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ON THE GENESIS AND SEMANTICS OF "SWAN SONG" IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The "Swan Song" is one of the most popular mythologems in literature – a symbol of a poet, a singer; it expresses one's last great deed.¹

The objective of the research is to trace the formation of the mythologem "Swan Song" in the ancient literature, detect its origin and find out whether the mysterious "song" of the bird truly corresponds to the reality.

First, we can examine the mythic origin of the "swan song" which is connected to the god of music, Apollo² and the swan, his sacral bird.³

According to the myth, when Leto gave birth to Apollo on the island of Delos, Zeus granted the newly-born god with a herd of swans. The white birds came from the Golden Spring of Pactolus⁴ and flew around the island seven times (it is due to this mystical number that Apollo's lyre has seven strings).⁵ Since then the swan became a sacral bird of Apollo.

During the winter period the god of light and music used to leave the Delphi temple. The singing swans,⁷ tied to the chariot, accompanied the patron to the country of Hyperboreans,⁶ taking with them the Fertility and the Sun to the upper northern country.

¹ Лосев А., Античная мифология в её историческом развитии, Москва 1957, 276.

² According to the mythico poetic tradition, the swan is also associated with Aphrodite, Zeus, Leda, Brahma and Saraswati.

³ Fank & Wagnalls, Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, ed. by M. Leach, Fank and Wagnalls Publishing Company: New York, 1972, 1091.

⁴ O. Keller names two swan species in Greece and Italy: *cygnus olor* and *cygnus musicus* which came to Greece from the North (see Keller O., *Die Antike Tierwelt*, Leipzig 1913, 213-14).

⁵ Callimachus, Hymn. in Apollinem, II, 5.

⁶ According to Isidore of Seville, in the land of the Hyperboreans, when the kithara-players played, the swans would fly up singing harmoniously (*Etymologiae*, 12.7.19).

Having spent the winter period with Hyperboreans, Apollo would return in spring, again accompanied by the white birds. The swans used to rise from the Pactolus river with regular flap of wings, which would coincide with the rhythm of cosmic temporality. First, male swans were rising near the temple, producing c-f notes; they were followed by d-e of the female swans.⁷

According to "Birds" by Aristophanes (790), whole Olympus was carefully listening to the singing swans near the banks of Hebros.⁸ After performing the ritual the birds would fly like white clouds and gradually descend to the earth. After that the people, who had witnessed the ritual, would play paeans, Apollo's ritual songs⁹ on the swan-shaped lyre.

The idea of relating the prophetic singing bird to music, presumably, comes from Ancient Egypt, where a swan, a hieroglyph corresponding to music, was a prophetic bird,¹⁰ which, as the death was approaching, uttered unusual and pleasant tunes. Besides, there are a number of Egyptian instruments decorated with the swan body that have become the symbol of music.¹¹

In my opinion, the symbols of music and swan existed as far back as the Minoan culture. This is proved by a figure of a "lyre player" called "Apollo"¹², which is painted on the wall of the Palace of Nestor at Pylos; the body of the lyre, like many other Egyptian musical instruments, is decorated with a white body of a swan.

In Ancient Greece the idea of connecting the swan to the music acquired much broader and more interesting meaning. Apollo, the god of music, lyre, his cult instrument, and muses are related to the mentioned symbols.¹³ I think this very relationship accounts for Greek peoples' intention to explain the swan's faculty to sing.

However, it is not the "singing swan" but rather the "swan song" that represents the focus of this paper – the phrase refers to a swan singing right before it dies. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out since when the swan song acquired the meaning of one's last action.

⁷ Keller O., *Die Antike Tierwelt*, Leipzig 1913, 214.

⁸ Aristophanes mentions the Pythian Swan of Delos in the same comedy (870).

⁹ Apollo, a swan and a lyre are depicted on the coin of Kalchedon (III A.D.).

¹⁰ Pierius Valerianus, *Hieroglyphica sive de sacris Egyptorum*, Lvgdvni: Apud Paulum Frellon XXXIII 1626

¹¹ Gadalla M., *Egyptian Rhythm: The Heavenly Melodies*, Tehuti Research Foundation 2002.

¹² Buchholz H. G., Karageorghis V., *Altägäis und Altkypros*, Koeher und Ameleing: Leipzig 1971, 81.

¹³ Euripides, *Iphigenia Taurica*, 1102-1105 (Where a singing swan glorifies the muses at the round lake of Delos).

A "singing bird" is mentioned by many authors of the ancient period.¹⁴ However, a swan as a singing bird first occurs in Homer's Hymn (XXI.1) alongside with Apollo and his cult instrument.¹⁵ Antique literature presents a singing bird in different ways; in general, it is Apollo's attribute. In classic literature, it denotes one's last deed.¹⁶ In Aeschylus and Euripides works, a swan is linked to the god of music, and a swan song is a funeral song performed before one dies. Both tragedians describe a "Swan Song" as a metaphor for the last action in one's life – in fact, they are the first to offer such an interpretation of the image in fiction.

In the "Agamemnon" (1444) by Aeschylus, Clytaemnestra compares Cassandra with a swan – a bird-prophet which sings before it dies¹⁷ (ἡ δὲ τοι κύκνου δικτὴν τὸν ὑστάτον μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον" – "[Cassandra] issued her last song before the death like a swan").

