

An Egyptian Parallel for Idyll 7, 131-157 of Theocritus

This article presents an Egyptian parallel to Idyll 7, 131-157 by the Hellenistic poet Theocritus. The focus of interest is the sighing of the dove, that long remained a mystery in secondary literature. The comparison helps to better contextualize the motif. It stems from the association of the melancholic cooing of doves with sounds of lament.

Keywords: Greek literature – Idyll 7 of Theocritus – Sighing of the dove – Egyptian parallel – Khety XIIIa

Introduction

This article seeks to gain a deeper understanding of a passage from the „Idylls“ of the Hellenistic poet Theocritus (for Theocritus cf. Lesky 1999, 807-818; Meyer 2014, 215-230; for the Idylls cf. Gutzwiller 1996, 129). The focus is on Idyll 7, which – despite or perhaps precisely because of its difficulties – is one of the most frequently studied works in his oeuvre. The topic can be narrowed down further to the sighing of the dove, a detail that has puzzled previous scholars. The opening lines serve to present some introductory remarks.

The poet's lifetime can be dated to the 3rd century BC; in all likelihood, his birthplace was Sicily (Hunter 1999, 1). In later years, he spent time in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the island of Kos held a particular attraction for him. Details of Theocritus's vita remain largely unknown. The poetry of that era is characterized by a shift toward smaller forms, a high degree of self-reflexivity, and a particularly refined style rich in allusion. The poet is considered the creator and principal representative of Greek bucolic poetry (Pretagostini 2006, 53-73; Hunter 2021, 223). The „Idylls“ often take a dramatic form, artfully imitating the antiphonal singing of Sicilian shepherds or featuring scenes of everyday life and mythological narratives. Idyll 7, regarded as Theocritus's most self-referential poem, is written in the Doric dialect, supplemented by a large number of epic elements (Tribulato 2021, 86). Idyll 7 is sometimes classified among Theocritus's „programmatic“ poems (for the term „programmatic“ cf. Cairns 1984, 89). The possibility that it formed the conclusion of a collection of bucolic idylls cannot be categorically ruled out (Lawall 1967, 1-13). The work is narrated by the poet Simichidas – a figure generally considered to be a persona for Theocritus himself (Farrell 2015, 414-415; Korenjak 2003, 68; Fantuzzi 2006, 254-255; Spanoudakis 2011, 225-237). In this instance, we are dealing with a hermeneutic remnant of the allegorizing theory of „bucolic masquerade“, a theory otherwise long since discarded. The question of whether Simichidas is a patronymic or a nickname need not be addressed here.

Material

The following excerpt, taken from Id 7, 131-157, merits special attention. The context concerns an excursion by several men from the city of Kos and their intended participation in a harvest festival dedicated to Demeter. Along the way,

the travelers encounter Lykidas – the goatherd mentioned at the beginning of the passage – who was evidently gifted with exceptional musical talent. The primary model for this scene is the encounter between Odysseus, Eumaeus, and the goatherd Melantheus in the “Odyssee” (17. 204-214; for this passage cf. Ott 1972, 146-149; Halperin 1983, 224-227).

„And Lycidas turned off to the left and walked along the road to Pyxa; but I – along with Eucritos and the handsome Amyntas – headed for the farm of Phrasidamos, where we lay down in high spirits upon a bed of fragrant rushes and freshly plucked vine leaves. Black poplars and elms swayed in abundance above our heads, and nearby, the sacred water murmured as it flowed from the Nymph’s grotto. Dark-brown cicadas chirped busily on the shady branches, while a tree frog croaked in the distance amidst the dense thorn bushes. Crested larks and goldfinches sang, the turtledove sighed, and bees hummed as they flew around the spring.“

