryope see Ant. Lib. 32 and Ovid, *Met*. 9.325ff where the nymph is transformed into a tree (black poplar).

[11] Koronis is the mother of Asklepios (Paus. 2.26.1-7, Ovid, *Met*. 2.596ff.). Korax and Koronos are reported as kings of Sikyon: Paus. 2.5.8-6.1. Another Koronos appears (near Koroneia) in Boiotia: Paus. 9.34.7, yet another one in Elis: Paus. 5.1.6. Hyginus (14.1) mentions a lapith king Koronos, son of Kaineus as one of the Argonauts. In Hom. *Od*. 13.408 a Korakos petra on Ithaka is mentioned along with the fountain Arethousa and the scholia explain that Korax was a local man who died there while hunting and his mother was Arethousa. Korax is also reported as the name of a horse: Paus. 6.10.7.

- kyknos (mute swan = Cygnus olor) – Kyknos[12]
- laios (blue rock thrush = Monticola solitarius) – Laios, king of Thebes, son of Labdakos and father of Oidipous without any connection to the bird, but a homonymous thief was turned into the bird (Ant. Lib. 19)
- meleagris (helmeted guineafowl = Numida meleagris) – Meleagros/ Meleagrides (Hyginus, *fab*. 174)[13]
- merops / aerops (bee-eater =Merops apiaster) – Merops (different heroes cf. below n. 18 and 25), Merope (Oceanid nymph, mother of Phaethon / name of several mythical queens / one of the Pleiads; see n. 28, 29), Meropis (grand-daughter of Merops on Kos, turned into an owl: Ant. Lib. 15), Eeropos (Hdt. 9.26: mythical king of Tegea) / Aeropos (Macedonian ruler: Hdt. 8.139), Aerope (Tegean princess, daughter of Kepheus or Cretan princess, wife of Atreus, lover of Aigisthos)
- ortyx (quail = Coturnix coturnix) – Ortygia nymph (Strab. 14.1.20 with the discussion below)
- penelops (wild duck / Eurasian wigeon = Anas penelope) – Penelope, wife of Odysseus; the homonymous mother of Pan (mentioned, e.g., by Hdt. 2.145) is another mythical character.
- perdix (grey partridge = Perdix perdix) – Perdix, Perdikkas[14]
- porphyrion (purple gallinule = Porphyrio porphyrio) – Porphyrion (giant)[15]
- phene (bearded vulture = Gypaetus barbatus and black vulture = Aegypius monachus) – Pheno (Paus. 2.6.5)

ii) Historical characters:

- iktinos (red kite = Milvus milvus) – Iktinos, Athenian architect (Plut. *Per*. 13), reported also to have built the temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae (Paus. 8.41.9)
- kypselos (sand martin = Riparia riparia) – Kypselos, tyrant of Corinth,[16] but there was also a homonymous mythical king of Arkadia, father of Merope (Paus. 4.3.6)

[12] Son of Apollo in Aitolia, transformed into a swan: Ant. Lib. 12; Ovid, *Met.* 7.371ff. Other characters of the same name, e.g., a suitor of Penelope (Apollod. *Epit*. 7.27), a king of Kolonai (Strabo 13.1.19) or a son of Ares (Paus.1.27.6) have nothing to do with the bird except for their name.

[13] Arnott 2007, 206: "In antiquity the bird was linked with the myth of Meleager, but it appears more likely that the name echoed the female bird's staccato call 'melag' (so Aelian, *NA* 4.42)".

[14] Perdix, the nephew of Daidalos: Ovid, *Met*. 8. 236-259. According to Tzetzes, *Chil*. 1.19. 493, Perdix was the sister of Daidalos and mother of Talos/Kalos. Perdikkas was the name of several Macedonian kings and also a general of Alexander the Great.

[15] Aristoph. *Birds* 1249-52 clearly shows that both the bird and the mythical giant were well-known.

[16] Ancient authors were convinced that the name derived from the noun *kypsele* ('chest'), because Kypselos was said to have been hidden by his mother in a chest (Hdt. 5.92), which was believed to have been dedicated at Olympia (Paus. 5.17.5). The absurdity of the story strongly suggests that this is just a legend or a folk-etymological explanation of the personal name.

- psittakos / sittake / bittakos, etc. (parrot) – Pittakos, lawgiver of Mytilene, one of the seven sages
- phalaris (coot = Fulica atra) – Phalaris, tyrant of Akragas

Most characters belong to the realm of mythology, but historical ones are also attested; as it is natural, there are some overlaps (cf. Perdikkas, Alkyone, Kypselos). The reason for naming a person after the animal might be clear in some cases (as in the aetiological tales ending in a metamorphosis), but may be obscure or totally unknown in others (e.g., Iktinos, Keleos, Penelope, Phalaris). One may assume, e.g., that children were nicknamed in this fashion by their parents and these appellations were retained after reaching adulthood as sobriquets, but it is equally possible that there is no direct connection between the mythical character and the animal species, and that they were just named independently of each other (e.g., Chloris, Porphyrion, Dryope, Keleos, Kokalos). The reverse process of naming an animal after a mythical character is much rarer; it can be suspected in the case of exotic and rare birds, like *meleagris* and *memnon*.[17]

Mythical heroes are, on the other hand, often connected to certain localities, explaining the otherwise senseless or just barely understandable toponyms. Most of them (e.g., Helle, Ikaros, Lichas, Aigina and other nymphs) have no other function, i.e., they simply die in a spectacular way and thus act as eponymous heroes. Others are more elaborate characters (e.g., Aigeus, Saron) and are therefore not easily recognized as such.

[17] Ancient tradition (Ael. *HA* 5.1) held that in late autumn a flock of the *memnon(is)* birds would make for the tomb of the hero Memnon, who had fought for the Trojans and was slain by Achilles. When the birds reached the tomb, they would fight each other violently until half of them were killed; then the victorious survivors departed. Arnott 2007, 208-209: "Cuvier was the first to recognise that a substratum of ornithological truth appeared to underlie the mythical fictions. He linked the Memnon bird to a wader whose English name is Ruff for the male (29–32 cm), Reeve for the female (22–26 cm), now Philomachus pugnax. For most of the year it feeds mainly on seeds. The male's breeding plumage is remarkably variable, but one common type is basically black (or purple-glossed dark brown) in colour, usually with a paler ruff. These birds spend the European winter in Sub-Saharan Africa (with large numbers in modern Ethiopia!), but breed in the north of Europe and Asia. On their spring migrations north, however, in order to attract females to coition, large flocks of males put on impressive displays in communal leks, where they make sham attacks on rival males, jumping, pecking with their bills, and fluttering their wings. These lead at times to genuine fights: hence the bird's name chevalier combatant in France, Kampfläufer in Germany. Although now their main route north in spring passes through Italy, flocks of up to a hundred can still be seen travelling further east, through West Anatolia and across the Hellespont".

And finally, there are some heroes which belong to both categories, i.e., their name is identical with or closely resembles that of a bird and that of a geographical feature as well. Merops (bee-eater), who was allegedly born from the earth and gave the name Meropis to the island of Kos, clearly belongs here. But the island of Siphnos was also called Meropia and there was another hero with the same name, who is attested much earlier and has absolutely no connection to Kos.[18]

The question arises, therefore, how did this strange situation come about? There are many possibilities to explain the relation of these names (either some kind of linear development or a matrix of connections) and there are many useful handbooks and corpora which enable different approaches to the problem, but I am not aware of any study addressing it.[19]

Animal names and toponyms

The relationship between animals and toponyms is usually quite straightforward. It was a widespread practice to name geographical features after certain animals. The reason is most often also quite clear: it was either the size (e.g., Myonnesos, 'Mouse island'; Chelidoniae, 'Swallow island'; Tauros, 'Bull mountain'), the form (Elaphonesos, 'Deer island'; Onougnathos, 'Jaws of the ass', modern Elaphonisi; Myrmex, 'Ant'; Ichthys, 'Fish') or the distinctive colour of the animal species which was compared to that of the islands, mountains and promontories (Korakonesos, 'Raven island'; Alopekonnesos, 'Fox island').[20] The animals involved were widespread and widely known, this is plainly true for the birds as well. If the animal was a rare

[18] For Kos, see Thuc. 8.41 and Steph. Byz. s.v. Kos, for Siphnos, Plin. *NH* 4.66. Merops of Percote is mentioned in Hom. *Il*. 2.831, 11.329.

[19] Greek personal names and toponyms were studied for a long time: cf. Fick 1905; Fick and Bechtel 1894; ancient Greek and Roman birds are thoroughly discussed from different perspectives by Thompson 1936, Pollard 1977, Arnott 2007, Mynott 2018 and Green 2023.

[20] For detailed references see Patay-Horváth 2023, 164-165. The earliest extant testimony of a comparison drawn between animals and islands is Archilochus fr. 21, where the poet describes Thasos as resembling the backbone of an ass. The most widely used animal in toponyms (ancient and modern) seems to be the crow or the raven, obviously denoting the dark color of a geographical feature. Although the simple reason for naming e.g., a rock as 'Korakos petra' must have always been clear, there were some legends or folk-etymological explanations based on eponymous heroes obscuring the obvious truth (cf. above n. 11).

one, like monkeys in the case of Pithekousai, one has to assume that these animals were living there.

The toponym was gradually distorted or the original meaning faded out for some reason and usually a folk-etymological explanation was invented in order to account for the name. In this way, an eponymous hero was most often created and legends became attached to this character. A fine example for this process is the ridge Sauros ('Lizard') in the Peloponnese, with the wrongdoer Sauros, both mentioned only by Pausanias (6.21.3). The story of Italy and Italos (mentioned already by Thuc. 6.2.4) might have been similar, since the name of Italy likely derives from *vitulus*, meaning young calf.[21] In both cases, the form of the geographical feature was most probably compared to, i.e., described by referring to the form of the animal (lizard and the horn of a calf).

The name Ortygia deriving from the bird's name (*ortyx* = quail) is similar. The toponym was quite widespread, since there is not only the well-known Ortygia of Syracusae, but other islands were also called in this way; moreover, there was a grove next to Ephesos, where the eponymous nymph Ortygia is mentioned.[22] The reason for giving this name to the islands was most probably

[21] Wojtylak 2003 and most recently, with a thorough discussion of the entire research history, Manco 2009, 157-232. The correct etymology most probably inspired and is also reflected by the alternative ancient explanation for the toponym: cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.35: "Hellanicus of Lesbos says that when Hercules was driving Geryon's cattle to Argos and came to Italy, a calf escaped from the herd and in its flight wandered the whole length of the coast and then, swimming across the intervening strait of the sea, came into Sicily. Hercules, following the calf, inquired of the inhabitants wherever he came if anyone had seen it anywhere, and when the people of the island, who understood but little Greek and used their own speech when indicating the animal, called it vitulus (the name by which it is still known), he, in memory of the calf, called all the country it had wandered over Vitulia". [Transl. E. Cary].)

[22] Strabo 10.5.5 mentioned that Rhenaia was formerly called Ortygia, Plin. *NH* 4.66 says the same of Delos referring to Aristoteles. The mythical island called Ortygia, where Orion died according to Hom. *Od*. 5.121-124, can be equated with any of them or may be seen as referring to another island of this name. The grove Ortygia is mentioned by Strabo 14.1.20: "On the same coast [near the city of Ephesos], slightly above the sea, is also Ortygia, which is a magnificent grove of all kinds of trees, of the cypress most of all. It is traversed by the Kenkhrios River, where Leto is said to have bathed herself after her travail. For here is the mythical scene of the birth, and of the nurse Ortygia, and of the holy place where the birth took place, and of the olive tree nearby, where the goddess is said first to have taken a rest after she was relieved from her travail". [Transl. H. L. Jones]. For the different localities named Ortygia see Schmidt 1942 and Tréheux 1946.

their small size, comparable to that of the bird,[23] since other small islands were also called after similarly small-sized birds, such as swallows and pigeons: Chelidoniae (modern Gelidonya)[24] and Güvercinada ('Pigeon island' near Kuşadasi meaning 'Bird island' itself). Myonnesos ('Mouse island') and Myos Hormos ('Mouse harbour') are also clear examples with two modern parallels (Pontikonisi, 'Mouse island', a well-known islet near Corfu, and an uninhabited one with the same name to the west of Crete). In all these cases it is quite clear that mice cannot have been and are indeed not extraordinarily numerous on these islands, but they were called in this way only because of their small size.

In the case of birds, it could be perhaps assumed that the islands were named because of the frequent occurrence of the animals there. With migratory birds, one can test this hypothesis and by looking at a map showing the migration routes of quails and swallows, one can immediately recognize that this was clearly not the reason for naming these localities.[25] Animals around

[23] The only reason given by an ancient authority for naming the island of Delos/Ortygia after the bird cannot be accepted (see below fn. 25) and the problem is apparently not discussed by modern commentators. It was variously supposed that the name of the bird derived from the circumstance that they returned with the returning sun around the spring equinox and the localities were named because of some festivals celebrated on this occasion. This idea (mentioned perhaps for the last time by Thompson 1936, 219) derived from the supposed etymology of the name, i.e., that Ortygia and also the name of the bird would derive actually from an Indo-European root, 'vert', i.e., to turn. As already stated by Thompson, *ibid*. 215, this linguistic derivation is without any foundation and it is also irrelevant in the case of the toponyms (Schmidt 1942, 1521-22 who also translates the name as Wachtelinsel, i.e., Quail island). The mythical tales involving the transformations of human characters into a quail (e.g., Apollod. 1.4.1) are simply folk-etymological explanations or aetiologies obviously deriving from the toponym. For the etymology of the zoonym see Thompson 1936, 215 and Beekes 2010, 1112.

[24] These islands are already mentioned by Demosthenes (19.273) as part of the peace of Kallias. Strabo (14.3.8) neatly summarizes the relevant pieces of information: "Then one comes to the promontory Hiera and to the Chelidoniae, three rugged islands, which are about equal in size and are about five stadia distant from one another. They lie about six stadia off the shore, and one of them has a landing-place for vessels. Here it is, according to the majority of writers, that the Taurus takes its beginning, not only because of the loftiness of the promontory and because it extends down from the Pisidian mountains that lie above Pamphylia, but also because of the islands that lie off it, presenting, as they do, a sort of conspicuous sign in the sea, like outskirts of a mountain".

[25] There is an ancient text (Athen. 9.47, 392D referring to Phanodemus) maintaining that the island of Delos was called by the ancients Ortygia, because of the numerous flocks of quails which came over the sea and settled in that island as one which afforded them good shelter. That this was plainly not true is shown by Aristotle (*HA* 597) not mentioning any such location and also by Varro (*RR* 3.5.7) mentioning the Pontine islands as frequented by these birds. For the actual migratory routes of quails see the map in Common Quail 2009 fig. 2.

Chelidoniae are explicitly recorded by Pliny (*NH* 9.85.1), but these are not swallows, rather a special kind of fish.

The relationship between toponyms, zoonyms and personal names can be, however, different. Merops (the bee-eater) is the name of various heroes;[26] it is used as an adjective already in Homer and is always associated with mankind or people in general.[27] In addition, Meropis is a toponym as well, usually referring to the island of Kos, but also reported as the name of Siphnos (Plin. *NH* 4.66).