In his "Electra" (150-53) Euripides compares Electra's sorrow with a singing swan's cry (οἶα δὲ κύκνος ἀχέτας ποταμίους παρὰ χεύμασιν πατέρα φίλτατον καλεῖ ... ὁ σε τὸν ἄθλιον πάτερ ἐγὼ κατακλαίομαι "Like a singing swan calls its beloved father [Apollo] at the river bank, I, so much unhappy, am crying over you, father").

The swan's last song acquires a double meaning in ancient literature – on the one hand, a "swan song" is a funeral song performed as the death comes closer, and on the other hand, it is a festive song rather than a funeral one as it is performed to celebrate one's communion with God after the death and to express one's hope to get closer to Him. In "Phaedo" (85E) by Plato the "Swan Song" is discussed for the first time. Socrates tells his interlocutor: "The swans feeling the death getting closer, start singing so loudly and marvelously, as they have never done before. They are happy at only the thought of drawing to the God [Apollo] closer soon, whom they serve... and the soothsaying birds see their happiness in advance waiting for them in Hades and they sing and are so happy on the last day of their lives as never before".

¹⁴ Alcman, Lyrica: 2: 368-9; Aeschylus, Agamemnon, 1144; Euripides, Iphigenia Taurica, 1079; Ion, 167; Electra, 150-53; Hercules, 690-95. Aristophanes, Aves, 770. Cicero, Tusculanarum disputationum, 1, 30; Ovidius, Heroides, VII: 1-; Metamorphoses, XIV: 428-34; Fasti, II: 108-10; Marcius Capella, De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae, XII: LXXVII; Horatius, Odes, 11; Aelianus, De natura animalium, XI.1; Lucretius, De rerum natura, 3:6; Callimachus, II, 5 etc.

¹⁵ Euripides in "Ion" (167-74), alongside with a swan's sweet song, mentions other associated symbols of Apollo, lyre and Delos.

¹⁶ Aeschylus, Agamemnon, 1444; Euripides, Electra, 150-53.

¹⁷ Aeschylus: Agamemnon, Ed. with Commentary by E. Fraenkel I-III: III, Oxford 1960, 684-85.

Apart from Plato, Cicero gives the same idea of the swan song, according to which the swans offered to Apollo sing with pleasure as they die for they perceive death as happiness.¹⁸

Such an interpretation of the swan song is presented only by Plato and Cicero – other authors consider the "Swan Song" in its traditional sense. Aristotle in his "Historia animalium" writes: "Swans are musical and as the death gets closer they mainly sing ... a funeral song."¹⁹

In Aelianus's words, "the voice of these birds is especially beautiful and sweet at the end of its life".²⁰

Whether a swan could indeed sing or not, Ancient authors described it as a singing bird. Therefore ornithologists were eager to find out if such belief was based on true facts.

According to A. Brehm, the sound issued by swans is in most cases a strong scream or a muffled croak, and on rare occasions it resembled the sound of a trumpet. Besides, the birds give out certain sounds by fluttering in the air.²¹ According to A. Brehm, there are only several swan species that utter pleasant and sweet sounds, which are especially enjoyable when heard quite at a distance. *Cygnus musicus* is distinguished for its beauty and loud and sweet voice.²²

F. Willoughby, a XVII century ornithologist, studied the swan's larynx respiratory system. He explains that the structure of a respiratory larynx in the form of a trumpet results in the modulation of the bird's voice.²³

After examining the swan's larynx, U. Aldrovandus discovered that its sound producing organs are located in the bird's breastbone. Such kind of larynx structure accounts for melodious tunes and creates a wide range of sounds.²⁴

In reality, the swan species *cygnus musicus* is distinguished for melodious voice and likewise pleasant sounds that accompany the rhythmical flutter of its wings. This species is normally white. The bird owes the epithet "singing" to its particular voice modulations. Its cry, modulated through combining the sounds "kouh-keh", is pleasant to listen to and sounds like a bell ringing. Individual melodies of the song constitute six or seven notes and ascending and descending keys. The mechanism for issuing sounds is as follows: a swan has

¹⁸ Cicero, *Tusculanarum disputationum*, I, 30.

¹⁹ Aristoteles, *Historia animalium*, IX.12.

²⁰ Aelianus, *Variae historiae*, I, 14.

²¹ The same idea of identifying the swan's song with the bird's rhythmic flutter is expressed as far back as antique times in Homer's *Hymn* (XXI, 1), and Aristophanes (*Aves*, 772).

²² Брэм А. Э., *Жизнь животных*, Т. I-III: II, Москва 1902, 301-2.

²³ The Ornithology of Francis Willoughby, London: John Martyn 1678.

²⁴ Aldrovandus U., *Ornithologiae*, Wolfgang Richter: Francfort 1610.

a peculiar phonation apparatus, a larynx, the same as *Syrinx*. It has two hal-lows which the bird uses simultaneously. The vocal ability of swans is double: a cry and a song. There is only a shade of difference between them. It should also be mentioned that ornithological literature has never described a swan singing immediately before its death. The sounds uttered by *cygnus musicus* are really distinguished for their miraculous rhythm and tunefulness and in this respect differ from those of other swan species, which obviously cannot be called a song, as it was accepted in antiquity.

"The fact that the swans are famous for their singing is universally known... It is possible, that no one has ever heard them singing; however, everyone believes that the swans do sing."²⁵

Thus, we see that as far back as antiquity the "Swan Song" acquired the semantics which is universally known today (however, the surviving ancient sources do not mention the word combination "Swan Song"). Since the "Swan Song" is almost universally used in its traditional meaning, it does not matter whether such kind of phenomenon really exists or not.

²⁵ Aelianus, *Variae historiae*, I, 14.