This scene arguably constitutes the most famous example of Theocritus’s „locus amoenus“, the excerpt serves as an illustration of an idyllic bucolic landscape par excellence. For Posch (Posch 1969, 87), the words embody the most beautiful depiction of nature in bucolic poetry. While Theocritus describes a landscape, according to Sistakou (Sistakou 2021, 334), he is in reality creating an imaginary space composed of poetic symbols. The immediate model for bucolic poetry is already found in Plato’s “Phaedrus” (Massimilla 2021, 139). However, Thalmann (Thalmann 2021, 460) views the bucolic character of Idyll 7 with skepticism due to the presence of urban elements as well. That question is not the primary issue here. The almost classical connection of black poplars with springs appears elsewhere in bucolic poetry. The latter part of the excerpt, mentioning the sighing dove, is of special importance here. In Greek, the crucial verb appears nowhere else in connection with the sounds made by doves. The fact alone complicates matters. When Greek texts speak of lamenting birds, the reference is usually to nightingale. Several scholars have already addressed this aspect in previous research; the following overview traces the development of the discussion.

In the standard edition of the text, Gow (Gow 1950) expresses considerable surprise at the use of the verb „to sigh“ in relation to doves – a usage he evidently found puzzling.

Schönbeck (Schönbeck 1962, 127) also considers it unusual to interpret the cooing of the turtledove as sighing; in his view, the sound is part of the idealizing atmosphere of an idyllic landscape. This explanation complicates the actual situation and therefore overshoots the mark. As shown below, the obstacles can be cleared away much more simply.

Posch (Posch 1969, 87) believes he can circumvent the difficulty by interpreting the word as “to coo”, but doing so does excessive violence to the text.

This unease regarding that motif is also reflected in Höschele (Höschele 2016, 73), who likewise resorts to the meaning “to coo” for the verb in question. If the translation is intended to be interpretive, it at least destroys the sense’s conciseness.

1 According to Hatzikosta (Hatzikosta 1982, 203), the verb in question clearly
 2 conveys the aspect of mourning – a matter so self-evident to the author that no
 3 further words are wasted on it.

4 The same objection raised against Hörschele applies to Massimilla
 5 (Massimilla 2021, 150), who assigns the meaning “to coo” without any
 6 comment. Here, smoothing out the meaning results in the loss of a delightful
 7 nuance.

8 Ultimately, what has just been said also applies to Phillips (Phillips 2021,
 9 56), who opts for the meaning “to coo”. He is, after all, willing to acknowledge
 10 an undertone of lament, even without specifying its precise basis (Phillips 2021,
 11 57). Thus, the original nuance has at least not entirely faded away. The following
 12 proposal aims to secure its definitiv acceptance.

13 The crucial point is that the motif in question constitutes a well-established
 14 element in Oriental literatures. The scope extends from Sumerian literature
 15 through Akkadian to Hebrew and Arabic literature (for Sumerian cf. Bojowald
 16 2023a, 169-174; the cooing of the dove can be observed with Heimpel 1968,
 17 399, elsewhere in Sumerian where the context is too much destroyed for final
 18 conclusions; for Akkadian cf. Maul 1988, 12; Zernecke 2011, 42; Oppenheim
 19 1971, 203; for Hebrew cf. Gesenius 1962, 173; Botterweck/Ringgren 1977, 343,
 20 445; for Arabian cf. Bossong 2005, 110/142/146/151.). In all these traditions,
 21 the cooing of the dove is associated with sounds of lament. Indeed, the sounds
 22 made by doves can elicit such a reaction. The concept is therefore more
 23 widespread than one might think. Consequently, the impression of exoticism –
 24 which had surprised Gow and Schönbeck regarding this motif – loses much of
 25 its significance. Egyptian literature, which also features this motif, is discussed
 26 in somewhat greater detail below.