Although it is quite clear that the eponymous hero of Kos originated, as usually, by way of folk-etymology, from the toponym Meropis, it is not sure that the toponym came from the name of the animal. Based on Aristotle (*HA* 9.13), Chantraine argued that the earth-born hero was named after the bird, since in antiquity, bee-eaters nesting in deep holes may have been thought to be born from the earth and mortal people were also occasionally called earth-born.[28] However, this explanation would hardly account for the other heroes and heroines[29] with the same name, especially for a star, Merope the Pleaid,[30] nor for the name of Siphnos. It is more likely that the adjective was applied to the bird and the islands of Kos and Siphnos independently. The heroes and heroines called Merops or Merope have generally nothing to do with bee-eaters nor are they

[26] For the eponymous hero of Kos and for Merops of Percote, see above n. 18. Another Merops was king of Aithiopia, by whose wife, Klymene, Helios became the father of Phaethon. (Strab. 1.2.27; Ovid, *Met*. 2. 178).
[27] Usually (nine times) it occurs in the genitive μερόπων ἀνθρώπων, but there is also μερόπεσσι βροτοῖσιν (*Il*. 2.285), and μέροπες ἄνθρωποι (*Il*. 18.288). Beekes 2010, 933 declares that the original meaning is unknown and the relation with aerops is unclear. For detailed discussions see Ramat 1960 and Koller 1968.
[28] Chantraine 1936. The formulation in Chantraine 1980, 687 s.v. *meropes* is a bit different: he thought it difficult to decide whether the hero was named after the bird or *vice versa*. Given that the animal is, contrary to the hero, widespread and well-known, the latter possibility would be strange. Other possibilities and the possible connections with the toponym were not considered by Chantraine.
[29] Merope was the name of an Athenian princess (daughter of Erechtheus and mother of Daidalos according to Plut. *Thes*. 19.5), a queen of Messenia, wife of Kresphontes (Paus. 4.3.6) and also a nymph, the mother of Phaethon (Hyginus, *fab*. 154).
[30] Already mentioned by Hesiod (*Astr*. fr. 1). There was a general agreement among the ancients as to the names of the seven Pleiades and it was also generally agreed that there were seven of them, but that one was invisible, or nearly so, to the human eye. One of the explanations was that Merope, who had married a mortal man, Sisyphus, was so ashamed of her humble lot by comparison with the splendour of her sisters, who were all of them paramours of gods, that she dared not show herself.

said to be born from earth, so they were most probably also named because of the original meaning of the adjective. Linguists are divided on the issue whether the adjective *merops* is of Indo-European or some other derivation, but I think the suggested Indo-European etymology, i.e., 'glittering' can be perfectly applied to both the animal and the islands, and in a figurative sense also to human beings.[31] Merope, the Pleiad (a star on the sky), and Merops/Merope of Aithiopia intimately related to Helios and Phaethon might have been the first mythical characters to be named in this way.

Finally, there were two settlements called Kenchreai in the Peloponnese and an eponymous hero Kenchrias was also recorded by Pausanias (2.24.7). Strabo (14.1.20) attested the stream Kenchrios near Ephesos in the grove Ortygia already mentioned above (n. 22). Two very different birds, i.e. κεγχρίς 'ortolan bunting' and κέρχνη 'kestrel' have a very similar name[32], but none of them is likely to have furnished a reason for naming the localities. As one can easily recognize from the Liddell-Scott dictionary, another kind of animal, a snake was also named in this way, and most probably all the zoonyms derive from the common noun κέγχρος meaning 'millet'.[33] In most cases, the reason for giving such a name was most obviously a dotted skin or plumage. The ortolan bunting is also dotted, but only on its craw and only the females, and the name was plausibly connected by Varro (*LL* 5.11) to the fact that they were regularly force-fed on millet.[34] The toponyms could perhaps derive from the plant[35] or from one of the animals named after the

[31] Beekes (2010, 933) claims that the meaning of the word is unknown and most probably pre-Greek, and dismisses (Beekes 1996, 22 n. 6) the plausible Indo-European derivation briefly formulated for the last time by Pastor de Arozena 1993 (from *merH- 'shine' cf. Mallory and Adams 2006, 328-329; on the precise form of the verb see Mayrhofer 1996, 321 with refs.) as "semantically implausible". For the other suggestions concerning the etymology of the word see Frisk 1960, 211-212 s.v. *meropes*.

[32] Arnott 2007, 133 treats the different names as variants of one and the same bird, the falcon (actually two species: Falco tinnunculus = Common kestrel and F. naumanni = Lesser kestrel) and omits the other one, although it is clearly a different species, if they were eaten (as stated by Eubulus in Athen. 2.71) and fattened (Ael. *NA* 13.25). Thompson (1936, 136) most probably correctly identifies the small bird with Latin *miliaria* mentioned by Varro (*LL* 5.11) as a bunting or an ortolan.

[33] That the different animal names derive from the phytonym is also stated by Beekes 2010, 662, but *ibid*. 681 he does not accept the derivation of the name of the kestrel from that of the millet.

[34] Mynott 2018, 122.

[35] A toponym (Kerchneia) is considered by Beekes 2010, 662 as possibly related.

plant, but a settlement or a stream is unlikely to be dotted and the plant is not a rare one nor are the birds nesting only in special environments. It is more likely, therefore, that the toponyms are related to words like κερχνώδης 'rough, hoarse' and κέρχνω 'make rough or hoarse' because of the similarity resulting from the confusion of the consonants (also reflected by the different spelling of the bird names Kenchrē, Kenchrēïs Kerchnē, Kerchnēïs). In Hippocrates (*Aër* 15) we find the description of a wind blowing near the river Phasis, which is "peculiar to the country, is violent and hot, and is called by them the *kenkhron*". In a similar way, a violent stream and villages in a rough, rocky environment can be reasonably named after this characteristic and most probably there is no connection between the bird names and the toponyms.

Saron and the Saronian Gulf

And now we turn to the Saronian Gulf, where there is also a well-known eponymous hero, King Saron of Troizen (Paus. 2.30.7):

> After Althepos, Saron became king. They said that this man built the sanctuary for Saronian Artemis by a sea which is marshy and shallow, so that for this reason it was called the Phoebaean lagoon. Saron was very fond of hunting. As he was chasing a doe, it so chanced that it dashed into the sea and he dashed in after it. The doe swam further and further from the shore, and Saron kept close to his prey, until his ardor brought him to the open ocean. Here his strength failed, and he was drowned in the waves. The body was cast ashore at the grove of Artemis by the Phoebaean lagoon and they buried it within the sacred enclosure and after him they named the sea in these parts the Saronic instead of the Phoebaean lagoon. [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

I think the preceding examples have made it clear, that the mythical character most probably originated from popular etymology, i.e., he simply explains the toponym which is attested much earlier (already in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 305-307). This conclusion is all the more certain since the story is full of characteristic folktale motifs: the doe is a typical kind of leading or guiding animal (e.g., the miraculous stag for Hunor and Magor in the foundation legend of Hungarians or a similar animal guiding the Huns through the Maeotis: Iordanes, *Get*. 24. 123-124), the

submerging in water is a typical punishment for excess (e.g., Tantalos or in a different way for Ikaros) and the corpse washed ashore is known from foundation legends (e.g., Melikertes at Isthmia: Paus. 2.1.3). There are also two parallels for the entire story: King Euenos drowning himself in the homonymous river (Apollod. 1.7.8)[36] or the hunter chasing a deer and dying similarly in the lake of Stymphalos (Paus. 8. 22. 8-9).[37]

The toponym 'Saronian' must have been quite old, since it is also attested as a cult epithet of Artemis (cf. Paus. 2.32.10) and as a hydronym for an otherwise unknown river near Troizen.[38] As such, it may be older than the cult epithet, but it is quite unlikely to name the gulf after a small stream. Finally, it is worth pointing out that there were different forms of the toponym like Saronios or Saronikos and simply Saron, as attested by the relevant entry in Stephanus of Byzantium.

Surprisingly enough, there is a homonymous promontory in the Bosporus as well, where the eponymous hero comes not from Troizen but from Megara,[39] obviously because Troizen had nothing to do with this region, contrary to Megara which founded Chalcedon. And further away from Greece, in Cilicia there was quite a large river also called Saros with a homonymous

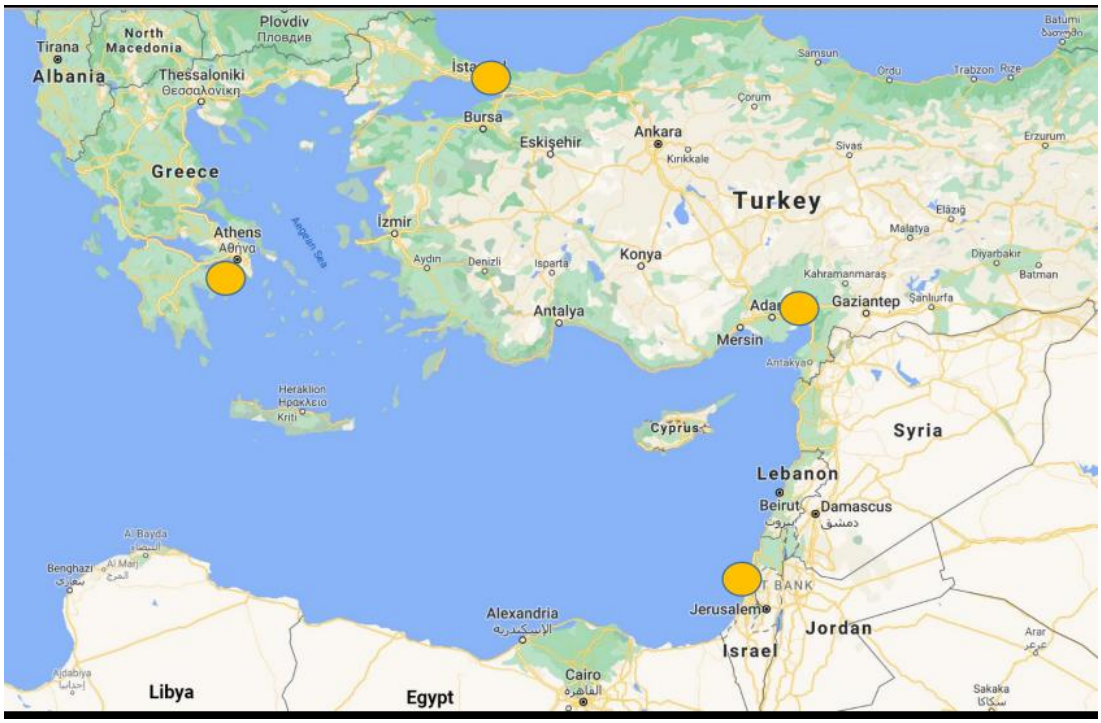
[36] "Euenus begat Marpessa, who was wooed by Apollo, but Idas, son of Aphareus, carried her off in a winged chariot which he received from Poseidon. Pursuing him in a chariot, Euenus came to the river Lykormas, but when he could not catch him, he slaughtered his horses and threw himself into the river, and the river is called Euenus after him". [Transl. J.G. Frazer].

[37] "The festival of Stymphalian Artemis at Stymphalus was carelessly celebrated, and its established ritual in great part transgressed. Now a log fell into the mouth of the chasm into which the river descends, and so prevented the water from draining away, and (so it is said) the plain became a lake for a distance of four hundred stades. They also say that a hunter chased a deer, which fled and plunged into the marsh, followed by the hunter, who, in the excitement of the hunt, swam after the deer. So the chasm swallowed up both the deer and her pursuer. They are said to have been followed by the water of the river, so that by the next day the whole of the water that flooded the Stymphalian plain was dried up. Hereafter they put greater zeal into the festival in honor of Artemis". [Transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod].

[38] Eustathius, *Commentarium in Dionysii periegetae orbis descriptionem* 420.9ff: Σαρωνικὸς δὲ κόλπος ἢ ἀπὸ Σάρωνος ποταμοῦ Τροιζῆνος ἐμβάλλοντος εἰς αὐτὸν, ἢ ἐπειδὴ Σάρων τις κυνηγὸς ἐπιδιώκων σῦν ἐκεῖθεν κατενεχθεὶς εἰς τὴν ὑποκειμένην κατέπεσε θάλασσαν καὶ ἀπεπνίγη.

[39] Dionysius of Byzantium, *Anaplous of the Bosporos* 71-72: "Near Dikaia rock is the so-called Bathykolpos ... Here stands the altar of the Megarian hero Saron, and a net-casting place for fish, ... A little below the Saronic promontory is Kalos Agros, which has its name from nature by the commodiousness of land and sea". (Greek original lost, transl. from the 16th century Latin transcript by Brady Kiesling on topostext.org [modified]. Last accessed on: 24.07.2025).

founder hero.[40] Finally, there was a commonly known sea-demon called Saron and a Saronian sea in the Levant and an otherwise unknown Saronian Syrtis, which is most probably just an error of an unknown author.[41] (See the Map here below).



It is not surprising that no etymology has been proposed for the toponym. It is considered to be pre-Greek.[42] Sweeping or the other Greek words with a similar sound would result in obviously absurd meanings. But looking at the earliest mention of the river usually called Saros, one can

[40] Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἄδανα and Ῥοῖξος. The first entry also shows that the name Saros was not a local toponym adopted by the Greeks, but a Greek hydronym replacing the older, native designation Koiranos.
[41] Ioannes Philoponos (ca. 490-560) *De vocabulis quae diversum significatum exhibent secundum differentiam accentus*: <Σάρων>· δαίμων θαλάττιος; Apostolius Paroemiographus (15th cent.) 15.34.1: <Σάρωνος ναυτικώτερος:> οὗτος ὁ Σάρων δαίμων ἦν ναυτικώτατος· ἐξ οὗ καὶ πέλαγος Σαρωνικὸν ἐπικέκληται. ἔστι δὲ τῆς Παλαιστίνης· ᾧ πρόσκειται ἄλλαι τε πόλεις πολλαὶ, καὶ Ἰόπη καὶ Λύδα; Ps-Plut. *De Fluviis* 1.1: ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὸν εἰς ποταμὸν Ἰνδὸν, ὃς ἀπ' αὐτοῦ Ὑδάσπης μετωνομάσθη· ἔστι δὲ τῆς Ἰνδίας νεανικῶς καταφερόμενος εἰς τὴν Σαρωνικὴν Σύρτιν.
[42] Fick 1905, 131.

recognize that originally it might have sounded differently, i.e., Psaros, because it is spelled in this way by Xenophon (*Anab*. 1.4.1).

The change from *psi* to *sigma* at the beginning of a word occurs, e.g., in psittakos/sittakos, Psappho/Sappho and assuming such an origin for the Saronian Gulf, we arrive at *psar* ('starling'), a common bird name, which is also attested with an initial *sigma*.[43] Moreover, the same word was used to describe the colour of ash and that of dappled horses, so it could be used in a similar way to describe the colour of the sea. As the Red Sea, the Black Sea, or the *Melaina Kolpos* (Black Gulf) near the Thracian Chersonnese clearly show, it was always common to give names describing the dark colour of the sea.[44] In the designation of the Myrtoan Sea it was a plant, the myrtle, the colour of which was compared to that of the sea;[45] here it was presumably an animal.

That a zoonym and especially a bird name can be used to denote a bay is clearly shown by the Thalassa Alkyonidos on the other side of the Isthmus (Strabo 8.2.3; 9.1.8; 9.2.1) where a few islands are still called Alkyonides (I admit not to have found any ancient text mentioning them). Although there were many mythical heroines named Alkyone, and the giant Alkyoneus is mentioned by the scholia to Pindar (*Nemean* 4.43) as living near the Isthmus of Corinth, none of these characters is credited to have given the name of this sea, and there is no eponymous hero for the deep Alkyonian lake near Lerna mentioned by Pausanias (2.37.5) either. The obvious conclusion is that they were simply called after the bird, the kingfisher, which is similarly bright-coloured as the bee-eater and may therefore denote the glittering of the sea.

[43] For the change from *psi* to *sigma*, see Schwyzer 1939, 211.6 and 329 referring to the hydronym Psaros / Saros. Hesych. s.v. σαρίν· ὀρνέου εἶδος, ὅμοιον ψάρῳ. According to Arnott 2007, 305 it is best interpreted as an alternative spelling of (P)sari(o)n. Thompson (1936, 257) refers to a group of possibly related medieval Latin words (*serena, sirena)* meaning bee-eater.

[44] For the hydronyms mentioned here, see in general Burr 1932.

[45] It is symptomatic that there were two eponyms attached to the Myrtoan sea (Myrtilos, the charioteer of Pelops and an unknown local woman called Myrto: Paus. 8.14.12), even though the original, etymologically correct meaning could have been evident for native Greek speakers.

The starling might be also used for naming the Saronian Gulf especially because there were many small islands scattered there like dapples on the plumage of the bird or on a comparable animal skin. Admittedly, we cannot know when this process took place. It is conceivable that the name of the sea was coined by the Greeks, but it is equally possible that this happened already earlier. The name of the starling is of unknown origins,[46] and although its original meaning is unfamiliar, it is not impossible that such a word was used to denote something with a dark but shiny colour or a dotted surface, and that it was applied to some animals and various natural phenomena already before the arrival of the Greeks.

Conclusion

In general, toponomastic problems are not easily solved, but the above examples have clearly shown that there is much work to be done in this field. Even if etymology cannot yield absolutely solid results, human-animal studies can both contribute to and profit from this. Of course, the above suggestions may turn out to be scholarly paretymologies if some other, pre-Greek or pre-Indo-European etymologies for these toponyms can be argued more convincingly. Absolute certainty is beyond our reach, but one can confidently conclude what has already been observed in another case, that these names "do not owe their origins to a local personal name or a local event".[47]

Greek eponymous heroes were usually mere names or shadowy figures almost devoid of any kind of personality, and because human mythological characters in general were often named after animals and especially after birds, there was nothing unusual about the eponymous heroes or heroines who were named in this way (Merops and Ortygia). They emerged much later (if they appeared at all) than the respective placenames (Meropis and Ortygia), and this fact most

[46] Beekes 2010, 1661.
[47] Liberman 2024, 307 on the contested etymology of Rotten Row and after listing many fanciful folk-etymological explanations.

probably shows that they were only needed and created at certain locations where the real meaning of the toponyms was forgotten.

