

# A Moonless Night in Cathay: On the Symbolism of the Simurgh

By Nigel Jackson



There in the Simurgh's radiant face they saw  
Themselves, the Simurgh of the world - with awe  
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend  
They were the Simurgh and the journey's end.

*(Farid ud-Din Attar, 'The Conference of the Birds')*

**T**he benevolent, mystical bird called the Simurgh in Persian tradition is the legendary 'King of the Birds' and symbol of the Divine. It may be contextualized within the broader symbolic taxonomy of birds in the Primordial Tradition as an embodiment of the winged messenger of God, an angelic spirit. In an alchemical context, the winged bird ascending in spiritual flight invariably indicates the 'volatilization of the fixed'. Related emblematic aviaries are encountered in Chaucer's 'Parliament of the Fowles' and Count Michael Maier's 'Jocus Severus'.

From the meta-poetic arcana of the 'Langue des Oiseaux' cultivated in medieval European schools of Christian Hermetism to the Sufic *Mantiq ut Tayr* ('The Conference of the Birds' by Attar) in Persian Islamic tradition, to understand the 'Speech of the Birds' is to comprehend the original 'universal language' of Paradise, the tongue of the angels.

The term 'sī murgh' (سیر مرغ) means 'thirty birds' in Persian. It signifies, in Farid ud-Din Attar's mystical poem, the thirty pilgrim birds who reach Qaf, to discover that the Bird they were questing for was none other than their own Self. They were seeking to realize the authentic Principle of their own being in God, resuming the journey of return to the spiritual Source and Origin, which is central to the metaphysics of pilgrimage.

The Simurgh's name derives from the archaic Avestan *merey Sa n* denoting 'the bird Saena', with which the cognate Sanskrit word *syenab* - 'eagle' may be traced (as also the Armenian word for the peacock *siramarg*). The Simurgh is the archetypal emblem of the ineffable, the form of the formless, hieroglyph of the transcendent, the bird of light upon the crown of the axial world-tree or on the highest peak of the cosmic mountain. It is therefore situated at the sacred polar center of the universe, as Ferdowsi described the craggy abode of the Simurgh on Mount Elburz in Iran:

Now there was a mountain called Alborz, nearing the sun in height and far from association with men, where the Simurgh that fabulous bird had its nest, an abode inaccessible to all.<sup>1</sup>

According to the principles of sacred geography, the mountainous range in northern Iran, was identified under the Old Iranian name *Harā Brzati*, with the sacred peak of Ahura Mazda. In the *Avesta*, it was described as 'the highest peak, on the high Haraiti, self-illuminated on the inside, star-studded on the outside'<sup>2</sup>, bulwark against the Ahrimanic outer darkness, and meeting-point of Heaven and Earth, the 'High Watch-post' or 'heart of the world' around which the circuits of the stars and planets revolve, the Pole over which presides the holy angel Sraosha.

The emerald capstone of Mount Qaf (Kaf) in Islamic cosmology, the crown of the cosmic mountain, is co-identical with the 'Eighth Keshvar', the 'Earth of Hurqalya', *Terra Lucida*. As Henry Corbin states<sup>3</sup>: 'There is ample supporting evidence that this was indeed the mountain formerly called Alborz (Elburz, in Avestan Haraiti Bareza).'

If Ferdawsī discovered its nest hidden in the inaccessible height of Mount Elburz, Farid ud-Din Attar locates the Simurgh in the land of

<sup>1</sup> Ferdowsi, *Shah-Namah*, in chapter 5 (trans. R. Levy).

<sup>2</sup> *Avesta, Yasna* 57, chapter. IX.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, in chapter 1, 'Midnight Sun & Celestial Pole'.

China, in accordance with the prophetic *baditb*: 'Seek ye knowledge even unto China'. 'China' here signifies the sphere which exists far beyond the limits of ordinary mundane perceptions, the world of the 'Intermediate Orient', which is apprehended by the gnostic via the 'Eye of the Heart'. The realm of Cathay was referred to in ancient tongues as *Sir*, *Seiris* and *Sbyr* related to Latin *Sericum* from the Old Chinese *sjg* meaning 'silk', i.e. the 'Land of Silk' - a locale to be identified with the primordial Surya/Shams, 'Land of the Sun' or 'Holy Land', all epithets of the paradisiacal center, *lux ex orientis*, source of Divine Light.

The 'Language of the Birds' is synonymous with the primordial Adamic tongue, *lughab suryanniyab*, for the language of Paradise was termed 'Syriac', the 'Old Solar' tongue. René Guénon calls this 'the language of "solar illumination" *sbams isbraqiyyab*.'<sup>4</sup> Referring to Homer's *Odyssey* in which the primeval 'Syria' is said to be an island 'beyond Ogygia', Guénon identifies this region 'where the revolutions of the sun are found' with the Hyperborean *Tula*.

Attar states,

It was in China, late one moonless night,  
the Simurgh first appeared to mortal sight -  
He let a feather float down through the air,  
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere; ...

In China still this feather is on view,  
whence comes the saying you have heard no doubt,  
"Seek knowledge, unto China seek it out" ...  
It is a sign of Him, and in each heart,  
there lies this feather's hidden counterpart.<sup>5</sup>

The 'moonless night' is the mystical darkness of the depth of gnosis-contemplation. The feather of the Simurgh which drifts down earthward and which has its 'hidden counterpart' in each human heart alludes to divine grace and the traces and lineaments of the Divine Image concealed in the microcosm - the eternal Word or Divine Intellect at the sovereign center of the theomorphic human. As the Simurgh tells the birds who have sought him that after having passed through the

<sup>4</sup> René Guénon, in chapter 6 of 'Symbols of Sacred Science'.

<sup>5</sup> Attar, *Conference of the Birds*, (Penguin, 1984) translated by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi.

initiatory states of *Fana'* (Annihilation) and *Baqa'* (Subsistence): 'You find in Me the selves you were before'.

The initiatic quest of the bird-souls for their spiritual King, 'the Simurgh, Truth's last flawless jewel', across the symbolic topography of Seven Valleys, is the interior journey to this numinous heart of being, locus of the Self, the sacred mountain peak referred to in the following verse from Attar:

...until we leave this plain of sin and pride  
and gain Kaf's distant peak. There shall we hide,  
a mote lost in the sun; the Simurgh's shade  
will cover those who travelled and obeyed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*