



## COCK

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**COCK**, the male of the subfamily *Phasianinae* (pheasants), usually having a long, often tectiform tail with fourteen to thirty-two feathers. The thirteen genera (twenty-nine species) of this subfamily all originated in Asia (Raethel, p. 49); one species, the red jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*), the ancestor of the domestic chicken, lives in a variety of habitats in the wild, which probably facilitated its domestication (Raethel, p. 52), some time in antiquity. It was being exported from India to China in the 14th and 15th centuries b.c.e. (Lühmann, p. 55). Cocks are territorial birds and defend their hens and territories against other cocks, but, because they live in hierarchical groups, such fights are rarely fatal. Only “fighting cocks,” bred by humans for the purpose, continue fighting until they kill their adversaries (Lühmann, p. 56).

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*i. In Zoroastrianism.*

*ii. In Persian folklore and literature.*

## i. In Zoroastrianism

The cock, Av. *parō.darəs-* “he who foresees (dawn),” Pahl. *parōdarš* (from the Av. nominative *parō.darš*) and *xrōs* “caller,” was revered by Zoroastrians as the helper (Pahl. *hamkār*, cf. *Bundahišn*, TD 2, pp. 156.15-157.3, tr. Anklesaria, pp. 202-03) of Sraoša (Pahl. *Srōš*), the *yazata* of prayer and of protection in the night, because with its cry it heralds the day and drives away demon-infested night. It is therefore called also the bird of the righteous *Srōš* (Pahl. *\*murwag ī Srōšahlāy*, in *Yōišť i Fryān* 2.25, Haug and West, p. 215). This is a role the cock performs in many cultures (cf. Shakespeare’s “The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn / Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat / Awake the god of day; and at his warning . . . Th’ extravagant and erring spirit / Hies to his confine . . .” *Romeo and Juliet*). Jewish writings praise the bird (*geber*) and link it with Gabriel (Gabriēl), the archangelic herald of light (Schwartz, p. 158, on the anguiped symbol). Gabriel is paired with Sorūš in Islamic Persia, and it appears that the specific Jewish tradition was inspired by Persia. To the ancient Greeks the bird was *persikē ornīs*, “the Persian bird” par excellence, in *The Birds* of Aristophanes.

In Zoroastrianism the bird is sacred and may not be eaten (*Šāyest ne šāyest* 10.9, ed. Tavadia, p. 129), a prohibition still observed by Parsis. Persian Zoroastrians bring white cocks as living offerings (not to be sacrificed) to the shrine of Pīr-e Sabz (Boyce, *Stronghold*, pp. 257-59). In chapter 18.22-23 of the *Vidēvdād* it is explained that, when in the last third of the night the fire of Ahura Mazdā calls upon Sraoša for help, the latter awakens the cock, whom speakers of evil call *kahrkatat-* (a word evidently onomatopoeic, like Avestan *kahrkāsa-* “vulture,” a caw sounding like a cock-a-doodle-doo; cf. Arm. *ak’a-a-* “cock,” reflecting the way classical Armenian authors heard a cock crow). The bird is linked in the Pahlavi *Vidēvdād* (18.15) to the whole of the Ušahin *gāh*, the watch between midnight and dawn over which Sraoša presides (Kreyenbroek, p. 118 n. 38); this would explain why it is called the foreseer of dawn (and foremarker, Pahl. *pēš-daxšāy*, in *Bundahišn*, TD 2, p. 112.7, tr. Anklesaria, pp. 142-43), *Āaṭ hō mərəgō vāčim baraiti upa usāṅhəm yām sūrām* “Then that bird raises its voice at the mighty dawn.” The bird is not only the dispeller of darkness but also the disciplinary priest (*sraošāvarəza-*) who rouses the faithful to prayer, crying (*Vd.* 18.16): “Rise up, ye men! Praise ye the



best righteousness; abjure ye the demons!” (*Ul estēd mardom-at stāyēd ašāyīh ī pāšom, nikōhēd dēwān*). The *Vidēvdād* prefers the name *parōdarš* to *xrōs*, claiming that the bird would be more effective if people did not use the latter term; *xrōs* in the *Bundahišn* is used of a bird that lays eggs (TD<sub>2</sub>, p. 115.1), so perhaps confusion with chickens was a reason to prefer the Avestan name.