King Saron is no exception to this rule and, in this case, we can even suspect that his emergence was due to the evolution of the toponym. The tale of this king is so absurd and has so many parallels in folktales and legends that the toponym cannot have originated from it. If we accept the notion that the name was coined, similarly to the other hydronyms like the Aegean, the Hellespontos or the Myrtoan sea, after the arrival of the Greeks, then the derivation from the name of the starling is the only possibility which can claim some plausibility, I think; especially considering the other toponyms which clearly derive from the name of a bird or from that of some other animal. Alternatively, the name of the Saronian Sea and that of the starling may derive from a common root of unknown meaning in a pre-Greek language which was applied to both the bird and the bay already before the arrival of the Greeks who adopted both the toponym and the zoonym without considering their primary meaning.

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The Neades of the Island of Samos (Greece, Eastern Aegean): An Analysis of Speculative Reconstruction on the Mysterious Beasts described in an Ancient Greek Myth

By Carlo Canna

Abstract

An ancient Greek myth tells of wild and dangerous creatures of gigantic size that in primordial times populated the island of Samos. It is said that the bones of these beasts, known as Neades, emerged from the soil and their 'roar' was so powerful that it could split the earth. The information we have about these fantastic monsters comes from scarce written sources by classical authors. At the same time, no known iconographic evidence depicting these creatures has been discovered. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how the ancient Greeks imagined these Neades. This article aims to provide a speculative reconstruction using geo-mythological methodology, drawing from the research conducted by Mayor and Solounias. This reconstruction will cross-reference the ancient literary sources with the paleontological evidence of megafauna discovered on Samos and known ancient zoological knowledge. This article will demonstrate that in ancient times the Neades might have been imagined as either elephants (or creatures similar to these animals) or as gigantic beasts similar to hyenas (especially striped hyenas).

1. Introduction

An ancient Greek myth tells of wild and dangerous creatures of gigantic size that in primordial times populated the island of Samos, in the eastern Aegean. Their 'roar' was so powerful that it could split the earth and their huge bones emerged from the soil. These beasts were known as Neades.[1]

[1]The word Neades/Neides (*νηάδες/νήϊδες*) likely translates in this context as 'murky' (Boardman 2004, 32).

It is interesting to note that across various cultural contexts, islands are often depicted as places that were populated by monsters and unsettling presences—a fact that that can sometimes be interpreted by the existing archaeological and anthropological evidence on these islands.[2] In Greek mythology, in particular, there is no shortage of examples of frightening creatures dwelling on an island, from characters in the Homeric poems to the Minotaur, or the Neades themselves.

The Neades are recorded in scarce written sources by classical authors.[3] To date, there is no known evidence within the iconographic documentation which represents what these creatures might have looked like. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how the ancient Greeks imagined these Neades. This article aims to provide a speculative reconstruction using a geomythological methodology, drawing from the research conducted by Mayor and Solounias: the bones of prehistoric mammals hidden within the island's soil were connected with the Neades and their deafening 'roar' was associated with the noise of earthquakes that periodically struck the island.[4]

The Mediterranean is a region of high seismic and volcanic activity, and several classical authors report in ancient sources the discovery of giant bones following earthquakes (or other natural events), which were attributed to the remains of Giants, heroes, and monsters in Greece

[2] Cauvin noted the contrast between the persistence of massive circular stone houses in the Neolithic villages of the Khirokitia culture in Cyprus and the level of socio-economic development achieved by those communities, also taking into account the absence of any trace of weapon-making. This is a defensive mechanism typical of island communities, already highlighted by other scholars cited by Cauvin, such as Le Brun for Khirokitia and, more generally, Evans concerning the tendency of protohistoric insular or maritime communities to enclose themselves within massive constructions and to insist on megalithism. In conclusion, Cauvin interprets the data from Khirokitia advancing the hypothesis that this defensive mechanism may have been conceived in ancient times as an effective tool for countering "mythical" dangers that are difficult for us to perceive (Cf. Cauvin 1994, 231-233). In the Haida society of the Queen Charlotte Islands archipelago (British Columbia, Canada) the village houses were arranged so that the front and the entrance faced the sea, a source of survival, and the back faced the impenetrable forest believed to be inhabited by malevolent spirits and witches. Moreover, the windows facing the forest, unlike those facing the sea, were protected by curtains or screens in order to ensure protection from these evil entities (Tiberini 1990, 30).

[3] A reference to the classical authors is provided in Fozio/*Suda* under the name Naides (Phot. 298.7-10 Porson-=*Suid*. ν 306 Adler). For further information: Magnelli (1999, 55-58).

[4] Cf. Mayor 2000, 54-61; Solounias and Mayor 2004 and Solounias 2024, Chapter 1. On the various studies conducted on this myth since the early 20th century and on the history of paleontological excavations carried out at Samos in modern times starting from the mid-19th century: Solounias 2024, Chapter 1.

and in the Mediterranean more broadly.[5] Modern geomythological research has identified these remains as fossils of large mammals from the Miocene, Pliocene, and Pleistocene epochs.[6]

Ancient Greece, therefore, is a fundamental cultural context for this interdisciplinary study which, building on the aforementioned research, cross-references data from ancient written sources with paleontological evidence of the megafauna of Samos and with ancient zoological knowledge.[7]

2. From Cultural Context to Geomythology

2.1. The Cultural Context: Ancient Greece

Having moved beyond the reductive Jungian view that interprets myth merely as an expression of timeless structures of the human psyche, a growing number of scholars now support the idea that myths may also conceal elements of historical truth.[8]

[5] Philostratus (*Her.*): Vinedresser: [8.3] Indeed, if I were versed in legendary lore, I would describe the seven-cubit-long corpse of Orestes, which the Lacedaemonians found in Tegea, as well as that corpse inside the bronze Lydian horse, which had been buried in Lydia before the time of Gyges. When the earth was split by an earthquake, the marvel was observed by Lydian shepherds with whom Gyges then served. The corpse, appearing larger than human, had been laid in a hollow horse that had openings on either side. [8.9] (...) When Hymnaios happened to dig up vines on the island of Ikos (...) the earth sounded somewhat hollow to those who were digging. When they opened it up, they found a twelve-cubit corpse lying there with a serpent inhabiting its skull. [8.11] But the corpse that came to light on Lemnos, which Menekratês of Steiria found, was very big, and I saw it a year ago when I sailed from Imbros, only a short distance from Lemnos, however, no longer appear in their proper order: the vertebrae lie separated from each other, tossed about by earthquakes, I suppose, and the ribs are wrenched out of the vertebrae. But if one imagines the bones together as a whole, the size seems to make one shudder and is not easily described (...). [Transl. E. Bradshaw Aitken and J.K. Berenson Maclean].

[6] For further discussion, see Mayor 2000.

[7] On the reconstruction of the morphotype of mythical creatures, I believe it fitting to mention the studies conducted by Li Causi (2017; 2025) on the construction of morphotypes and cognitive types of imaginary or unfamiliar animals in Greek and Roman antiquity. However, it is a different approach from the one proposed in this research, which cannot consider a possible zoological identification of the Neades, as taken into consideration in the conclusions of the present article.

[8] "One can hardly assume that myth or mystery was consciously invented for some purpose: everything suggests rather that they represent an involuntary recognition of an unconscious psychic precondition" (Jung 1997, IX.1.183). Cf. also Versnel 1994 and Bremmer 2014.

The most prominent examples come from the classical world, specifically Greek mythology, due to the richness of archaeological data and the earliest written sources by Hesiod and Homer.

According to Boardman, unlike other ancient cultures which were characterized by a long tradition of historical and archaeological documentation—often sustained over centuries by dynastic or religious continuity—the Greeks of the historical period had to reinvent their past, which had been disrupted by the collapse of the Bronze Age civilizations of Crete and Mycenae. The cultural legacy preserved through oral tradition was combined with efforts to identify, through a mytho-historical lens, the locations and deeds of figures from their heroic past (the Bronze Age). Both the natural and the man-made worlds (fossils, landscape features, ruins and relics) may have been responsible for this reconstruction of the past.[9]

Within this specific cultural framework, the research conducted by various scholars—especially Mayor—plays a significant role. Through a thorough and thought-provoking investigation, she has provided the most comprehensive documentation of the connection between myths and legends of Giants, heroes, and monsters in Greek mythology and the discovery of fossil remains of large vertebrates.[10]

2.2. Geomythology

'Geomythology', a term coined by Vitaliano, is the study of geological phenomena as interpreted through myth and folklore by prescientific cultures.[11]

When interpreting the geological content of a myth, it is important to distinguish between general cases—where objective verification is not possible—and more specific ones that are strongly tied to particular territories, such as sacred sites or emotionally impactful geological events, like volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.[12] Among natural objects (such as unusually

[9] Boardman 2004.
[10] Mayor 2000.
[11] Vitaliano 1968; 1973.
[12] Cf. Piccardi 2002.

shaped rock formations, gemstones, meteorites, etc.), fossils have particularly sparked human curiosity, inspiring numerous speculations about their origin and meaning.[13] The list of examples is extensive, but the fossils that likely had the greatest influence on the collective imagination of ancient cultures—especially in ancient Greece—are the large bones of prehistoric vertebrates, which were often directly interpreted as the physical remains of mythological beings: Giants, heroes, and monsters.

In the history of speculative reconstructions of mythological monsters through a geo-mythological study approach, one of the best-known early examples is Abel's theory of Polyphemus who suggested that there may have been a relationship between the large nasal cavity located in the centre of the skull of Palaeoloxodon falconeri (a prehistoric species of 'dwarf' elephant whose fossil remains have been found in Sicily and Malta) and the eye of the Homeric Cyclops.[14] One of the most acclaimed theories is that of the griffin (a creature combining features of lions and birds): Mayor suggests that there was a possible relationship between the fossil remains of the Protoceratops, a Central Asian horned dinosaur of the Cretaceous period (ca. 100-65 million years ago), with the morphology of this legendary creature.[15]

[13] For further reading on Geomythology and fossils cf. also: Vitaliano 1973; Mayor 2000, 2005a-b and 2025; Piccardi and Masse 2007.
[14] Abel 1942, 55-56. For further information on Cyclops and fossils in the Mediterranean islands: Masseti 2008, 10-11.
[15] Mayor 2000, 15-53.

3. A Speculative Reconstruction of the Neades: Insights from Classical Texts, Fossil Evidence, and Ancient Zoology

3.1 Ancient written sources

Our information about the fantastic monsters of Samos whose roar tore the earth primarily comes from Euagon (fifth century BC), Aristotle (fourth century BC), Euphorion (third century BC), Plutarch (first-second century AD), and Aelian (second-third century AD).[16]

The most complete written source on the Neades is a fragment from a lost work by the Greek geographer Euphorion, as reported by the natural historian Aelian (*De Natura Animalium* 17.28):

> Euphorion says in his memoirs that during the very old times, Samos became deserted; deserted due to very large and fierce beasts which appeared on it, they caused sufferings [they were awe-inspiring] [two possibilities for the word *deina*] and were called Neades, and their mere roar could fracture the earth. Thus, there is a proverb on Samos: 'to scream louder than the Neades'. The same writer [Euphorion] says that their big bones for years and now are displayed.[17] [Transl. Solounias and Mayor 2004].

In their interpretation of the text from this source, Solounias and Mayor believe that in ancient times the Neades were considered responsible for the extermination of the entire population of Samos and classified these beasts as 'wild mammals'.[18] Euphorion's proverb, 'to scream

[16] Cf. Mayor 2000, 54-60; Solounias and Mayor 2004, 284-293. It should be clarified that the source cited by Plutarch actually refers to a different myth, which tells of creatures (identifiable as the elephants of Dionysus) described as the beasts sometimes called Neades in earlier sources (see below).

[17] Ael. *De natura animalium* 17.28 cf. Scholfield (1958, 359) in Solounias and Mayor 2004, 285-286; cf. also Solounias 2024, 12.

[18] In modern Samian folklore, there remains a recognition of a natural catastrophe that led to the disappearance of the island's entire population—likely attributable to a single major earthquake that lies at the origin of these myths. For further reading, cf. Solounias and Mayor 2004, 286, 293; Solounias 2024, 12, 20.
Regarding historical and archaeological data on earthquakes in ancient Samos: Papadimitriou et al (2020, 255) trace the earliest historical evidence back to the second century BC (around 201-197 BC, when an earthquake caused injuries among the people of the island of Samos); Sassu (2013, 258) reports the collapse of the Heraion (Temple of Hera in Samos) in the sixth century BC due to the failure of the foundations in the eastern half of the building, caused by marshy ground and weak substructures.
On the possible identification of the Neades as 'wild mammals', Solounias and Mayor (2004, 286) write: "*Theria* means wild animals or beasts. It can also mean fierce. 'Wild mammals' is the preferred translation".

louder than the Neades', is also documented in Aristotle with political connotations and, likely, in Callimachus for poetic purposes.[19]

The oldest reference to giant beasts whose roar tore the earth in Samos comes from a fifth-century BC fragment by Euagon, cited by Plutarch:

> at the location called Phloios the very earth cracked open and collapsed upon [some] huge beasts as they uttered great and piercing cries. [20]

A similar description of such creatures can be found in Plutarch's *Greek Questions*, although it belongs to a different myth that tells of an epic battle held in Samos between the god Dionysus and the Amazons:

> What is the reason that on Samos there is a region called Panaima [all bloody place or bloodbath]? The answer is the Amazons, fleeing from Dionysus, fell [or were trapped] on Samos [fleeing] from the land of the people of Ephesos. Dionysus constructed ships, passed [from the mainland to Samos] and fought the Amazons, killing most of them, in various locations [on Samos]. Such a vast amount of blood spilled that people who noticed the red-stained earth called the place by the name Panaima. Some of the...phi...[later added as elephants] died near the place called Phloios and their bones can still be seen there. Some say that they fractured Phloios because of their prodigious bellowing.[21] [Transl. Solounias and Mayor 2014].

In Plutarch's reference to the creatures whose 'prodigious bellowing' split the earth at Phloios and whose bones were displayed, one can find a clear connection to the historical sources previously mentioned by other classical authors. This observation provides an additional

[19] On the association of this proverb with the roar that accompanies an earthquake and Aristotle: Mayor 2000, 57-58 and n. 3, 290; Solounias and Mayor 2004, 292. Aristotle (or one of his students) on the Neades: "It is said that in the beginning, Samos was lonely and contained a number of animals with a loud cry. The animals were called Neides" (*Heraclidis Lembi* 30 in Dilts 1971, 24-25). Magnelli (1999, 55-58) suggests that the poet Callimachus may have been familiar with the myth of the Neades and, in the prologue of the Telchines (*Aitia*, fr. 1 Pf.), he specifically compares the 'croaking' of the Telchines—detractors of his poetry—to the loudness of the Neades: "The Telchines grumble at my poetry, ignorant, they weren't born friends of the Muse".

[20] Solounias and Mayor 2004, 292 and Solounias 2024, 19 (Plutarch in Halliday 1928). "(...) earth cracked open and collapsed upon huge beasts. This scenario can be interpreted as the ancient recognition that huge beasts once lived near Phloios where they were destroyed by an earthquake" (*ibid*.).