27 Exactly one example of this motif can be identified in Egyptian literature.
 28 This insight has only gained traction in scholarly research over the last twenty
 29 years. In this instance, the highest priority is accorded to passage XIIIa from the
 30 so-called “Teaching of Khety”, which dates to the Middle Kingdom. The name
 31 of Khety is also associated with other milestones in the history of Egyptian
 32 literature, such as the Hymn to the Nile. In modern chronological terms, this
 33 corresponds to the transition from the 3. to the 2. millennium BC. The division
 34 of Egyptian history into dynasties is, as is well known, attributed to the
 35 Hellenistic priest Manetho (for Manetho cf. Helck 1956, passim; Hornung 2012, sp.
 36 1-6). Egyptian literature flourished during the intellectual awakening of the
 37 Middle Kingdom, which followed the cultural, political and economic collapse
 38 of the Old Kingdom. In modern scholarship, the text is known by the somewhat
 39 misleading label “Satire of the Trades” – a term retained here for conventional
 40 reasons, despite the associated difficulties (for the problems cf. Guglielmi 1994,
 41 68-72). To the greater glory of the scribal profession, the composition caricatures
 42 various traditional trades. This is the only preserved Egyptian literary text of the
 43 genre. The poet’s biting mockery is directed at potters, gardeners, and bird-
 44 catchers, among others. The Ancient Near Eastern genre of the satire of trades
 45 later evolved into the basis for biblical religious satire (Assmann 2021, 31).

The poet's playfulness also vents itself on the farmer, who rails against his fate in the following manner:

„ḥw.ti šbh=f r nh, k3i ḥrw=f r 'b(w)“ (Helck 1970, 76)
 „The farmer complains more than a guinea fowl (for this meaning cf. Seibert 1967, 161), his voice is louder than that of the 'b(w)-bird“

As previously mentioned, this motif appears only this once in the entire corpus of Egyptian literature; however, the vagaries of textual transmission may create a distorted picture here. Particular interest focuses on the word „'b(w)“, which was long interpreted as a term for a raven. The decisive factor was likely the word's phonetic structure – specifically in conjunction with the preceding preposition “r“ – which suggested an onomatopoetic formation. The view is held, either implicitly or explicitly, by scholars such as Brunner (Brunner 1988, 162), Lichtheim (Lichtheim 2006, 187), Parkinson (Parkinson 1998, 277) and Hsu (Hsu 2017, 51). In the past, however, criticism had already been leveled at this long-standing position, causing its foundations to waver. The fiercest opposition to the thesis came from Helck (Helck 1970, 83a), Burkard (Burkard 1977, 55) and Hannig (Hannig 1995, 135), who, however, had no better alternative to offer. Consequently, the interpretation of the word as a name for a raven is entirely devoid of any basis, meaning the correct explanation must be sought elsewhere.

The most promising approach comes from Jäger (Jäger 2004, 141 n. 29), who opted for a different solution and proposed viewing the word as a term for a dove. The author of these lines had independently arrived at the same conclusion (Bojowald 2005, 57-63); the publication of the two findings occurred around the same time. This approach appears quite compelling. The word “'b(w)” can easily be identified as a variant form of the 'b3-dove. The latter is well-attested in lexicographical sources (Edel 1961, 229/246; Edel 1963, 177). Phonetically, the equation works out perfectly. The loss of “3” and the addition of a “w” are entirely consistent with established norms; alternatively, one could argue based on a sound shift between “3” and “w”. The Egyptian evidence for the “'b(w)”-dove has been compiled in a recent study of my own (Bojowald 2003b, 231-235). The current collection comprises just a handful of examples. The final result was fully accepted by Widmaier (Widmaier 2009, 115). The proposal also met with broad approval from Quack (Quack 2020, 240). Leitz (Leitz 2017, 475) also ultimately supports the identity of the “'b(w)”-bird with the “'b3”-dove, though he appears to have missed out the most recent scholarly debate. In any case, he leaves the earlier views of his predecessors unmentioned. However, this explanation is likely to represent a general consensus now. The ornithological identification as „palm dove“ (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) (Wolterman 1991-1992, 120) or „turtle dove“ (*Streptopelia turtur*) (Hannig/Vomberg 1999, 211) remains uncertain, since migration and distribution patterns may have changed over the centuries. The question is not particularly crucial to the idea under consideration here. At any rate, the dove species found in Egypt were also depicted with artistic care (Houlihan 1986, 101-103). The philological prerequisites are thus met, and the perspective in question also makes excellent