Cocks figure in Persian art from early times, as befits their religious importance. A silver incense burner of the 6th century b.c.e. in typical Achaemenid style (cf. the example depicted in a relief at Persepolis; Hinz, p. 65 pl. 19) has a Lydian inscription identifying it as the property of Artimas (Justi, *Namenbuch*, p. 39, regards this as a Persian name, but Zgusta, p. 101, thinks it native; for the piece, see *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Summer 1984, p. 44 pl. 68). Cocks abound in Sasanian art, as on a silver-gilt vase, where the bird struts proudly, its head haloed (see Harper, pp. 64-65, with references)

The cock retained its Zoroastrian importance in Christian Armenia: Cocks at the church of St. George of P'uṭ'ki were reputed to warn travelers if the mountain pass beyond were to be snowed in; their prescience evidently compassed more than the coming of dawn (see Russell, p. 267). In a colophon to a 12th-century Armenian manuscript explaining the depiction of a cock on the canon table, the bird is said to symbolize supervision (*tnawrenuṭ'īwnlusakaṇč'* “crier of the light,” *kusot-* “caller,” with present-participle ending, possibly based on a Parthian loanword (cf. the Parthian loanword *gusan* “minstrel”; and see Ačaryan, I, p. 369).

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## ii. In Persian Literature and Folklore

According to the *Šāh-nāma*, the cock (*korūs*, with variants) was domesticated by the mythical king Tahmūrāṭ, who asked that people speak kindly and gently to this fowl (ed. Khalegi, p. 36 ll. 15-17). This story may have influenced a later tradition attributed to the Prophet Mohammad, according to which men were prohibited from cursing the cock (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 258; Soyūṭī, p. 3). In another Iranian legend the domestication of the cock was attributed to Kāyūmart, who was moved by the bird's human characteristics and brought it among men, asking them to care for and respect it (Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 117-18).

In early popular belief the cock was viewed as both apotropaic and mantic. Such harmful beings as demons, basilisks, lions, and later the jinns were said to fear it, and the Prophet was reported to have said “do not kill the cock, as the devil rejoices in its slaughter” (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 354). This belief may have arisen because the early morning crowing of the cock foretells the dawn, when demons and other night creatures escape into the dark realms (Penzer, I, p. 77 n. 1; cf. Wilhelm, pp. 201, 212; Lühhmann, p. 61). Traces of this ancient belief are still recognizable in vampire films, in which the revenant returns to his coffin at cockcrow. The Greek military writer Aelian (fl. 2nd century c.e.; 4.29) declared that no sunrise passes unnoticed by the cock (cf. Penzer, I, p. 243) and considered the bird or its sound frightening to both lions (cf. Thompson, motifs J881.2, J2614.3) and basilisks (3.31, 5.50, 6.22; 8.28; cf. Penzer, pp. 193, 349-51, II, pp. 39, 217). The lion's fear of the cock is also attested in Muslim zoological sources, some of which suggest that lions will not attack a caravan in which a white cock is present (e.g., Ṭūsī, p. 545; Qazvīnī, p. 434; idem, in *Damīrī*, II, p. 266; cf. Mostawfī, p. 102). In fact, the white cock is the most magically potent variety, considered in Persian and Muslim lore the source of great fear among demons and jinns (cf. Thompson, motifs G303.16.19.4, G303.17.1.1; Mostawfī, p. 102; Qazvīnī, p. 434), perhaps owing to association between the color white and daylight. Any house where a white



cock resides is automatically protected against the devil and all manner of other demons (Damīrī, I, p. 344; Qazvīnī, in Damīrī, II, p. 266; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 118). In the oral version of one epic tale the snakes growing from the shoulders of Žaḥḥāk (the wicked king of the *Šāh-nāma*, who is chained on Mount Damāvand) lick his chains until they are reduced to the thickness of a hair; then a white cock crows, and the monster's chains are made whole again. For that reason members of the clan of Žaḥḥāk try to kill every white cock they can find, and the Zoroastrians raise white cocks in order to keep the monster enchained (Enjavī, 1358 Š./1979a, p. 24; see i, above).