[21] Plut. *Quaestiones graecae,* 56 cf. Halliday/Clarendon Press (1928, 233) in Solounias and Mayor 2004, 287; cf. also Solounias 2024, 14.

insight into a possible identification of the Neades by the ancients and in Plutarch's description of these creatures. It is worth mentioning what Solounias and Mayor have observed: "(...) The emendation of the word elephants was based on the presence of the *phi* and was added by Wilanowitz-Mollendorff and affirmed by subsequent scholars" [...] "the word elephant is plausible because Plutarch was referring to a well-known myth of Dionysus' war elephant, in which the god used to defeat the Amazons (...). Because it features elephants, we know that this myth arose sometimes after [...] Alexander the Great's conquests in India".[22]

The indirect reference to Dionysus' elephants can be interpreted as a potential recognition by the ancients of mastodon fossils as the bones of the god's elephants that had fallen in battle against the Amazons.[23]

3.2 Paleontological Documentation

The historical sources cited, ranging from Euagon to Aelian, represent some of the earliest European examples of interpreting fossil remains of large vertebrates.[24] The bone beds of Samos were accumulated near fault zones, a fact that can be seen in the association between the Neades (the fossil remains) and their roars (earthquakes and ground fractures), as well as in the identification of the two 'geonyms' Phloios and Panaima.[25] The paleontological record of Samos has yielded a rich Late Miocene fauna similar to the present-day African savanna but more abundant and diverse, including several species of giraffes, rhinoceroses, hipparions, hyenas, proboscideans, and many more. The most common fossils are ungulate mammals such as hippotheria, rhinoceroses, the giraffid Samotherium, antelopes, and other large mammals of

[22] Mayor 2000, 56 and n.1, 289; Solounias and Mayor 2004, 287-288, 290-291; Solounias 2024, 15-17.
[23] Mayor 2000, 55; Solounias and Mayor 2004, 288 and Solounias 2024, 15-17. For more information on the interpretation of this geomyth and the identification of these creatures: cf. Mayor 2000, 54-55; Solounias and Mayor 2004, 287-292; Solounias 2024, 14-19.
[24] Solounias 2024, 11.
[25] Major excavations sites are near Phloios (Quarry 1) and Panaima (Quarry 5) in the Mytilini Basin: Phloios ('thick and hard crust' in Greek) is a big block of faulted limestone (The Pythagoras Fault) next to Quarry 1; Panaima ('bloodbath' in Greek) is a small red plateau located near Quarry 5. Cf. Solounias and Mayor 2004; Solounias and Ring 2007 and Solounias 2024.

the Miocene epoch.[26] By observing the fossil remains (probably skulls and teeth), the ancients could distinguish the more unusual ones from the bones of domestic animals, correctly identifying them as the remains of 'wild beasts'.[27]

It is likely that the bone beds of Samos, which have not been documented with drawings or pictures, were very similar to the bone beds of Gansu in central China: a huge accumulation of skeletons and isolated bones of different animals (Figure 1).[28] This suggests a possible identification of the Neades by the ancients based on fossil remains of animals belonging to various taxa. We cannot exclude the possibility that the Neades were reconstructed as either real or fantastic animals based on the observation of unusual and/or common fossil remains found in the bone beds of Samos (Figure 2). However, this remains a hypothesis that cannot be further explored with the data currently available from the sources at our disposal.

The description of the Neades as enormous beasts that split the earth with their screams is a fact that must necessarily be related to the larger mammals found in the late Miocene megafauna of Samos: among these, in particular, the huge skulls of rhinoceroses (Figure 3 **&**Figure 4) and proboscideans (Figure 5 **&** Figure 6) were probably the most easily associated with the remains of gigantic beasts, possessing jaws powerful enough to cause earthquakes.[29]

[26] Solounias and Ring 2007, 11 and Solounias 2024, 7. Among the most common mammals in Samos: Hyaenidae, Orycteropididae, Porcaviidae (Pliohryax), Equidae (hipparion skulls), Rihinocerontidae (Chilotherium), Giraffidae (Samotherium, Paleotragus), Bovidae (Miotragocerus, Samokeros), Antilopini (Gazella), Ovibovini (Palaeoryx); cf. also Solounias 2024, 96-99, 262-265.

[27] This is an interpretation of Euphorion's text with a possible translation of the term *theria* as 'wild mammals' (cf. *supra* fn. 18).

[28] Solounias 2024, 39-41, Fig. 122-125.

[29] Of particular interest is the discovery, in the Temple of Hera (Heraion), of a fossil femur belonging to a Miocene rhinoceros, datable to around the seventh century BC (Mayor 2000, 182-183; Solounias 2024, 14, 21). In particular, in ancient times, the teeth (premolars and molars) of proboscideans discovered in Samos (deinotheres and mastodons) may have been more easily identified with those of carnivorous animals. Indeed, up to the 19th century, in several instances those prehistorical creatures were identified as monstrous carnivorous animals (cf. Semonin 2000 and Garbin 2016, 246-252). Therefore, in the past, when fossil remains belonging to the head (mostly fragments of cranium, jaws and teeth) of proboscideans were discovered in Samos, they were probably associated to the remains of enormous carnivores.

Finally, from the possible reference to Dionysus' war elephants that died at Phloios to the modern Samian folklore identifying the fossil beds as an elephant cemetery, these data indicate that these animals have long played a role in the collective imagination of the people.[30]

3.3 Ancient Zoology

According to Solounias, the largest mammals known to the ancient Greeks were the cow and the horse, but they may also have known of elephants.[31]

Many classical authors, especially in the earliest sources, describe the elephant as a wondrous creature: from the *wild beast* of Herodotus (4.191), to the only animal capable of confronting the legendary manticore described by Ctesias (*Ind*. 7), or the *very large and very voracious animal* mentioned by Plato (*Crito* 2.4e). For Juba II (son of Juba of Numidia), the tusks were horns, not teeth—a characteristic later echoed by other authors such as Aretaeus of Cappadocia (*De causis et signis diuturnorum morborum, Liber Secundus,* XIII), who described the elephant as having a *dark skin, like the night and death*.[32] However, there are also very precise observations of this animal from Aristotle (*Part. an.; Hist. an.; IA; Gen.an.*) to later authors, such as Pliny (*HN* 8.1-13) and Aretaeus himself.[33]

From Plutarch's possible reference to Dionysus' elephants to the earliest sources recounting huge and fierce beasts sometimes called Neades, it is possible that these mythological creatures were identified in antiquity as elephants or animals similar to them (Figure 7 & Figure 11 in the front cover).

[30] Solounias 2024, 14, 17,19.
[31] Solounias 2024, 13.
[32] Scullard 1974. These ancient sources provide a mythical aura to such exotic animals as elephants.
[33] Scullard 1974, 37-48, 209, 221. Aretaeus (*De causis et signis diuturnorum morborum, Liber Secundus,* XIII cf. T.F. Reynolds 1837, 151), for example, provides a detailed description of the skin of these animals: It has a rough and very thick skin, containing fissures with prominent edges, long channels, and other hollow clefts, some transverse, others oblique, very deep, in all respects like a furrowed field. Iconographic evidence from the Hellenistic period to the end of the Roman era generally presents a realistic image of this animal (cf. Scullard 1974; Karahan and Tülek 2023).

Elephants, like the Neades, are described as enormous beasts and symbolize loudness.[34] Even Edward Topsell, although citing no specific evidence, suggested this identification for the Neades in his *The historie of foure footed beasts* (1607):

> "(...) and this title [Of the Neades, Neides, or Naides] I thought good to insert into this History, leaving the Reader to consider, whether he will take them for Elephants, or for any other greater beast; for my opinion if it be desired, I think them rather (if there ever were any such) that they were Elephants of greature stature then ever since were seen, and not any generations of beasts now lost and utterly perished".[35]

Excluding the hypothesis of the elephantine Nead, it is possible to consider another speculative reconstruction based on an indirect interpretation of the proverb 'to scream louder than the Neades', as a possible association between the Neades' sound and the human voice.[36] According to Li Causi, in ancient times, the *sermo humanus* was attributed to various animals: some species of birds, the legendary manticore and the hyena (in its 'variants' hyaina, corocotta and leucrocotta); the hyena, in particular, is described as a fierce beast and a magical and mysterious animal that assumed fantastic traits so as to resemble mythological monsters.[37]

The Hyaenidae family comprises four extant members: the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*, Linnaeus 1758), the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*, Erxleben 1777), the brown hyena

[34] Regarding the size of elephants in ancient sources: cf. Scullard 1974, 47: Excessive bulk, such as has been given (...) in still greater measure to elephants, is sufficient in itself to protect an animal from being destroyed by others (Arist. *Part. an.* 3.2; 663^{a}5); 220: (...) he is the greatest and the thickest of animals; in size, he is as great as if you were to put one animal on top of another, like a tower; in bulk, he is as large as if you should place several other very large animals side by side. But neither in shape is he much like to any other (Aretaeus of Cappadocia); 209: the largest land animal (Plin. *HN* 8.1). On the loudness of elephants in ancient sources: cf. Scullard 1974, 45: (...) the sound produced is like that of a hoarse trumpet (Arist. *Hist. an.* 4.9; 536^{b}22); 227: And the elephants bending their trunk inward and folding it beneath their tusks, like the ram of a ship driving along with a great surge, fall upon the men in a tremendous charge, overturning many and bellowing with a piercing shrill note like a trumpet (Ael. 8.10); 102: the huge earth-shaking beast (a roman ballad poetry which Macaulay attributed to Capys).

[35] Topsell 1607, 567.

[36] A similar case is that of an ancient legend told by the Latin poet Rutilius Namatianus in the fifth century AD (*De reditu suo* vv. 255 ss.): a deity in the form of a bull scraped the soil and caused a source of water with beneficial properties to spring form the earth. Such legend has been interpreted as a possible indirect reference to the use of thermal water to heal the animals in ancient times (Bassani 2012, 193).

[37] Li Causi 2003, 232-237 and 2018, 225.

(*Parahyaena brunnea*, Thunberg 1820), and the aardwolf (*Proteles cristatus*, Sparrman 1783).[38] In Greco-Roman antiquity, the only species of hyena that would have been observed by historians, travellers or naturalists were the striped and the spotted hyenas.[39] Striped and spotted hyenas have a different historical distribution. Striped hyenas, unlike spotted hyenas, are present in Northern Africa, Western Asia, and India; in particular, the presence of the striped hyena is well documented until the first decades of the second half of the twentieth century, in the extreme western part of Turkey, an area (the Aegean Region, in particular) close to the island of Samos.[40]

The oldest historical sources on the hyena are reported between the fifth and fourth century BC by Herodotus (4.192), Ctesias (*Ind.* fr. 76) and Aristotle (*Hist. an.* 6.32 and 8.5*; Gen.an.* 3.6); on the hyena's capability to imitate the human speech, wrote Ctesias (*Ind.* fr. 76), Agatarchides (*On the Erythraean Sea* fr. 78a), Diodorus Siculus (*Bibliotheca historica* 3.37.10), Pliny (*HN* 8.44, 106), Aelian (7.22) and Solinus (*Collectonea rerum memorabilium* 27.23-26).[41] The striped hyena was mentioned by Herodotus (4.192) already in the fifth century BC and, later on, the most detailed description was provided by Aristotle (*Hist. an.* 6.32 and 8.5*; Gen.an.* 3.6). Such data can be related to the geographical distribution of that species.[42] One of the most detailed ancient depictions of a hyena is the one by the famous Nile mosaic from Palestrina (c. 120 BC). The animal, portrayed as a big and robust dog, with horizontal instead of vertical stripes, has been identified with a striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*, Linnaeus 1758);

[38] Mills and Hofer 1998.
[39] Funk 2012, 145-146.
[40] Mills and Hofer 1998, 44, 55. Kasparek *et al.* 2013, 96-98, Fig. 6, 104.
[41] Cf. Li Causi 2003 and Funk 2012. In particular, with reference to hyenas' ability to imitate the human voice, it is a characteristic which we may associate to the notorious cries of the spotted hyena; yet the analysis of the sources does not allow for a zoological identification (cf. Funk 2012, 155).
[42] Cf. Mills and Hofer 1998, 44, 55 and Funk 2012, 146. Aristotle's description refers to this species for morphological characters and geographical distribution: Arist. *Hist. an.* 6.28 and 8.7 cf. Cresswell (1883, 176): The hyaena is of the colour of the wolf, but it is hairier, and has a mane along the ridge of its back (...). The animal which some persons call the glanus and others the hyaena, is not less than the wolf, it has a mane like a horse, but the hair all along its spine is harsher and thicker (...). In particular, the mane along the entire back is a distinctive character of the striped hyena also reported in Pliny (*HN* 8.105); (Li Causi 2003, 232); Arist. *Mir.* (845a 24 ff.) cf. Dowdall 1909: In Arabia they say there is a certain kind of hyaena (...).

on the other hand, no authentic representations of the spotted hyena have been discovered from antiquity, the Middle Ages or early modern times.[43]

Therefore, it is likely that travellers' records from Samos spread information about such a strange animal, and the morphological features of the striped hyena may have affected the collective imagination of the ancients, shaping the image of Neades as fierce and feral beasts (Figure 8**,** Figure 9 **&** Figure 10).

4. Conclusions

Two hypotheses for the speculative reconstruction of the Neades have been formulated in this paper. The data presented suggest that these beasts may have been visualized in ancient times as elephants, creatures similar to elephants, or enormous beasts comparable to hyenas, especially striped hyenas. The most intuitive reconstruction is that of the Neades as elephants or animals resembling them—large and noisy—although this hypothesis lacks a direct reference to these animals in the written sources. In the second reconstruction, a possible connection between the Neades and the hyena was hypothesized, an animal that the ancients believed possessed the *sermo humanus*, based on an indirect reading of the proverb 'to scream louder than the Neades'. In the ancient world, people believed that living beings from the past were larger than those of the present, a fact that can be related to a medium-sized mammal such as the hyena; yet, with reference to fossil remains, that datum can be especially true for those animals whose history was linked to the one of ancient heroes, like the mythical Calydonian Boar killed by Meleager, whose tusks were originally displayed at Tegea, in Greece, before being transported to Rome by Augustus.[44]

[43] Salari 2006, 38; Funk 2012, 147. Different morphological features that are characteristic of this species can be identified: a black stripe on the back that can be identified as its mane and possible fur clumps or stripes on the right side of its head (both are morphological features that are present in striped hyenas) (Salari pers. com.). Another example of a detailed ancient depiction of a striped hyena is the Ostracon from the Ramesside period in Deir el-Medina (Egypt), which portrays hunting dogs attacking a hyena (Germand and Livet 2001, 95 fig. 108). For other ancient depictions of striped hyenas: Funk 2012, 164 figs. 4-5.

[44] Li Causi 2018, 180-182; Boardman 2004, 32-33. On the tusks of the Calydonian and Erymanthian boars and their identification with the fossil tusks of proboscideans: Mayor 2000, 126, 142-143, 205-206.

Finally, we cannot rule out that the mere discovery of unusual and/or particularly common fossil remains in the bone beds of Samos may have been identified with those of another real animal, or perhaps even a fantastic one; or, more simply, that the Neades might have been imagined as 'spirits' of creatures extinct in a distant past, not attributable to any known animal.

In conclusion, a speculative reconstruction is neither provable nor disprovable and we will probably never know how the ancient Greeks imagined the Neades. However, based on the data available to us, two main interpretative hypotheses have been proposed by cross-referencing historical sources with paleontological evidence and ancient zoological knowledge.

