

## Thoth's Ibis in Horace *Odes* 2.20

Commentators have unanimously agreed that the “white bird” that Horace turns into in *Odes* 2.20 is probably a “swan,” although they admit that Horace never actually names the bird. This paper argues that Horace meant his readers to consider among the options the ibis, the white-bodied bird sacred to the Egyptian god Thoth, whom the Greeks and Romans identified with Hermes/Mercury.

Although a swan, associated with both Callimachus and Pindar, is an appropriate bird for a poet like Horace to metamorphose into, there are some details that problematize this supposedly easy identification. In lines 9-10, Horace says “rough skin settles on my legs” (*residunt cruribus asperae | pelles*), an oddly specific detail. Unlike swans which are not well-known for their legs, ibises have characteristically long, rough-looking legs, as Cicero mentions: “ibises [ . . . ] are tall birds with rough legs and a horny and long beak” (*ibes [ . . . ] sint aves excelsae cruribus rigidis corneo proceroque rostro*, *Nat. D.* 1.36.101; cf. *Hdt.* 2.76: εἶδος δὲ τῆς μὲν ἰβίου τόδε: [ . . . ] σκέλεα δὲ φορέει γεράνου, “and the appearance of an ibis is as follows: it bears the legs of a crane”). Furthermore, Horace brags that he will be “more well-known than Daedalus’ Icarus” (*Daedaleo notior Icaro*, 13). In *Odes* 4.2, Horace describes emulators of Pindar as “relying on wings waxed with Daedalean skill abut to give his name to a glassy sea” (*ceratis ope Daedalea | nititur pennis vitreo daturus | nomina ponto*, 2-4) while Pindar is the *Dircaem cycnum*, the “swan of Dirce” (25), who, as a real bird, flies high without danger of falling. Horace, on the other hand, says he is *apis Matinae*, a “Matine bee” (27)—also not an Icarus, but not himself a swan either. Horace frequently poses as both self-confident and self-deflating, as in 1.1.35-36 (“but if you insert me among the lyric bards, I will strike my uplifted

head on the stars” (*quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres, | sublimi feriam sidera vertice*). In *Odes* 2.20 he also positions himself somewhere between overconfident and self-deprecating: he is not bold enough to say outright he is a swan like Callimachus or Pindar, but he also asserts that his wings are not of human manufacture and that his fame will not be through failure, like Icarus’. Finally, his self-description as *biformis vates* (“two-form bard,” 2-3) has a sort of monstrous feel to it; the only other place *biformis* appears before or during the time of Horace is at Vergil *Aen.* 6.25-26 in reference to the bull-headed Minotaur. One is tempted to think of the “monstrous” (to the Romans; see *Aen.* 8.698) animal-headed gods of the Egyptians in this description rather than an elegant swan.

The ibis, as the bird sacred to Mercury/Hermes’ Egyptian counterpart Thoth, is an appropriate bird for Horace to allude to in *Odes* 2.20. Horace clearly has an affinity for the witty, peacemaking psychopomp Mercury, whom he hymns in 1.10 and connects with Augustus in 1.2 (where he calls Mercury *ales* [ . . . ] *filius Maiaie*, 42-43, “the winged son of Maia,” which is echoed in the *alitem* and *ales* of 2.20.10 and 16). Throughout the *Odes* Horace depicts himself as especially close to the god Mercury, having been saved by him twice: once from the battle at Philippi (2.7.13-14), and once from being killed by a falling tree (2.17.27-29) through his son Faunus, “the guardian of Mercury’s men” (*Mercurialium | custos virorum*, 29-30). In *Odes* 2.20 Horace, in talking about his escape from death through poetic immortality, describes himself as turning into his patron god’s sacred bird. The fact that the ibis is associated with Egyptian concepts of immortality and the afterlife only sets us up for his ultimate declaration of immortality in 3.30.1-2: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius | regalique situ pyramidum altius*, “I have completed a monument more lasting than bronze and more lofty than the regal position of the pyramids.”

However, the fact that Horace does not make the identification of the “white bird” means that we cannot definitively identify it ourselves. Does he mean us to see him as a swan or an ibis? The answer perhaps is both: in the *Odes* Horace enjoys the inspiration of both Apollo and Mercury (see, e.g., 1.30 followed immediately by 1.31); he is, after all, a *biformis vates*.

#### Select Bibliography

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