sense in terms of content. The monotonous sound of dove cooing can – to reiterate – certainly sound like wailing to the human ear. Going a step further, the verb “k3i” could be viewed as a playful imitation of the cooing sound. The Coptic root “koukou” “to coo” and English root “to coo” are likely – like the German “gurren” – formed according to the same pattern, all based on the onomatopoeic imitation of dove calls. In semi-official English usage the dove is also known by the name “mourning dove” reflecting its melancholic voice. The new interpretation of the passage in “Khety” is therefore quite convincing, the dove cooing, interpreted as a sound of lamentation, comes close to constituting a fixed “topos”.

Conclusion

In light of the preceding remarks, the motif found in Theocritus can be placed within a broader context. The comparative material demonstrates that the interpretation of dove-cooing as a sound of lamentation appears across various locations and eras. Furthermore, these examples show that the motif has been drawn upon repeatedly over a span of some three thousand years. The Greek example fits well into this framework. To avoid any potential misunderstanding, it should be stated that there is by no means an assertion of direct or indirect textual dependency; this is a point the author is particularly keen to emphasize. A far more probable explanation lies in a shared Eastern Mediterranean reservoir of symbols and metaphors, a view increasingly supported by scholars. This line of inquiry dates back to Gordon (Gordon 1962, 19), who incorporated Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Canaanite, Hebrew and Greek material into his own analysis. More recently, Nissinen (Nissinen 1998, 624) expresses views along these lines. He estimates the lifespan of the reservoir at several thousand years, while considering its content to consist of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hebrew, Ugaritic, and Greek written documents. Nissinen’s idea has found a receptive audience in Fox (Fox 2016, 12). Ultimately, Witte (Witte 2021, 45) – who focuses on Akkadian, Egyptian, Aramaic and Greek texts – also accepts the explanation based on a shared intellectual substrate in the Eastern Mediterranean. The concept is so compelling that it is adopted in this essay as well. Put differently, the same intellectual heritage has left its mark on all these examples. Oral tradition may well have had a positive influence on this process. This phenomenon can be observed in many ancient literatures (for oral transmission cf. Ong 2002, *passim*; Henige 1982, *passim*; von Ungern-Sternberg/Reinart 1988, *passim*; Carr 2005, 13; Goody 1985, *passim*; Vansina 1985, *passim*). Lelli (Lelli 2017, 392/395) highlights its particular significance in the case of Theocritus. The individual mosaic tiles thus combine to form an increasingly clear overall picture. Ultimately, the sighing of the dove in Idyll 7, 131-157 also conforms to established conventions. The following argument should also be noted: this is not the first time Theocritus’s Eastern connections have been analyzed. Griffin (Griffin 1992, 189-211), for instance, pursued the same line of inquiry. In that case, the points of contact were both direct and

indirect. The parallels to the topic under discussion here are immediately apparent. What is permissible there should also be possible here. The approach adopted is therefore methodologically sound.

This same longevity of ornithological knowledge can also be observed elsewhere in antiquity. Two examples can be cited in this context. The first example concerns the behavior of hens in sheltering their chicks under their wings – a detail recorded by Theocritus, in the Egyptian „Book of the Fayyum“, and in the New Testament (Bojowald, in press; Hörschele 2016, 103; Beinlich 1991, 248). The second example consists of the symbiosis of crocodile and sentinel bird – a phenomenon documented from Demotic times through to the Arabic period (Prada 2023, 101-125). The underlying basis for all these examples lies in the ancient people's remarkable aptitude for precise observation of nature. This ability has repeatedly been noted with astonishment in modern research.

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