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Figures

Figure 1

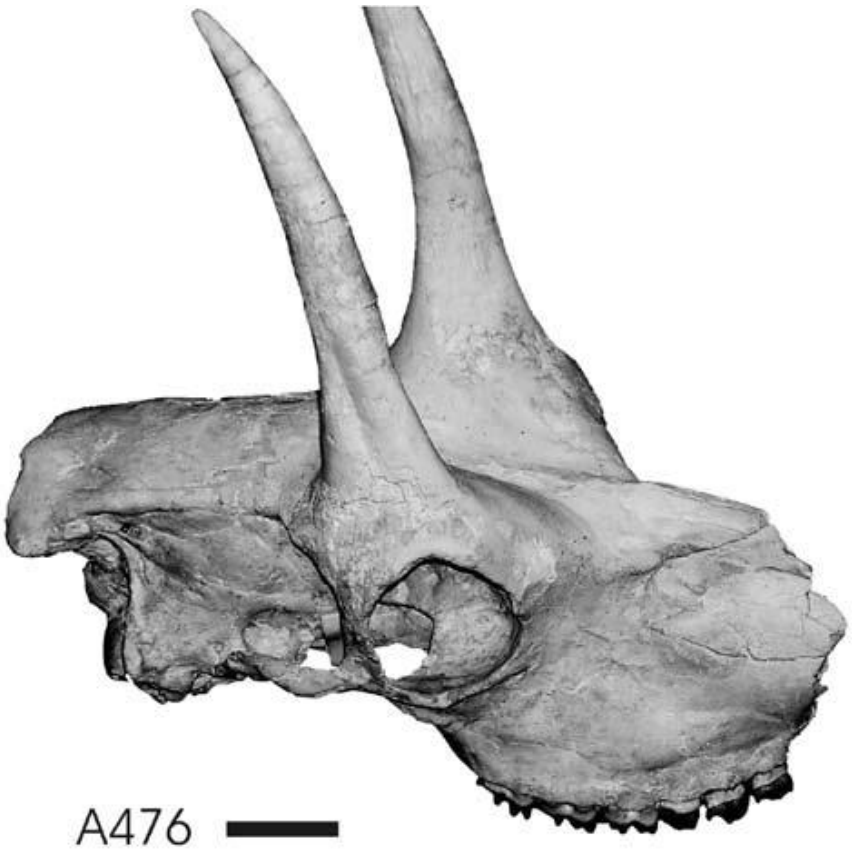

Figure 2

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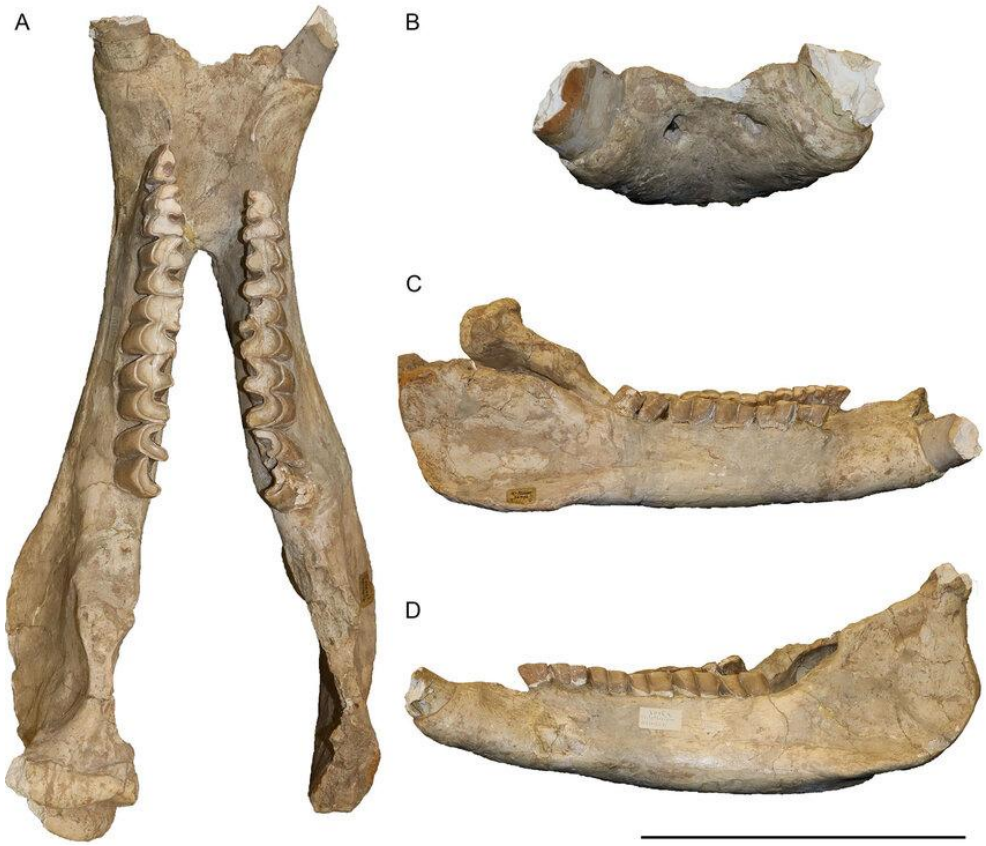

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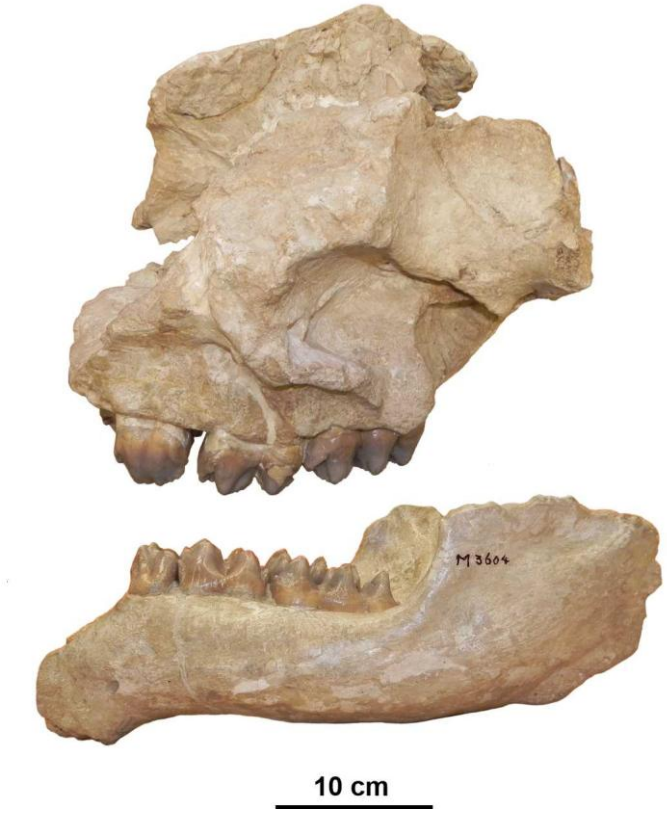

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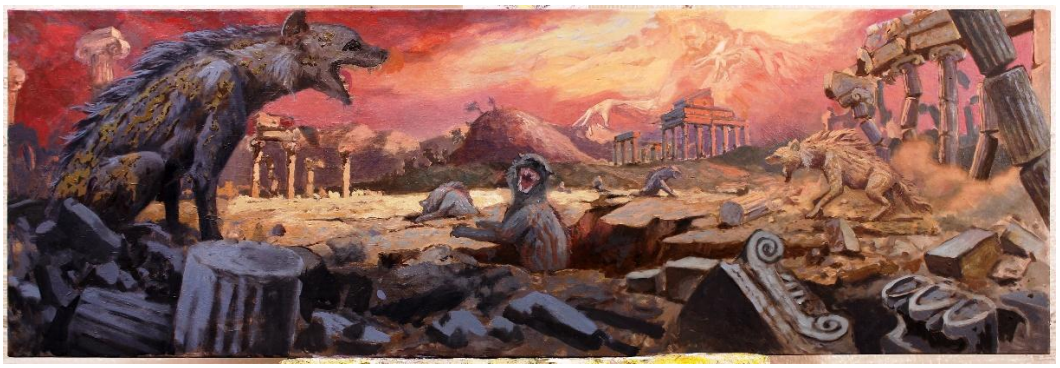

Figure 8

Figure 9

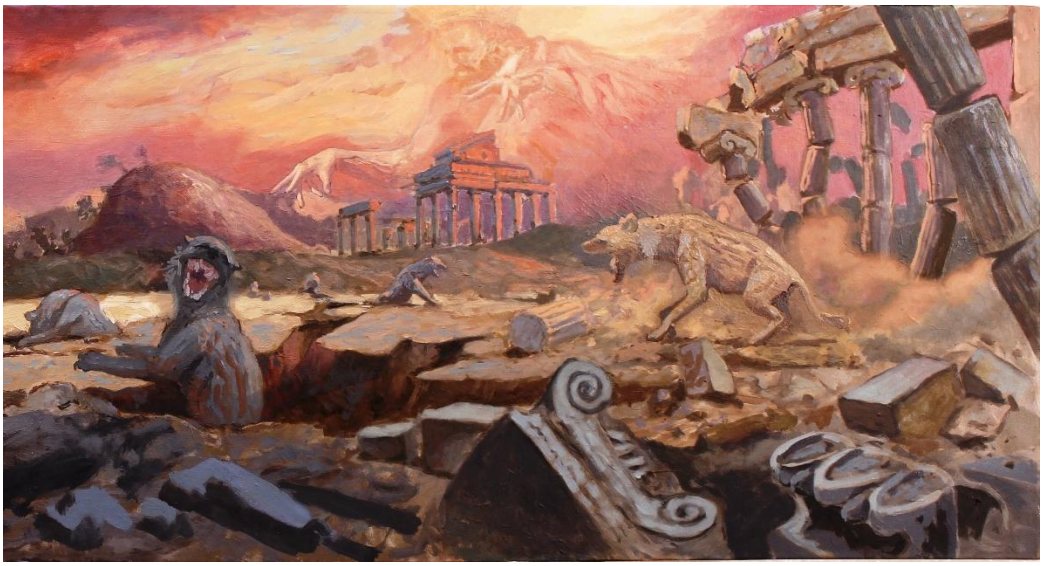

Figure 10

Figure 11

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The Role of Dogs in the Erotic Magic of the *Greek Magical Papyri*

By Marcela Alejandra Ristorto & Silvia Susana Reyes

Abstract

This paper explores the symbolic and ritual role of dogs in the erotic magic of the Greek Magical Papyri (*PGM*). In Greek religion, dogs were frequently used in purification rites—rituals closely associated with the goddess Hecate, to whom dogs were regularly sacrificed and in whose cult they held a central role. Hecate was often depicted in the company of dogs, whose barking was believed to signal her presence. Drawing on this background, this paper examines the ritual use of dogs—and canine body parts—in erotic spells, where Hecate is invoked in her aspect as a dog. Special attention is paid to the semantic significance of the term κύων (*kyon*) and its adjectival and nominal derivatives, which function as epithets shaping the discursive construction of Hecate as a chthonic and threatening goddess.

1. Introduction[1]

Erotic magic falls under the category of the so-called binding or attraction spells, as well as malevolent magic, which in the *PGM* mostly involve aggressive or violent attraction procedures commissioned by men to coerce women into sexual transgression. While there are literary references to this type of magic, our paper focuses on the texts commonly known by the generic name "Greek Magical Papyri" (*PGM: Papyri Graecae Magicae*),[2] namely the

[1] We warmly thank Guendalina D.M. Taietti for inviting us to contribute to this second animal-themed issue. We are also grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

[2] The acronym *PGM* refers to the title of the corpus: *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri* (Teubner 1928-1931). From now on, we will refer to the corpus using this acronym. K. Preisendanz edited two volumes of *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (*PGM* I and II), published in 1928 and 1931 (Teubner, Leipzig). This corpus arrived at European libraries throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The third volume, which was to include the reconstructed hymns and indexes, could not be published because the Teubner publishing house was damaged during the 1943 air raid. The material that would have appeared in this third volume was later incorporated into the second volume of Albert Henrichs's re-edition of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (1973-1974). A. Henrichs undertook a re-edition of the corpus with minor

corpus of papyri with magical content dating from the second century BC to the fifth century AD. As Martín Hernández (2014, 42), among other researchers, points out, these texts should be called "papiros mágicos egipcios de época greco-romana",[3] since—although mostly written in Greek—they were produced in Egypt and contain passages partly written in Egyptian. These texts likewise reflect the fusion of Greek and Egyptian religious traditions (Ager 2022, 78).

Among the various ritual activities recorded in Greco-Egyptian magic manuals are 'binding spells'— that is, 'malefic' or 'aggressive' magic designed to subdue rivals (in sports, law, or politics), or to compel the love of another person through the coercive force of a spell. These practices include spells of erotic attraction (*ἀγωγαί*), ritual acts intended to lead the desired individual to the home or bed of either the ritual's author or of the person who commissioned the spell (cf. Faraone 1999, 25-28). Men typically use such magic to awaken *eros* (erotic desire) in order to satisfy their sexual longing. What is particularly striking about many of these erotic spells is that they aim to awaken feelings of love and erotic desire in the victim, often by invoking a goddess to inflict severe bodily torments: "to destroy, to burn, to afflict, to torture: this is the language of love, at least in the spells under discussion" (Versnel 1998, 249).

The goddesses targeted in these rituals are chthonic-lunar nature deities, such as Hecate, who is often syncretized with Artemis, Selene, and Persephone. The frequent invocation of Hecate accounts for the prominent role of the dog in these ritual practices, where it assumes various functions and symbolic values.

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emendations in 1973-1974. The corpus of magical papyri was completed between 1990 and 1992 thanks to the work of R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, who edited the *Supplementum Magicum* (in two volumes). The corpus was translated into English in 1986 by a group of scholars under the direction of H. D. Betz in Chicago. This translation has the advantage of including the Demotic texts found in the documents—texts that were not edited by Preisendanz. There is also a Spanish translation of the *PGM* corpus by J. L. Calvo Martínez and Ma. D. Sánchez Romero, *Textos de magia en papiros griegos*, Madrid 1987. Following the *Supplementum* by Daniel and Maltomini, additional texts (including formularies and activated texts) have continued to be published in academic journals. Currently, an international team of researchers, under the direction of Ch. Faraone and S. Torallas Tovar, is preparing a new edition of the Greco-Egyptian magical formularies in three volumes, the first of which has already been published (Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022). See also: W. M. Brashear, *The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography* (1928-1994), ANRW II. 18.5 (1995), 3398-3412.

[3] "Egyptian magical papyri from the Greco-Roman period".

Like all ritual practices, erotic rituals involve the preparation of offerings to be burned in honour of the deity, accompanied by hymns or prayers recited at the moment of burning the offering. Ritual activity consists of two instances: 'what is done' (τὰ δρώμενα), and 'what is said' (τὰ λεγόμενα). Within these dual aspects, the figure of the dog assumes different roles: on the one hand, it serves as an ingredient in the preparation of offerings, and, on the other, the term 'dog' functions as an epithet or symbolic designation of Hecate. We will focus not so much on its use in *praxeis* (ritual actions), but rather on its function as *symbola* or epithets of Hecate in the hymns and prayers of the *PGM*.

2. Dogs and Hecate in *PGM*

Hecate's bond with dogs was special, for as Zografou (2010, 249) underlines, unlike other deities associated with various animals, the dog is the only animal linked to this goddess. Thus, in poetic and magical tradition, it was believed that the barking of dogs announced the goddess's presence.[4] One possible reason for this close affinity is that both Hecate and dogs—within Greek mentality—share ambivalent traits and behaviours. Moreover, the Greek philologist (2010, 252) points out that the bond between the goddess and the animal is clearly reflected by the fact that both fulfill the role of guardians. Hecate can play a beneficial role as a protective goddess of households or cities, or an infernal role as commander of spirits and ghosts, but she is always accompanied by one or many dogs. And dogs can act as human companions or guards of homes, but they can also behave disgustingly as scavengers or corpse eaters, or even become threatening for those who believe they represent or stand for unburied dead or ghosts.[5] Bortolani (2016, 240) states that in Greek tradition, dogs embody a dual symbolism: on the domestic side, they are portrayed as protectors, assistants, and loyal companions to both mortals and deities—most notably Artemis, the quintessential goddess of hunt; on the other hand, dogs also possess a distinctly chthonic dimension, evidenced by their

[4] Theoc. *Id*. 2.12-13, 35-36; Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 3.1040, 1214-1217; Sen. *Med.* 840-3 and *OA* 949-987.

[5] Dogs as restless souls or demons: Johnston 1990 ch. 9; Roscher 1896, 25-50. Here, too, the precise implications of this association remain uncertain. As Roscher points out, however, parallels can be found in other cultures, where dogs are portrayed both as demons and as protectors against them. Perhaps this duality reflects nothing more than reality: dogs are indeed both ferocious meat eaters and excellent guardians (cf. Plu. *QR* 276 f. 277a).

role as mythic beasts of the Underworld (such as Cerberus), and by the belief that the spirits of the unburied dead could manifest in canine form. As Mainoldi (1984, 46) points out, Hecate and her monstrous dogs guide the dead to the world of the living, and in addition she is "la déesse inquiétante et démoniaque, qui, la nuit, erre près des tombeaux pour effrayer les vivants". [6] It is precisely because of these threatening aspects that Hecate is invoked by practitioners in magical rituals.

In the coming subsections, we will analyze selected hymns embedded within several erotic spells of the *PGM,* in which the term 'dog' (κύων)—whether masculine or feminine—functions as an epithet or symbol (σύμβολον) of Hecate. We will also analyze how adjectives related to canine traits are used to evoke the chthonic, vengeful, and dangerous nature of the goddess.

2.1. Dog and dog-related terms as epithets or *symbola*

In *PGM* IV.1399-1434,[7] we find a hymn to Hecate-Selene as part of a ritual procedure titled "love spell of attraction in the presence of heroes or gladiators or those who died violently" (Ἀγωγὴ ἐπὶ ἡρώων ἢ μονομάχων ἢ βιαίων). The hymn not only invokes other deities as assistants of the goddess, but also calls upon "those who died untimely and violently" (φθιμένοις ἀώροις, βιομόροις v. 2). This invocation to the deceased reflects the belief that individuals who died prematurely before fulfilling the span allotted to them by fate remained in an intermediate liminal state. Suspended between both worlds, they could not fully pass to the Underworld because they had not really completed their lives, according to the time agreed by destiny. This liminality rendered these special spirits suitable 'instruments' in the hands of magicians (see S. *fr*. 535; E. *Med,* 397; Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.33; Bremmer 2002, 77-81; Garland 1988, 77-78; Faraone 1991, 3-32; Johnston 1999, 204; Martín Hernández 2011, 95-115). Also invoked are the "unfortunate who left the light" (λειψίφωτες ἀλλοιόμοροι, v. 10), another reference to the 'restless dead'—spirits whose final destination is not Hades, but who are

[6] "the disturbing and demonic goddess, who, at night, wanders near the tombs to frighten the living".
[7] The translations of the *PGM* are by Bortolani 2016.

condemned to wander until their desires are fulfilled or their thirst for revenge is quenched. Their anomalous status granted them the power to intervene in the world of the living, either at will or when summoned, often bringing harm and distress (Johnston 1999, 84).