According to a Muslim tradition, the white cock is both the friend of the Prophet and the enemy of his enemy (Soyūṭī, pp. 6-8; Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 259; Damīrī, pp. 344-45). It has the power to protect the house in which it lives and those surrounding it from evil (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 354; Soyūṭī, pp. 7-9, 11). In another prophetic tradition a great white cock stands with his head under the divine throne and crows every morning in praise of God; although men cannot hear him, he is heard by all the cocks in the world, which then crow in response (Mostawfī, p. 102; Soyūṭī, pp. 4-6; Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 207). This white cock will be prevented from crowing at dawn on the day of resurrection, and all the world except for men and jinns will thus become aware of the approach of judgment (Soyūṭī, p. 6). The cock's role as herald of the approach of daylight has so dominated the perception of this bird in folklore and religion that his failure to crow is as significant as his actual crowing. In fact, early clocks were often decorated with images of the bird (see, e.g., Ṭūsī, p. 218). Killing white cocks was believed to cause misfortune (Qazvīnī, p. 434; Ṭūsī, p. 523; Soyūṭī, p. 10; Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 259). One of the Prophet's associates prevented the caliph 'Omar from ordering the slaughter of cocks, on the grounds that they praise God and should therefore not be harmed (Jāḥeẓ, I, p. 296; cf. III, p. 191). There is also a Persian folk belief that, when the cock and the pigeon sing in the mornings, they are speaking to God and praising Him (Hedāyat, p. 136).

Many varieties of cock are mentioned in classical Arabic and Persian literature. The most famous are the Indian (*hendī*), Persian (*fārsī*), and *kelāšī*, which seems to have been a cross between the Persian and Indian varieties (Jāḥeẓ, III, p. 145; cf. Soyūṭī, p. 3). Certain human characteristics were assigned to cocks in folk belief. They were thought to be generous, brave, and protective of their hens (Ṭūsī, pp. 116, 523; Soyūṭī, pp. 3, 15; Jāḥeẓ, II, pp. 148-49, 367; Qazvīnī, p. 434). They were bred and trained for fighting, and sometimes fighting cocks were rented for the purpose of fighting dogs in the ring. Such



cocks are said to have attacked even humans, inflicting serious injury on their victims (Ṭūsī, p. 523; Faqīhī, p. 646).

The mantic characteristics of the cock are well attested both in dream lore and in general folklore. Cocks, especially red cocks, represent Persians in dream-interpretation texts, perhaps because Persians were called *al-ḥamrā* “the reddish ones” by the Arabs, owing to their skin color. ‘Omar is reported to have dreamed that he was pecked by a red cock, which was interpreted as foretelling his death at the hands of a Persian (Ṭūsī, p. 524; Afšār, p. 194; Soyūṭī, p. 14; Damīrī, I, pp. 345-46). A cock’s crow at night is a sign of impending danger and evil, which may be averted only by killing the cock or throwing it out of the house (Baḷ’amī, I, pp. 118-19; Šakūrzāda, p. 316; Kvānsārī, p. 42; Hedāyat, p. 130). This belief is at the root of the Persian expression *korūs-e bī maḥal(l)*, referring to one who does or says something at an inopportune time. The Zoroastrian clergy, on the other hand, considered night crowing not as a sign of evil but rather as a warning against a demon’s entrance into the house (Dhabhar, p. 25).

The supposed apotropaic efficacy of the cock is reflected in the medicinal use of the bird and parts of its body in traditional folk medicine. For example, hearing the call of a white cock was believed to be beneficial to the sick (Ṭūsī, p. 524), a belief that may be related to the early notion that all sickness is caused by demonic possession. If the call of a white cock can scare away demons, it is reasonable to suppose that people who have been made ill by the entry of demons into their bodies will improve as soon as the demons have been scared away. An extension of this magical belief involves phonetic confusion between the word *šīr* “lion” and *šīr* “milk,” as in *gīā šīr* (lit. “milk plant”; Lat. *Euphorbia* > Ar. *farfīūn*

Various parts of the cock’s body may also be used medicinally. Its comb, when dried, ground, and administered orally, was supposed to cure bed wetting and insanity (Mostawfī, p. 102; Qazvīnī, in Damīrī, p. 266). Slitting the belly of a slaughtered cock and placing it on a wound inflicted by a lion while still warm will soothe the pain (Ṭūsī, p. 573; cf. Ṭabarī, p. 432), another manifestation of belief in the lion’s fear of the cock. A secondary elaboration of this general association is reported by Šakūrzāda (p. 244): Applying the warm intestines of a slaughtered cock to the wounds resulting from cupping (*tīḡ zadan*) is supposed to be efficacious. Consuming the cock’s brain is good for kidney problems (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 375; Damīrī, I, p. 345), and its blood, gall, flesh, and other body parts may be used as remedies for many other ailments (see, e.g.



