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FROM SACRIFICE TO REBIRTH: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF PELICAN SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical and cultural transformation of pelican symbolism from natural observation to religious, literary, artistic, musical, and alchemical meanings. Rather than treating the pelican as a fixed emblem of self-sacrifice, the paper traces how distinctive biological characteristics—especially the bill, gular pouch, and parental feeding behavior—were reinterpreted through textual and visual traditions. Particular attention is given to the Physiologus and medieval bestiaries, where the legend of a pelican reviving its young with its own blood became a Christological image of the Passion, Eucharist, redemption, and resurrection. The study then follows the symbol into heraldry, Dante and Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, devotional art and music, and alchemical imagery and apparatus. Across these contexts, the meanings of body, blood, nourishment, sacrifice, death, purification, and rebirth are repeatedly reorganized rather than simply preserved. The analysis proposes that the pelican is best understood as a historically layered symbol of costly transformation: a symbolic structure in which loss, wounding, self-giving, or dissolution becomes the condition for renewed life, meaning, or form. This formulation preserves the importance of Christian self-sacrifice while also accounting for the symbol's later ethical, literary, artistic, and transformational meanings.

Keywords: Pelican Symbolism; Sacrifice; Rebirth; Physiologus; Christian Iconography; Literature; Alchemy

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Purpose

Animals have long served as mediators between observations of nature and human systems of meaning. Their bodies, behaviors, habitats, and relationships are selectively interpreted through religious, literary, artistic, and ethical frameworks, allowing a biological creature to become a cultural symbol. The pelican offers an especially revealing example because the natural bird and the symbolic bird differ markedly. Modern pelicans are large waterbirds whose distinctive bill and gular pouch are adapted to feeding, and phylogenetic and fossil studies confirm a long evolutionary

history for the family *Pelecanidae* [1]–[3]. Yet in Western cultural memory the pelican became famous not for its zoology but for a legend in which a parent wounds its own breast and gives blood to restore its young to life.

The symbolic history of this bird is unusually complex. Biblical reception associated a pelican-like bird with wilderness, solitude, and ruined places, while later Christian traditions transformed the bird into an emblem of Christ's sacrificial blood. Medieval bestiaries and religious art stabilized the image of the Pelican in her Piety; heraldry extended it toward parental devotion, charity, and service; literature used it to explore loyalty, blood relationship, betrayal, and artistic suffering; devotional poetry and music connected it with Eucharistic purification; and alchemy transformed the pelican into both a regenerative image and a vessel of repeated circulation. Earlier scholarship has documented important parts of this history [4]–[7], but a concise synthesis of the symbol's long-term cultural transformation remains useful, particularly one that distinguishes historical layers rather than treating all meanings as timeless or archetypally identical.

Accordingly, this study asks how pelican symbolism was formed, how it changed as it moved across cultural contexts and media, and which symbolic structures remained sufficiently stable to permit continuity. The paper argues that 'self-sacrifice' alone is too narrow as an integrative definition. Across its historical transformations, the pelican more consistently represents costly transformation: a process in which nourishment, wounding, loss, giving, purification, or dissolution makes a renewed condition possible.

1.2 Method and Scope

This article employs a historical-cultural and comparative symbolic analysis. It brings together zoological research, the *Physiologus* and bestiary tradition, Christian iconography and devotional texts, selected literary works, historical studies of the pelican symbol, and Jung's modern interpretation of alchemical imagery. The purpose is not to conduct a systematic review of every appearance of the pelican, nor to claim that identical meanings occur across all cultures. Instead, the analysis traces a documented Western tradition and compares the functions of recurring motifs—body, nourishment, blood, sacrifice, death, purification, return, and rebirth—within their particular historical settings. Where later psychological interpretations are discussed, they are treated as stages in modern reception rather than projected back onto medieval or early modern sources.

2 NATURAL AND TEXTUAL ORIGINS OF PELICAN SYMBOLISM

2.1 The Biological Pelican and the Symbolic Imagination

The pelican's distinctive morphology provides an important starting point for understanding later symbolism. Living pelicans possess long bills and expandable gular pouches, and they feed their young through close bodily interactions in which chicks obtain regurgitated food from the parent's bill and throat. Such behavior offers an observable basis for the cultural image of a parent that nourishes from its own body. The legend of breast-piercing is not a zoological fact; nevertheless, symbolic traditions rarely emerge from biological observation without transformation. They select striking features, exaggerate relationships, and reorganize them around human concerns. In the pelican's case, a biological pattern of feeding could be reimagined as a dramatic relationship between body, nourishment, and life.