It is not until verse 29 that the proper name of the praised goddess is revealed: "O mistress Hecate" (κυρία Ἑκάτη). In the following verse, the author of the magical hymn uses a female animal epithet to characterize the goddess: "black bitch" (κύων μέλαινα, v. 30). This epithet reinforces the chthonic nature of the deity, highlighting her dark and dangerous aspect. As Dosoo and Galoppin (2022, 217) point out, it was usual to dedicate black female dogs to Hecate as a lunar and chthonic goddess. Likewise, black dogs were not only consecrated to her, but also served as her favourite sacrificial victims[8].

In *PGM* IV.2242-2355, there is a hymn addressed to Hecate-Selene that is supposed to be performed during a ritual procedure entitled "inscription to the waning moon" (Δέλτος ἀποκρουστικὴ πρὸς Σελήνην), in the context of an ἀγωγή ritual. It is worth mentioning that in this hymn the goddess is not invoked by her proper name; instead, she is addressed through epithets and attributive expressions that make reference to different aspects of her nature. In verse 10 she is called "maiden-like bitch" (ἰσοπάρθενος κύων), and again in verse 37 simply as "bitch" (κυνώ).

Later in the hymn, the author clarifies that the designation 'bitch' functions as a symbol (σύμβολον) of the goddess, referring to her secret names known only to the practitioner, which he has begun to reveal in the list of epithets found in verses 25-45 and 58-67 (cf. Addey 2011, 283-284). Then, he lists a series of actions performed by the practitioner, when he manipulates

[8] It was customary to sacrifice dogs to Hecate (see Sch. Ar. *Pax* 277 b; Sch. Paus. I.1, 5; Lycoph. *Alex.* 88, Plu. *QR* 280b, among other examples). See Martín Hernández 2010, 28, n.29. A striking instance of this ritual practice is attested in a curse tablet where the sacrificial use of puppies is evident: "(*First tablet*) I denounce the persons written below, Lentinus and Tasgillus, in order that they may depart from here for Pluto and Persephone. Just as this puppy harmed no one, so (may they harm no one) and may they not be able to win this suit; just as the mother of this puppy cannot defend it, so may their lawyers be unable to defend them, (and) so (may) those (legal) opponents *(Second tablet)* be turned back from this suit; just as this puppy is (turned) on its back and is unable to rise, so neither (may) they; they are pierced through, just as this is; just as in this tomb animals/souls have been transformed/silenced and cannot rise up, and they (can)not..." (the rest is unreadable). Gaul, region of Aquitaine, ca. 172 AD (Gager 1992, no. 53).

these divine 'symbols'. Thus, in verse 50 he declares: "I opened the locks of Cerberus, holder of Tartarus" (ἤνοιξα ταρταρούχου κλεῖθρα Κερβέρου), thereby unleashing the darkness of the Underworld over the entire world. The hymn continues to reference symbolic canine imagery associated with the goddess, notably in verse 92 when the practitioner mentions the "dark dog" (κύων κυάνεος).

Through these associations, the goddess—like the chthonic dogs that accompany her—is portrayed as capable of leading the dead into the world of the living and instilling terror. This power is linked to her role as "guardian of the dead" (νερτέρων ἐπίσκοπε v. 23), underscoring her liminal and fearsome nature.

In *PGM* IV.2522–2567, we find a hymn to the syncretic goddess Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis, to be performed in a spell of attraction (ἀγωγή). The reference to the dog serves to characterize the goddess' behavior: "with... dogs" (σκυλάκεσσι, v. 7). Later, she is described as a "horse-faced goddess, howling like a dog" (ἱπποπρόσωπε θεά, κυνολύγματε, v. 24).[9]

In *PGM* IV.2714-2784, we find a hymn to Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis to be performed, again, in the context of a ritual of attraction (ἀγωγή). Here the goddess is characterized with names referring to dogs. In verse 2 she is called Baubo (Βαυβώ), a proper name that can be understood as a *vox magica,* evoking the onomatopoetic repetition of syllables βαύ βαύ, reminiscent of a dog's bark and related to the verb 'to bark' (βᾰΰζω). This interpretation is plausible given Hecate's association with dogs. Further reinforcing this connection, she is described in verse 7 as "dog-leader" (σκυλακάγεια). Another possible explanation for the name Βαυβώ is that, according to Chantraine (1968, 170), it refers to Demeter's nurse, while as a common noun it denotes the female genitals, the vulva. In this way, the proper name is linked to Orphic tradition. There, Baubo, together with her husband, King Disaules of Eleusis, receives Demeter, who was searching for Persephone. She offers Demeter a refreshing drink (κυκεών), which the grieving goddess refuses; then, in an attempt to cheer her up, Baubo exposes her private parts, and this obscene display ultimately provokes Demeter's

[9] The translation of ἱπποπρόσωπε θεά is by Betz 1986.

laughter (*OF* 394 F, 395 F and 396 F; Clem. Al. *Protr*. 2.20.3). Moreover, associated with the Eleusinian goddesses, Baubo received cultic worship in Paros (fourth century BC, *SEG* 16.478) and in Thasos (first century BC, *IG* XII.5.227; cf. Richardson 2012, 226; Karatas 2019, 185).[10]

In this hymn, we also find allusions to the restless dead, who are guided by the goddess and her dogs. The practitioner invokes Hecate together "with those who died untimely" (σὺν ἀποφθιμένοισιν ἀώροις, v. 12) and "those among the heroes who may have died without a wife and children" (κεἴ τινες ἡρώων ἔθανον ἀγύναιοί τε ἄπαιδες, v. 13). These souls are described as "hissing wildly, with animosity in their hearts" (ἄγρια συρίζοντες, | ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θυμὸν ἔχοντες v. 14), reflecting their liminal and unfulfilled status. Their inclusion in the invocation underscores Hecate's role as psychopomp and mistress of the dead, particularly those who remain unsettled or excluded from normative funerary rites.

In *PGM* IV.2786-2870, in a hymn to Hecate-Selene-Persephone-Artemis to be performed in a ritual procedure called 'prayer to Selene for any spell' (εὐχὴ πρὸς Σελήνην, ἐπὶ πάσης πράξεως), we find an enumeration of epithets and symbols referring to the attributes of Hecate related to dogs. She is depicted as having "the voice of a young dog" (σκυλακώδεα φωνήν, v. 17), and we are also reminded that dogs are her favourite companions, "fierce-minded dogs are your friends" (κύνες φίλοι ἀγριόθυμοι, v.19). This hymn also mentions her relationship with a monstrous dog, the doorkeeper of Hades: "you hold Cerberos in chains" (Κέρβερον ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἔχεις, v. 51).

2.2. Dog as a component of *materia magica*

Through the corpus of the *Greek Magical Papyri*, Hecate is portrayed as an all-powerful goddess, which is why she can be invoked simply as 'goddess' (θεά). Thus, in the ritual known as 'slander' (διαβολή), found in *PGM* IV.2574-2622 A; 2643-2674 B, there is a hymn to this omnipotent deity. It should be made clear that these are not two separate hymns, but rather

[10] This story remains present in Late Antiquity, as Karatas (2019, 83) notes: "Iambe/Baubo was mentioned again in the 2nd century AD–more than 300 years after Nicander–by Apollodorus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Arnobius, who give a similar account about Demeter and Baubo, as recorded in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Demeter's arrival at Eleusis and Baubo's jokes are at the centre of these accounts".

two versions of the same practice copied within a single document (LiDonnici 2023, 174). The διαβολή is a ritual practice aimed at defaming the target of the spell in order to provoke divine wrath (Herrero Valdés 2011; Blanco Cesteros 2013, 213-214). The 'slander' typically focuses on recounting impious acts allegedly committed by the victim, which may include spreading religious secrets, offering sacrilegious gifts to the deity, or uttering blasphemy. In this way, the ritual seeks to turn the goddess against the victim and thereby legitimizes the use of magical practices.

In verses 2-14 the expert lists the ingredients for preparing an incense stick, which include 'disgusting' substances such as "substance of a dead dog" (*οὐσίαν νεκροῦ κυνὸς*, v. 4). The term *οὐσία* refers to the vital force, in this case that of the dog, since it serves as a bearer of magical power. Thus, Gallopin (2017, 327) takes up Jean-Pierre Vernant's argument and states that "'l'impur' est une des qualités de la puissance divine". Watson (2019, 134) argues, on the other hand, that the use of specific animals in certain spells was common practice. The inclusion of a dog in an erotic spell is not surprising, given its symbolic association with sexual activity. From Hesiod's *Works and Days* (vv. 67-68), sexuality and shamelessness establish a link between women and female dogs or bitches, since Hermes places in Pandora's head a dog-like or shameless mind (*κύνεόν τε νόον*). Margariti (2024, 53), following Franco (2014), further highlights that "dogs also have a special connection to women", and that "the epithet *κυνῶπις* (dog-eyed or dog-faced) is used for shameless females, such as the murderess Clytemnestra and her adulteress sister Helen". In the prose section of the hymn the goddess is also referred to with the epithet "mare bitch" (*ἱπποκύων*). Since the recipes analyzed do not specify the sex of the victim, it seems pertinent to consider the duality of the term *κύων*, which also means "penis" (see LSJ VII, Ar. *Lys*. 158). In this sense, it appears in epigrams from the Hellenistic period. Marcus Argentarius and Strato of Sardis use the noun *κύων*, playing on the double meaning of dog and penis (cf. Lilja 1976, 122-123).[11] The ancient Greek imagery linked the

[11] The term *κύων* is likewise connected to another expression, *kynodesme*, which denotes the practice—customary among athletes—of binding the penis with a cord. Zanker (1995, 28), however, proposes a different interpretation, one that is connected with the broader theme of shame: "To expose a long penis, and especially

dog to female lust and shamelessness, but also to the human penis. We may therefore conjecture that dogs and canine imagery in aggressive magical recipes function both as feminine and masculine erotic symbols.

In the second version of this ritual practice (*PGM* IV.2643-2674 B), the preparation of "a repugnant incense" is explicitly mentioned. The qualification of this offering is due to the repulsiveness of the ingredients used in its preparation, as for example, "a dog's embryo" (κύνειον ἔμβρυον, v. 3). This choice aligns with the broader magical strategy of using ritually impure or liminal materials to provoke divine attention and action. The use of canine matter, especially in embryonic form, may also reinforce associations with Hecate's chthonic and erotic dimensions, as dogs are linked to both death and sexual excess.

3. Conclusion

In the Greek tradition, particularly in connection with Hecate, both good and bad aspects of the dog are prominent, as the goddess's domains align with the dog's roles in areas of influence. Hecate and the dogs can adopt positive roles, such as guardians of thresholds, but they can also embody negative or fearsome qualities when associated with the Underworld and the spirits of the dead who visit or linger in the world of the living. A plausible explanation for the prevalence of these negative values in the *PGM* lies in the nature of the hymns themselves—invocations of chthonic goddesses within the context of aggressive erotic magic. This ritual framework likely accounts for the emphasis on the sinister features of both the goddess and the animal associated with her. In the case of dogs, their symbolic connection to female lust and shamelessness further reinforces the logic of the spell, in which the female victim is expected to be drawn to such transgressive traits.

The sombre aspect of these rituals lies in the double form of violence they enact. The magician, relying on specialized knowledge and ritual expertise, seeks to compel the goddess to comply with the petition articulated in the hymn. At the same time, the goddess—

the head, was regarded as shameless and dishonourable, something we see only in depictions of slaves and barbarians".

accompanied by her infernal dogs—is herself charged with the task of subduing the spell's intended victim.

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The History of the Strange: The Nature of an Historical Consciousness in Tang Tales

By Justin Winslett

Abstract

Though the genre of history in China has a long and venerable pedigree, the role and nature of historical texts has been consistently disputed by successive generations of scholars. By the modern era, Chinese historiography has been approached in one of two ways, as either an exposition of the events of the past with the aim of arriving at the 'truth' or as didactic parables meant to impart moral lessons. Whereas recent scholarship suggests a more nuanced approach between these positions, it focuses on a narrow set of texts which constitute the genre of history shǐ 史, often 'official' imperial histories, and ignores the wider set of texts that premodern Chinese readers would have engaged with—notably tales about the supernatural and the extra-human. This paper looks at a selection of these tales to see how they use, and engage with, history. It notes that in many of these tales there are techniques and conventions to mark the time frame of the tale, but they are rarely concerned with placing the events of the tale into wider 'historical' contexts. Rather, the texts show a strong preponderance for either adopting an ahistorical historicization, or through framing the events, or drawing allusions to events and people that would have been contemporary to the writers of the tales. This paper argues that history in these tales is about providing a moral didactic, but also to inform people about the present and not only the past.

The association of history with China on the surface would seem to require little analysis. Casual observers of contemporary Chinese politics would consistently be exposed to political slogans such as 5,000 years of continuous history, international disputes over the 'correct' understanding of history and indeed debates over 'historical revisionism'.[1] Chinese identity

[1] Shan 2024, 31-51.

both national and local is steeped in lengthy and interwoven historical narratives, and within the 'discipline' of Chinese studies, historians and historical methodologies are commonplace not only when looking at the modern era but also premodern China.

History, as such, can be seen to be a very inalienable aspect of China, but despite this wealth of engagement, there are many nuances, perspectives and ideas concerning history that remain unexplored and underdeveloped, not least owing to the continual framing of history in contemporary modes of historiographic scholarship. Early scholarly debate over Chinese history tended to be preoccupied with the factual reality of the texts identified as history, notably a question of whether or not the events written in these texts can be deemed to have taken place or not—an approach which spoke not only to the scholarly environment of the time, but also to the more contemporary approach to history as a record of events. Later scholarship, however, often looked more to the ideology that informed these historical texts to elucidate fundamental historiographic approaches found in Chinese history—that Chinese history is didactic and must be read for the lessons it contains, with some scholars even refuting the possibility of reading these histories as evidence of accurate events.[2] As Olberding points out, more recent scholarship has tended to regard history in these texts as often falling between these two extremes and has highlighted the greater nuances that many of these texts actually reflect.[3] These explorations, however, have generally been with texts which have been used by Late Imperial scholars, from not only the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1912), but also in the present day to reconstruct the events of the past and which are understood as 'history'. Much ink has been spilled, for instance, discussing the value and nature of texts from the Warring States 戰國 (420-221 BC) and the Han 漢 (206 BC-AD 220): texts such as the *Shiji* 史記, *Hanshu* 漢書 and *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and their conventions and the role of history, effectively establishing a genre known as *shi* 史 is well understood.[4] However, there are many texts that in premodern China would be understood to follow the conventions of this genre

[2] For a more involved discussion of this scholarship and debate, see Olberding 2012, 14-16.
[3] Olberding 2012, 15.
[4] See Schaberg 2001, Chen 陈 2020, and Pines 2005 for further discussions of how these specific texts contribute to and establish this genre.

which even since the Late Imperial period have been generally excluded from the purview of history and, as such, not often engaged with in this discussion for how they use and contribute to history in China.

These texts, which contemporary scholars label as *zhiguai* 知怪 and *chuanqi* 傳奇,[5] have often been excluded from discussions of history owing to their concern for the extra-human and supernatural. Indeed, when approaching history from the attempts to ascertain what 'actually happened', tales of lurid monsters, miraculous transformations, and crafty spirits would certainly not provide useful information on the reality of events. However, these tales firmly follow the conventions of the genre of history. Likewise, though modern scholars have shown more interest in them as the beginnings of 'fiction' in Chinese literature,[6] the concept of fiction was not present amongst Chinese intellectuals during the Early Imperial period when many of these tales were being composed.[7] Perhaps they are not the most credible sources to understand whether events did or did not happen, but as it will be seen, most likely this was not of the utmost concern when approaching these texts which make extensive use of history not simply in terms of their construction but also as literary techniques that resonated with the intellectual community at the time.