Mostawfī, pp. 102-03; Ṭabarī, pp. 432-33; Damīrī, I, p. 348; Qazvīnī, p. 434; idem, in Damīrī, II, pp. 266-67; Šakūrzāda, p. 244). A bluish or crystalline stone (*lapillus alectorius*) the size of a bean found in the cock's crop (e.g., *Pentamerone* 4.1) is not only beneficial to pregnant women but can also inspire courage in men. Medieval Muslim zoologists agreed that, when suspended around the neck of an insane person, it can cure madness; worn in the same way by a sane person it increases sexual appetite (Qazvīnī, in Damīrī, II, p. 267; Mostawfī, p. 103).

The cock is said to lay one egg (*bayzat-al-'oqr*, in Persian folklore *bayzat-al-foqarā* bālhā-yaš "feathers"?) will not experience fatigue (Mostawfī, p. 102). Mixing the blood from a cock injured in a fight into food will cause those who eat it to fight among themselves, clearly an instance of sympathetic magic, as is the use of various parts of the cock's body as aphrodisiacs (Qazvīnī, p. 434; Ṭabarī, p. 432).

The traditional method of determining the sex of a chick was to pick it up by the beak; if it remained motionless it was a hen, if it struggled a cock (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 260; Ṭūsī, pp. 523-24). In 1963 the author witnessed this practice in Tehran, in the house of a lady from Semnān, who was trying to determine the sex of a batch of newly hatched chicks. Neutering cocks in order to improve the tenderness of their flesh is attested in early sources (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 345; Ṭūsī, p. 524) and is still widely practiced.

Cocks figure prominently in both charms and superstition. If a woman and her child die in childbirth, a cock or a hen should be killed and buried in a shallow grave between their graves. If this rule is violated a close member of the family will also die very soon (Šakūrzāda, p. 153). Feeding the foreskin of a boy to a cock will ensure that the child will grow up to be a good fighter. When two boys are circumcised together, a cock should be slaughtered in order to bring the number of "bloods" shed in that household to three; otherwise harm will follow (Šakūrzāda, pp. 167, 169; see [circumcision](#)). It is possible to forecast bad weather when a cock crows shortly after nightfall, and impending good weather is signaled by a cock's crow during rain (Šakūrzāda, pp. 333, 337).

The cock appears in many capacities in Persian folktales. It may function as helper of the hero (e.g., Enjavī, 1355 Š./1976, p. 165), manifestation of an evil sorcerer (e.g., Enjavī, 1979, pp. 343-50; Šobḥī, 1325 Š./1946, p. 133; idem, 1344 Š./1965, p. 51), or merely victim of the ever-crafty fox (e.g., Aarne and Thompson, type 20D; Enjavī, 1979, pp. 69-71). The cock appears as one of the dramatis



personae in a number of tales, the most famous being those in which “the fox persuades the cock to crow with closed eyes” (Aarne and Thompson, type 61), a type that has been the subject of extensive scholarship (Perry, pp. 525-26; Beckwith, pp. 14-15; Graf, pp. 25-47; Dargan, pp. 1-24; for Persian oral examples, see references in Marzolph, s.v. type 61). A version of a tale in which the fox tries to beguile the cock by reporting a new law establishing peace among the animals but flees when dogs appear, claiming that the dogs have not heard of the new law (Aarne and Thompson, type 62; Şobhî, 1979, pp. 28-29), is found in the *Marzbān-nāma* (Varāvīnī, pp. 170-72). Another tale, in which a group of travelers (usually a donkey, a cock, a cat, and a dog) unite to drive away intruders, is also well attested in Persia (see references in Marzolph, s.v. type 130; for other types of tale involving the cock in the Persian oral tradition, see s.v. *Hahn*).

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