The evolutionary antiquity of the bird strengthens the distinction between biological continuity and cultural change. An early Oligocene fossil preserves a bill remarkably similar to that of modern pelicans, showing long-term morphological stability [2], while a late Eocene specimen from Egypt extends the definitive *pelecanid* fossil record by approximately six million years [3]. The symbolic pelican, by contrast, changed repeatedly. This divergence is analytically important: the relatively stable animal body became the basis for a highly unstable and historically productive cultural body.

2.2 Biblical Reception and the *Physiologus*

Early textual associations were not uniformly positive. The Hebrew bird name *qā'at* has been translated differently across biblical traditions, and modern species identification remains uncertain. In the reception history relevant to the pelican, however, passages associated the bird with wilderness, desolation, and prohibited food. The cultural importance of these passages lies less in exact zoological identification than in the fact that the name 'pelican' became attached to textual images of isolation and ruined space. These meanings form an early semantic layer that differs sharply from the later emblem of redemptive love.

The decisive transformation occurs in the *Physiologus*, an influential late antique Christian collection of animal lore and allegorical interpretation. In the pelican account, the young rebel against their parents and die; after three days the parent wounds its side and its blood restores them to life [4]. The narrative was interpreted Christologically: rebellion corresponded to human sin, death to the consequence of sin, the wound and blood to the Passion, and restored life to redemption and resurrection. The three-day interval reinforced the correspondence with Christ's death and

resurrection. Through this interpretive process, parental feeding was no longer simply nourishment. It became a theology of life produced through sacrificial blood.

Recent scholarship confirms the importance of this tradition for medieval Christian culture. Peirats [5] shows how the pelican became associated with the Passion, death, and resurrection of Christ across the *Physiologus*, bestiaries, moral literature, illuminated manuscripts, religious architecture, and liturgical objects. The transformation therefore involved both text and image. The pelican became a compact vehicle through which complex doctrines could be taught, remembered, and visualized.

3 CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM AND MEDIEVAL EXPANSION

3.1 The Pelican in her Piety

By the medieval period the self-wounding pelican had developed into a recognizable visual type commonly called the Pelican in her Piety. The bird is typically shown bending toward its breast above a nest of young, sometimes with visible drops of blood. The composition converts narrative into iconography: the parent, wound, blood, recipients, and renewed life are compressed into one scene. Its cultural efficacy depended increasingly on symbolic action rather than naturalistic anatomy. Heraldic pelicans could resemble eagles more than actual pelicans, yet the wound and young made the meaning legible [6]. The symbolic animal had achieved relative independence from the zoological bird.

The term piety also broadened the meaning of the image. In historical usage, piety could encompass religious devotion as well as familial duty, loyalty, and care. Thus the Pelican in her Piety could signify Christ's sacrifice, but it could also express parental devotion, charity, or responsible service. This semantic flexibility explains its movement into heraldry, ecclesiastical emblems, educational foundations, and charitable settings. The core meaning remained self-giving for another, while the identity of the giver shifted from Christ to parent, clergy, leader, or institution.

3.2 Cross, Eucharist, and Devotional Culture

Christian visual culture intensified the association between the pelican and the Cross. When the bird was positioned above or near crucifixion imagery, the two figures interpreted one another: Christ's pierced body clarified the pelican's blood, while the pelican supplied a naturalized image of life emerging from sacrificial death. This association also made the pelican particularly suitable for Eucharistic imagery. The legendary parent gives its own bodily substance as nourishment, while Eucharistic theology centers on Christ's body and blood as spiritual food. The earlier biological logic of feeding was therefore retained but theologized.

The same symbolic structure entered devotional language in *Adoro te devote*, a Eucharistic prayer strongly associated with Thomas Aquinas. Schoot's textual and theological study emphasizes that the work is fundamentally concerned with Eucharistic and spiritual transformation [8]. Its address to Christ as the loving pelican and its petition for cleansing through blood show how the symbol moved from restored bodily life toward purification and participation in divine life. In this context, the pelican does not merely die for another; its blood nourishes, cleanses, and transforms.