When framing these tales into the larger discussions pertaining to history, a number of questions present themselves. If their marginalisation as history is the product of later generations, did the Early Imperial communities that used them regard their contents as credible and an accurate reflection of 'what happened'? If they too found them too incredulous to accept as fact, were these texts purely understood in didactic terms? Were these didactic lessons to be 'good' or 'not good', an historiographic approach more commonly seen in the Late Imperial period?[8] If this is the case, what are the 'not good' lessons contained in these tales, and what happens when some of these lessons overlap with the historical material deemed

[5] Dudbridge 2005, 197 and Huntington 2003, 16.
[6] See Lu Xun 1930.
[7] Nienhauser 1998, 32.
[8] Ditmanson 2007, 156-158.

'good'? Does one see consistent historical events referenced and employed, or do they represent alternative historical events? In short, how are these tales using and constructing history?

This paper will explore this overall question through a perusal of a selection of tales from the first millennium AD. As it will be seen, these tales are indeed constructed as 'history' through adopting a series of conventions from texts such as the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*. These conventions, however, often seem to provide greater ambiguity to the tale than explicit historical awareness. These tales are also prone to making a number of historical allusions, relying on historical figures or events to inform the narration and these events. In both of these cases, these tales engage far more with contemporaneous historical personages and events, raising further questions as to their role as 'history'.

The tales discussed in this paper were all sourced from the notable compendium *Taiping guangji*. This compendium of 500 chapters and 7,021 tales was compiled at the beginning of the Song 宋 (AD 960-1279) in AD 978 and represents one of the great textual projects of the Song which were carried out to collect and catalogue the all the knowledge of the empire.[9] Not only does it offer a wealth of material that is not found in other extant sources, particularly from the Sui 隋 (AD 581-618) and Tang 唐 (AD 618-907) empires, but its organisation into various categories provides great insight into how scholars from this time organised their world.[10]

These categories do not show any specific temporal or historic concern themselves, often reflecting categories of 'things' *wù* 物 such as worthies, immortals, dragons, etc. Therefore, this categorisation in itself is not useful to pinpoint tales that engage with what 'history' may be. However, it is very clear in an engagement with any tales from across the compilation that historical epochs and the conventions found across early Chinese historical writing inform many of them. The texts here discussed reflect a sample of 558 of tales from across this

[9] Dudbridge, 1983, 2-3. For a more detailed history of the composition of the *Taiping guangji*, see Zhang Guofeng 张国风 2004. For a discussion of the other great projects of the Song, see Kurz 2007.
[10] For a discussion of the diversity of these contents and the difficulties of reliable categorization, see Dudbridge 2013, 34-35.

compilation, eighty-three of which are contained in nine chapters devoted to foxes *hú* 狐, fourteen in two chapters devoted to yaksha *yècha* 夜叉 (nature spirits/demons), thirty-two scattered across twenty chapters of different categorization that mention Persia *bōsī* 波斯, and 429 tales devoted to Shu 蜀, in modern day Sichuan, which are also scattered across 237 chapters of diverse categorization. This sample should by no means be taken as exhaustive—indeed the number discussed pales in comparison to the size of the collection; rather, their modes of constructing history and engaging with historiography should be taken as representative, and the consistent approaches and commonalities found across these tales speak to how engrained these conventions are, particularly as these tales are all sourced from a variety of different texts representing different times periods, though mostly can be dated to the Tang.

In general, history is manifest in these tales in a number of ways. The first and most frequent is through marking the time that these tales take place, which is often in the recent, not distant past. When historical personages and figures are alluded to, or even used as characters in the tales, these too follow a pattern of usually being figures of the recent past and, in some cases, possibly contemporaneous to the writing of the tale. This concern with the recent, over the distant, past is generally consistent in tales constructing history; there are a number of tales that do seem to convey an ahistoricity, but these tales either express encyclopaedic information or are set in distant and extra-human lands.

The establishment of a time period by placing it at the very beginning of the tale is a convention inherited from the *Shiji*. This goes beyond a basic grammatical function of the language, where time is placed before or after the topic, as it is often used as a framing device for the events in the tale, which are often encompassed by the time period established with tales rarely taking place across different periods. An observation of the time frames used in these tales reveals several consistencies and patterns about how the writers communicate the historicity of the tales they discuss.

When looking at the collection of tales about fox spirits for instance, bar none the most frequent way of establishing time is to reference the empire that the tale takes place in.

Fifty of the eighty-three tales across these sections do this, with forty-five set in the Tang. Only one each is set respectively in the Han, Wei 魏 (AD 220-266), Jin 晉, Sui and Later Wei 後魏 (AD 386-585). As illustrated by the following examples:

> 唐國子監助教張簡，河南緱氏人也。曾為鄉學講文選。有野狐假簡形，講一紙書而去。
> Instructor Zhang Jian of Directorate of Education in the Tang was a person of Goushi of Henan. He once lectured on the *Wen xuan*[11] for a local school. There was a wild fox that borrowed the form of Jian, lectured on a page of text and then left...[12]

> 唐坊州中部縣令長孫甲者，其家篤信佛道。異日齋次，舉家見文殊菩薩，乘五色雲從日邊下。
> As for Magistrate Zhang Sunjia of the central portion of Fangzhou in the Tang,[13] his family sincerely believed in the ways of the Buddha. One day, he was lodging in his study, when the entire household saw Manjusri[14] ride on a multi-colored cloud and descend from the sun...[15]

> 漢廣川王好發冢。發欒書冢，其棺柩盟器。悉毀爛無餘。唯有白狐一頭，見人驚走。
> The King of Guangchuan in the Han[16] liked to excavate tombs. He was once excavating the tomb of Luan Shu,[17] and the coffins and tomb items had all been destroyed without exception. There was only one white fox which ran startled when it saw a person...[18]

The preponderance of tales set in the Tang is something of note. The texts provide no other clarifying information as to when the tale was set beyond the existing empire, suggesting some

[11] Compiled in the beginning of the fifth century, the *Wen xuan,* one of the anthologies of literary output of former times, enjoyed great prestige in circles of learning in the Tang. For further information on the text, see Knechteges 2014.
[12] *Taiping guangji* 447.3658. (All translations are done by the author).
[13] Today in southeastern Huangling 黃陵 in Shaanxi.
[14] A prominent and well-known bodhisattva. For a discussion of Manjusri's representations and roles, see Harrison 2000.
[15] *Taiping guangji* 451.3685-3686.
[16] The text is unclear as to which of the Kings of Guangchuan this was. The title was first bestowed on Liu Yue 劉越 (d. 137 BC) and this was subsequently passed on to four other relations before going to abeyance in 49 BC with the last holder Liu Haiyang 劉海陽. The area of their rule would be located today around Jizhou 冀州 in Hebei.
[17] A notable official of the state of Jin 晉 who is dated to have died in 573 BC.
[18] Taiping guangji 447.36853.

ideas concerning historicity—but this could also imply a relative lack of knowledge of historical events beyond the reigning empire. These tales appear to have been set overwhelmingly within the Tang empire, albeit a number may have also been compiled immediately after the Tang. This also raises questions as to what is the value of an 'historical' account of something that may be read by people within the same time period.

Eighteen of the tales do provide calendrical distinctions through the use of regnal dates. These are further focused owing to the practice of dividing one's rule into reign eras, a practice established under Emperor Wu 武帝 of the Han (r. 141-87 BC). Only one of these is set in a reign era outside the Tang, in this case, the Jian'an 建安 era (AD 196-220) of the Han. The remainder are all predominantly in the reigns of Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. AD 779-805), Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. AD 690-705) and Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. AD 712-756), however, beyond four tales in Xuanzong's Kaiyuan 開元 era (AD 713-741) and two in Dezong's Zhenyuan 貞元 era (AD 785-801), the eras represented are all different, an example is below:

> 唐開元中，有焦練師修道。聚徒甚衆。有黃裙婦人自稱阿胡，就焦學道術。
> In the Kaiyuan era of the Tang, there was a Dao Master Xiu who cultivated the Way and his followers were extremely numerous. There was a yellow clad woman who called herself Ahu. She approached Xiu to learn the art of the Way...[19]

What is marked is the ambiguity where era names are rarely clarified with exact years, only four provide them, and instead either simply state the era name as the historical period or provide some vague temporal specificity such as 'early' or 'during', an ambiguity that parallels the use of the empire's name to denote period.

The remaining tales in these sections do not rely on time as a framing device and in some cases can be seen to be atemporal either owing to their encyclopaedic nature, or simply because the events in the tale are not placed within any historical framework. However, in some of these tales, the lack of this convention does not render them ahistoric. Rather another way in which these tales employ historical events is through the use of allusion. The longest, and perhaps most famous tale, in the collection on fox spirits—*Renshi* 任氏—for instance is clearly set in

[19] *Taiping guangji* 449.3672-3673.

the Tang. This is not simply because of contextual clues but is reinforced through literary allusion as the location of the climactic scene of the tale is Mawei 馬嵬, today in Xianyang 咸陽 in Shaanxi. This is the location of the climactic events concerning Emperor Xuanzong's consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (AD 719-756), who is made to hang herself at this site for her supposed responsibility in the sacking of the capital and their fleeing during the Anlushan Rebellion.[20] The construction of parallels to figures in the story is obvious from a literary perspective and the identification of the lead character Renshi with Yang Guifei not only provides unambiguous temporal framing for the reader but also 'historicises' the events of the tale.[21] This is not simply by placing it in an historical context, but also by tying it to the didactic that the events of Yang Guifei's death are meant to teach the reader. Renshi is portrayed sympathetically throughout the tale—a virtuous and intelligent woman who is exploited by the male characters. If readers are to identify the two characters together, then one must understand that Yang Guifei was similarly virtuous and intelligent. Her death was hence not moral retribution for corrupting the emperor and scheming for power, but rather an unjust event brought about by the machinations of those she tried to aide. In this instance, one sees not only a tale employing historical events to develop its own historicity, but also to assert its own historiography on existing historical events.

Other tales in this collection likewise use existing historical events or personages as allusions to assert their own didactic and further inform the narrative, though. The tale of *Zhang Liben* 張立本 sees a young fox spirit take possession of the daughter of the titular character:

> 唐丞相牛僧孺在中書，草場官張立本有一女，為妖物所魅。其妖來時，女即濃粧盛服，於閨中，如與人語笑。其去，即狂呼號泣不已。久每自稱高侍郎。一日，忽吟一首云：「危冠廣袖楚宮粧，獨步閒廳逐夜凉。自把玉簪敲砌竹，清歌一曲月如霜。」立本乃隨口抄之。立本與僧法舟為友，至其宅，遂示其詩云。某女少不曾讀書，不知因何而能。舟乃與立本兩粒丹，令其女服之，不旬日而疾自愈。其女說云。宅後有竹叢，與高鍇侍郎墓近，其中有野狐窟穴，因被其魅。服丹之後，不聞其疾再發矣。出會昌解頤錄。

[20] For an interesting and thorough look at the dramatic social and political changes that these events brought about, see DeBlasi 2002.
[21] See Dudbridge 1983.

> When the Tang Chancellor Niu Sengru was in the secretariat,[22], there was a daughter of Zhang Liben, officer of the gardens. She became bewitched by a monstrous creature. Whenever this monster came, the daughter would heavily make herself up, put on fine clothes, would be in her boudoir and it would seem as if she were talking and laughing with someone. When they would leave, she went mad, howling and crying without stop. For a long time, she would call herself Deputy Minister Gao.[23] One day, she suddenly chanted a verse, 'With lofty cap, billowing sleeves, in Chu court array, I walk alone through the halls seeking the cool of night. I put my jade hairpin in myself and rap on the scaffolding. I purely sing one song while the moon resembles frost'. Liben then transcribed as she spoke. Liben was friends with the monk Fa Zhou. He went to his house and then showed him what the verse said. This particular girl had not learnt to read when young, and he did not know how this was possible. Zhou gave Liben two pellets of cinnabar and made his daughter take them. In not even a day, the illness improved of its own accord. His daughter told him, 'There is a bamboo thicket behind the house, and it is near to the Deputy Administrator Gao Kai's tomb.[24] There is a wild fox den inside it, and I was bewitched by them. After I took the cinnabar, I did not feel their malady and came out of it'. Taken from the *Huichang jieyi lu*.[25]

As seen above, the tale begins by framing the event during the chancellery of the controversial Tang official Niu Sengru, beyond the interesting and rare use of a government official's tenure to mark the period, the possessed girl is likewise meant to recite the poetry of another official Gao Shi. Veridiction of how she knows this is provided in the coda to the tale where Gao Shi's descendant Gao Kai is found to be buried behind the house and serve as den-space of a clan of foxes. Despite literally possessing a character in this tale, the daughter is not meant to be identified with either of the Gaos as in the tale of *Renshi* where Yang Guifei is paralleled to the title character. However, the allusions to controversial officials undoubtedly forces the reader to understand the events in relation to these figures and the known events of their lives. The events of the tale, however, are somewhat ambiguous if put in reference to the lives of the people alluded to. That baleful events such as fox-possession occur on the watch of

[22] This would place these events sometime between AD 824 and 830 when Niu Sengru 牛僧孺 was appointed to the secretariat under Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (r. AD 824-827) and before being appointed to the Ministry of War under Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (r. AD 827-840) Niu Sengru (AD 780-849) was a noted official in the later Tang and a prominent figure in the factional politics that defined that era. For a greater discussion of the political climate of the time and how it manifests in much of the writing, see McMullen 1988.

[23] Referring to Gao Shi 高適 (AD 705-764), a noted official and poet to whom the subsequent verse is attributed.

[24] Nineth century AD.

[25] *Taiping guangji* 454.3709-3710.

Niu Sengru could suggest a less than approving take on his tenure and the poem from the Gao Shi may serve as commentary on this. However, the exact didactic would require greater familiarity with the intellectual community the speaker is a member. Despite this ambiguity in present day understanding of this didactic, it does, however, reveal an interesting preoccupation of these tales with the contemporary issues of those who are reading and writing them.

Other collections of tales witness similar uses of history with either framing through vague periods or allusions to notable figures. It is also not uncommon for notable figures to be the subject of a variety of tales. The identification of tales with individuals, rather than the events within them, is a convention established by the *Shiji*'s construction of biographies, and there is a variety of tales with the names of individuals who barely feature in the tales. However, within the tales devoted to yaksha, a type of Buddhist demon, one entitled *Geshu Han* 哥舒翰 recounts an extra-human encounter with the titular figure. Geshu Han (d. AD 757) was a general who fought for Emperor Xuanzong during the Anlushan rebellion. This tale shows a young Geshu Han, noted to be a bit of a firebrand and libertine, watch over the body of his dead lover only to witness the body be devoured by the demonic yaksha which he ultimately tussles with and scares it away. The final sentence explains that from this event, Geshu Han went on to achieve fame and notoriety. This coda may imply that this event, his encounter with the extra-human, is something which set Geshu Han on the straight and narrow and thus imply the didactic of this tale. Other discussions of Geshu Han's history provides little details to his nature as a young man, often focusing on his loyalty to Emperor Xuanzong, and so if this tale contains greater commentary, such as *Renshi*, and historical events cannot be attested in this tale.

The profundity of tales concerned with persons and events of the High Tang, and the Anlushan rebellion is clear from the variety of tales introduced so far. This propensity to focus on these events is seen in many other tales across the vast collection. In texts that make up its pages create figures such as Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei as recurring characters. The tales concerning foxes and yaksha spoken about are collections established by the editors of the

Taiping guangji. As stated, they reflect how these editors understood their world and sought to organise for future scholars to make sense of the lessons and contents of the tales included. One could argue that this editorial approach may bring tales with similar content together, because even though this organisational approach was not done with an historiographic mindset, the subject matter, such as yaksha, a demon strongly associated with Buddhism which was highly pervasive during the Tang, could direct them to tales from a specific period.

But even looking at tales that are scattered across different sections not organised by the editors demonstrates similar historiographic approaches to those seen within editorially coherent sections. For instance, when looking at the number of tales that depict the area of Shu, what today would be in modern Sichuan, one also sees a strong propensity to use more ambiguous time frames, mostly the empire name, as framing devices and a general absence of specificity in this time frame. Further, historical events are also alluded to across these tales with the same frequent and recurring figures. During the Anlushan rebellion, Emperor Xuanzong is noted to have fled to Shu and established his court there before restoring the Tang at the end of the civil war. This historic event is alluded to in the majority of tales concerned with Shu with the phrase 'When Xuanzong took refuge in Shu' 玄宗辛蜀 becoming somewhat cliché. In some cases, this allusion is an active literary effect helping to construct a didactic meaning within the bounds of existing historiography, such as seen with the discussion of Yang Guifei's death in *Renshi*. In others, it seems to merely establish historical framing for the individual discussed or the events of the tale, as seen in the tale of Geshu Han.

The below tale of Yang Tongyou, illustrates many of these uses as the tale is not only framed by Emperor Xuanzong's escaping to Shu, but it also engages with notable historical events pertaining to Yang Guifei to build upon the didactic of the events she is famous for. Further, its focus on Yang Tongyou also builds up his character and helps the reader learn about who he is, why he is to be known and whether or not he is to be learned from.

楊通幽，本名什伍，廣漢什邡人。幼遇道士，教以檄召之術，受三皇天文，役命鬼神，無不立應。驅毒厲。剪氛邪，禳水旱，致風雨，是皆能之。而木訥疎傲。不拘於俗。其術數變異，遠近稱之。玄宗幸蜀，自馬嵬之後，屬念貴妃，往往輟食忘寐。近侍之臣，密令求訪方士，冀少安聖慮。或云：「楊什伍有考召之法。徵至行朝。上問其事，對曰：「雖天上地下，冥寞之中，鬼神之內，皆可歷而求之。」上大悅，於內置場，以行其術。是夕奏曰：「已於九地之下，鬼神之中，遍加搜訪，不知其所。」上曰：「妃子當不墜于鬼神之伍矣。」二日夜，又奏曰：「九天之上，星辰日月之間，虛空杳冥之際，亦遍尋訪而不知其處。」上悄然不懌曰：「未歸天，復何之矣。灶香冥燭，彌加懇至。三日夜，又奏曰：「於人寰之中，山川岳瀆祠廟之內，十洲三島江海之間，亦遍求訪，莫知其所。後於東海之上，蓬萊之頂，南宮西廡。有群仙所居，上元女仙太真者，即貴妃也。謂什伍曰：『我太上侍女，隸上元宮。聖上太陽朱宮真人，偶以宿緣世念，其願頗重，聖上降居於世，我謫於人間，以為侍衛耳。此後一紀，自當相見，願善保聖體，無復意念也。』乃取開元中所賜金釵鈿合各半，玉龜子一，寄以為信，曰：『聖上見此，自當醒憶矣。』言訖流涕而別。」什伍以此物進之。上潸然良久。乃曰：「師昇天入地，通幽達冥，真得道神仙之士也。手筆賜名通幽。賜物千段，金銀各千兩，良田五千畝，紫霞帔、白玉簡，特加禮異。

Yang Tongyou, originally named Shiwu, was a person of Shifang in Guanghan.[26] When he was young, he encountered a Dao Master and was taught the arts of summoning and received the *Heavenly Text of the Three Emperors*.[27] When he commanded the spirits, there were none who did not immediately respond. As for dispelling toxic maladies, cutting through vile miasmas, magicking rain and drought and bringing forth storms, all of these he was able to do. He was rather crude and inarticulate and did not take up with the common people. His arts were numerous and varied and those from near and far called upon him. When Xuanzong took refuge in Shu, he was deeply preoccupied with Guifei after Mawei. He always ate sparingly and would forget to sleep. A servant who was attending him secretly sought out this practitioner and hoped he would give some peace to the Emperor's thoughts. Some said, 'Yang Shiwu has a method of ensnaring spirits'. He was summoned to court, and the Emperor asked about this matter. He replied, 'Whether to the top of Heaven, the bottom of Earth, the realm of the dead or the abode of deities, all can be tracked and sought out'. The Emperor was greatly pleased and set up a space in the palace so that he could perform his art. That evening, he reported that 'I have already roundly searched through all of the deities to the ends of the Earth, but do not know where she is'. The Emperor said, 'My princess is not now down amongst the ranks of the spirits'. On the second night, he also reported, 'I have also roundly searched through the bounds of the void and the darkness amongst the sun, moon and stars to the height of the empyrean, but do not know her location'. The emperor in sorrow unhappily said, 'If she has yet to return to Heaven, then where has she gone?' He then lit incense and candles for the dead to increase his efforts to make her appear. On the third night, he again reported, 'I have also roundly searched her out in the realms of man, within the temples, mounds, pools, rivers and mountains, but none know her location. In the Western Hall of the Southern Palace on the apex of Penglai in the Eastern Sea is where assembled immortals dwell.[28] The Primordial Immortal of the Ultimate Truth is in fact Yang Guifei. She told me, "I am the paramount handmaiden and serve in the Primordial Palace. His majesty the true man of the Vermillion Palace of the Sun. It so happened that I was destined to be in the thoughts of a mortal. His wish was of ardent intensity and so his majesty sent me down to the mortal realm. When I went to be with mortals, I became but a servant. Yet through this entire span, we spent this time together and I wished only to be good at taking care of the emperor. I do not wish to dwell on this again". She then took half of all the gold and trinkets she had been given during the Kaiyuan era and one jade turtle and entrusted them to me as an act of sincerity saying, "When his majesties looks upon this, then he will forever remember". She wept when she finished speaking and then departed'. Shiwu then presented these items and the Emperor took to himself for a good long while, and then said, 'Master, you have ascended to Heaven and plumbed the Earth comprehending the darkness and grasping the mysterious. You truly are a master who has understands the Way, spirits and immortals. I will personally bestow on you the name Tongyou. I also bestow on you a thousand boxes of treasures, a thousand

> ounces of gold and silver each, five thousand *mu*[29] of good land, a purple cloak, a white jade talisman[30] and afford you rites and rituals most special...'[31]

The tale continues as a conversation between Yang Tongyou and the emperor, where Yang explains in somewhat technical detail his education through identification of not simply the masters he has learned from, but also the deities they are associated with. He also explains the techniques that he has learned and their efficacy. Although particularly interesting in establishing Yang within the framework of intellectual pedigree and in the understanding of Dao master practices, this conversation does not engage with any of the prior passages' matters concerning the Emperor's loss of Yang Guifei.

In this tale Yang Guifei is identified as a deity who was destined to spend time with the Emperor. Whilst the romantic connotations are clear, further reinforced by the Emperor's obsession with connecting with her even in death, this also identifies her with the extra-human and adds another dynamic to the didactic of understanding the role of Yang Guifei. Indeed, Yang Guifei's loyalty is reflected not only in her feelings but also in her divine responsibility, and her surrendering her life in the immortal realms for life in the mortal world is an act of sacrifice worthy of a noble being. Yang is not being identified with a figure like in *Renshi*; nevertheless, this tale equally creates a sympathetic portrayal of Yang and highlights her commitment to service and loyalty to the emperor, particularly the willingness to forgo time as an immortal to live in the mortal realm.

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[26] In modern, central Sichuan.

[27] This text, also known as the *Sanhuangjing* 三皇經, is purported to be an alchemical manual attested as early as the Jin. All copies of it were meant to have been destroyed in AD 647 on edict of Emperor Taizong, though fragments survive in a number of textual collections, notably the *Daozang* 道藏. That it is depicted here as being taught to Yang over a hundred years after its destruction adds to both Yang's pedigree and exoticism. For a history of this esoteric texts, see Steavu 2009.

[28] One of the mythical islands where immortals are meant to dwell, Penglai is often mentioned with two other similar island abodes, Fangzhang 方丈 and Yingzhou 瀛洲, as being somewhere in the "Eastern Sea". Often described with uncanny properties, such as floating with no supports, covered in palaces of gold, etc., these islands, and Penglai in particular, become bywords for otherworldly paradises across Chinese mythology, legend and fiction. For an interesting discussion Penglai in comparison to other paradisical islands in other traditions, see Fokkema 2011.

[29] Roughly 823 acres.

[30] Both items are regalia of nobility and often reserved for the Imperial family.

[31] *Taiping guangji* 20.138-139.

Although the connection to history in these tales is clear from their convention and literary provenance, it is important to stress that there are a number of tales which do not conform to these conventions, either through stylistic choice or owing to their origins. The *Taiping guangji*, as a compendium of texts, naturally includes material which would have been different from many of the dynamic genres the scholars were engaged with. Many instances of more encyclopaedic material, such as descriptions of various flora and fauna, foreign lands and medicinal practices are found across the samples of this collection. However, a number of these more encyclopaedic tales do contain 'historical' information through their explanatory framework. In the tale of Geshu Han, readers are to understand the tale not as a suspenseful depiction of the extra-human, but a life changing event for a notable historical figure. A number of tales in the collection are explanatory to why certain things in this world are the way they are and thus often construct an historical narrative for their explanation. However, these narratives lack many of the other historical features seen in the earlier tales discussed, providing no real detail as to when the event is meant to happen or identification with known historical persons. These tales, hence, can be understood as 'ahistorical history', and thus share conventions in common with myth and legend.

> 吐火羅國縛底野城，古波斯王烏瑟多習之所築也。王初築此城，即壞。歎曰。吾今無道，天令築此城不成矣。有小女名那息，見父憂恚，問曰。王有隣敵乎。王曰。吾是波斯國王。領千餘國。今至吐火羅中，欲築此城，垂功萬代，既不遂心，所以憂耳。女曰。願王無憂，明旦令匠視我所履之跡築之，即立。王異之。至明，女起步西北，自截右手小指，遺血成蹤。匠隨血築之，城不復壞。女遂化為海神，其海至今猶在堡下，水澄清如鏡。周五百餘步。出酉陽雜俎

> Balkh in Tocharia was built by the ancient Persian king *Wuseduoxi*. When the king first built the city, it was subsequently destroyed. He said, 'Now, I am without the Dao. Heaven commands me to build this city, but I am unsuccessful. He had a young daughter named *Naxi* who saw her father's sorrow. She asked, 'Does your majesty have a nearby enemy?' The King said, 'I am the King of Persia. I command more than a thousand lands. Now, upon coming to Tocharia, I wish to build this city and pass my achievements down for a thousand generations, but I am yet to achieve this dream. This is but why I am sad'. His daughter said, 'I wish that your majesty does not be sad. Tomorrow at dawn, order your builders to look at the trail of where I have walked, and build there. Then you will have your city'. The king thought this strange. The next day, his daughter walked toward the northeast, and left drops of blood where she walked from her right pinkie. The builders then followed the blood and built there. The city walls did not fall again. The daughter then transformed into a sea god. This sea is now still surrounding this city and the water that springs forth is as clear as a mirror. It is more than five hundred paces in diameter. Taken from the *Youyang zazu*.[32]

The above tale, found in the section on the *Prodigious and Strange* 靈異, is one of the thirty-two mentions of Persia within the tales of the *Taiping guangji*, none of which provides any useful information on the cultures and peoples of the Iranian Plateau. Rather, all sections on Persia tend to relay fantastical information and realms occupied by the extra-human. In this tale, the miracle is clearly the creation of a city from the supernatural acts of the princess. Tropes of sacrifice, physical exertion and commitment are clear literary conceits in this passage; however, though this can ontologically explain the miraculous origin of Balkh—or Bactres as it was known in antiquity—and thus purports an historical event, there are none of the other conventions observed in other tales to assert when this event took place. There are no dates, ambiguous or otherwise, provided and the only contextual clues would be the transliterated name of the Persian King Wuseduoxi, or what in Middle Chinese would have been something more akin to 'Usrittazjep'.[33] This name is not attested in any other tales of the collection, nor can it be found in any description of 'Persia' in the extant texts of or before this time.

[32] *Taiping guangji* 45374.2971.

[33] Reconstructions taken from Baxter-Sagart (*Digital Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* 2012). Although there is no known Persian ruler with a similar name, Yoshida Yutaka does assert that this is a variant of *yu4duo1xi2* 鬱多習 which he identifies as Wishtasp the Middle Persian form of Vishtaspa, a complex figure in Zoroastrianism who was identified as Hystapses in Graeco-Roman tradition and considered a follower and sage of Zoraster. (Ma 馬 and Wang 汪 2018, 82).

Furthermore, phonetic glosses are relatively weak to the names of known Persian rulers providing little clue if this is meant to be a known figure. Although this name could refer to another Central Asian figure being conflated as a Persian ruler, or a local Bactrian ruler of the area, the obscurity of the name when compared to other texts would suggest this was not meant to be a known figure, and indeed the name may simply be artifice to sound 'Persian', and thus foreign. The city of Balkh is ancient in provenance and so the 'history' of its foundation would itself be lost in mythistory. The ahistorical nature of this tale can be construed to 'historicise' it in a way as it reinforces the exoticisation and ultimately extra-human nature of the experience presented. Readers do not need to understand exactly when this event occurs, as it is fantastical and exotic, thus being set outside the realm of 'history'. Rather, they must understand that the foundation of this city was brought about through a daughter's loyalty and love for her father. This lesson is universal in both place and time, and as such the need to frame it within larger history becomes unproductive to the tale; on the contrary, rendering it ahistorical serves a greater weight in teaching the lesson of the event and the reinforcement of it as something that would apply in any situation at any time.

That ahistorical tales are present is of interest, but the events they avoid framing are as the above exotic or so far removed from existing experience as to be rendered mythological or legendary. Most of the tales discussed herein seem to relate to historical events or frame the events of the narrative in time frames that are recent to the compilation of the tale. In some cases these may even be contemporaneous to the tale. The profundity and frequency of tales set in the Tang from works known to have been written in the Tang is marked in the tales discussed and requires greater understanding as to why there is such an historical focus on the present. From one perspective, this could suggest that there is a relatively weak historical consciousness in many of the literate population of the Early Imperial period, and this is hence observed in a much stronger reference to recent events which the literate population would be aware of. This could suggest a lack of knowledge of historical events or possibly even a disinterest. Indeed, the diversity in education and its limitation to the upper classes could suggest an equally diverse, yet narrow, curriculum. However, this belies the commonalities, not

least the venerable Classics,[34] seen across the diversity of educational communities in this period.[35]

However, it is still obvious from the tales discussed herein that the ancient periods mentioned in the Classics seem rarely called upon when discussing these tales, and tales that are set in the distant past tend to eschew many of the conventions seen in other 'historical writing' in favour of an ahistorical mode of storytelling. The distant past to many of these tales seems to be the incidental mentions of the Han, Wei or Jin which occasionally, albeit ambiguously, showing that some writers were certainly aware of the existence of these empires even if the nature of the empire is rarely important to the narrative of the tale.

Furthermore, the historicization observed in these tales even when discussing more recent events rarely involves a discussion of those events per se. Often the setting of tales in history serves as a framing tool to help frame how the readers are to understand the tale. When historical events are alluded to, such as in the tales of *Renshi* or *Geshu Han*, they likewise are used to not only inform the narrative but also inform the understanding of the tale suggesting that the main point of historical framing is instead, as scholars like Goldin and Olberding suggest, simply to convey a didactic lesson, and the factuality of the events are of secondary importance, and indeed with these tales perhaps of complete unimportance.[36]

When approached from this perspective, however, this understanding of didactic history begins to inform the reader as to why history is constructed the way it is. Indeed, if one were to simply flip this understanding and realise that writers will not compose a narrative if it is not didactic, at least in the minds of the writers, then this provides a reason for why tales seem to be concerned with contemporary history and that historical events and the representation of history has a modern flair—Chinese history is about the present, not the past.

Tales set in the distant past perhaps delight present day scholars who seek to discern new insights in more opaque and forgotten times, but for readers in premodern China, tales

[34] For a discussion of these and their origins see Nylan 2001.
[35] Li 2000, 57-77.
[36] Goldin 2008, 80-81 and Olberding 2012, 15.

featuring history are not read with this intent, which may also help to explain why anachronism is so predominant in the tales that do delve further into the past. Rather, readers would inherently approach these tales to understand what lesson they are meant to discern. The identification of characters and use of allusions to contemporaneous and recent figures, such as seen in *Renshi* and *Geshu Han*, offer clear and obvious lessons with which readers of this time can immediately understand, particularly if the lessons are for those real people and the events that immediately shape the lives of those reading the texts. However, the setting of tales in the same period, beyond simply convenient framing, also helps immediately ping the reader into understanding that what is being discussed will teach them something about what is going on today. Setting tales in the past requires allusion and metaphor. This is by no means beyond both writers to employ and readers to understand. The choice to employ these in the face of more recent events, which is more often than not owing to the temporal and physical universality of human emotion which are similar to those in the past, is not simply present.

The use of the English term 'history' often blinds readers to what history actually meant to the people who wrote and read these texts at the time, and though it may be simple to understand that history is meant to teach a lesson, this paradigm forces different approaches into how writers of these tales actually employed history and framed their tales into historical realities. Premodern Chinese history is not about looking to the past for answers but rather thinking about the present and how the past explains answers today.

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