4 LITERARY, ARTISTIC, AND ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

4.1 From Christological Metaphor to Human Relationship

Literature demonstrates how inherited religious symbolism can be preserved while its application changes. Dante's *Paradiso* refers to Christ as 'our Pelican,' using an already familiar Christian image without retelling the legend [9]. The expression is especially dense because it evokes the beloved disciple resting near Christ's breast while also recalling the breast or side from which the symbolic pelican gives life. The pelican has become a literary shorthand for sacrificial Christology.

Shakespeare's uses are more ambivalent. In *Hamlet*, the pelican image can express extreme loyalty and willingness to give one's blood to true friends; in *King Lear*, 'pelican daughters' invert the traditional direction of nourishment as children are imagined as consuming the parent who sustained them; and in *Richard II*, the image contributes to a language of kinship and bloodshed [10]. These transformations retain the crucial motif of blood but detach it from guaranteed redemption. Blood may signify loyalty, inheritance, depletion, betrayal, or political violence. Literature thus exposes the ethical instability latent in the traditional image: self-giving can sustain another, but it can also be exploited.

A further transformation occurs in Alfred de Musset's *La Nuit de Mai*, where the self-sacrificing pelican becomes an emblem of the poet. Eltayeb [11] interprets the bird as a figure for poetic creation born from suffering. The older symbolic sequence—wound, blood, life—is translated into suffering, expression, and art. The receiver is no longer a

dead chick or a sinner but the reader. Rebirth becomes creative rather than bodily: private suffering acquires a new cultural existence as poetry.

4.2 Alchemy: From Sacrificial Event to Transformative Process

Alchemy reorganized pelican symbolism in a particularly significant way. The pelican appears not only as a regenerative image related to the Philosophers' Stone but also as the name of a laboratory vessel whose curved arms return condensed material to the main body. The vessel's design makes repeated circulation possible, and the symbolic emphasis therefore shifts from one decisive act of sacrificial bloodshed to an iterative process of departure, return, refinement, and transformation. What leaves the body returns to it in altered form.

Jung's twentieth-century interpretation of alchemy gave this process a psychological reading. In *Alchemical Studies* he treated repeated distillation, mortification, purification, and related operations as symbolic material capable of expressing psychic transformation [12]. In *Mysterium Coniunctionis* he further explored alchemical images of conjunction and the synthesis of opposites [13]. These interpretations should not be retroactively attributed to historical alchemists; they belong to the modern reception of alchemy. Nevertheless, they are important for the later cultural history of the pelican because they transform the bird and vessel into images of interior change, integration, and individuation.

The alchemical development broadens the meaning of rebirth. In the Christian legend, dead young return to life. In alchemy, the earlier form is dissolved so that a refined or unified form may emerge. Rebirth is therefore no longer simple restoration. It becomes qualitative transformation after dissolution. This shift from event to process is one of the most important developments in the history of the symbol.

5 INTEGRATIVE DISCUSSION

5.1 From Self-Sacrifice to Costly Transformation

Across the materials examined, the pelican cannot be reduced to a single stable meaning. Its biblical reception includes solitude and desolation; Christian tradition emphasizes redemption; heraldry emphasizes devotion and service; literature introduces loyalty, exploitation, and creativity; devotional culture adds nourishment and purification; and alchemy emphasizes circulation and regeneration. Yet these meanings are not unrelated. They repeatedly organize themselves around a body or substance that gives, loses, opens, dissolves, or returns so that another condition can emerge.

For this reason, costly transformation provides a more inclusive interpretation than self-sacrifice alone. The term costly preserves the constitutive role of wound, loss, expenditure, or dissolution. Transformation allows the outcome to vary according to historical context: restored life, salvation, purification, communal continuity, artistic meaning, or alchemical integration. This formulation also preserves the symbol's ambivalence. A costly act may be redemptive, but it may also result in depletion or destruction. Shakespeare's reversal of the nurturing pelican demonstrates that the receiver can consume the giver, while Musset's image of poetic suffering suggests that creation itself may demand self-expenditure.

5.2 A Relational and Historically Layered Symbol

The pelican is also fundamentally relational. Its major cultural meanings depend on a relationship between giver and receiver: parent and offspring, Christ and humanity, leader and community, poet and reader, or components circulating within an alchemical vessel. The symbol rarely represents autonomous strength. Instead, it represents vulnerability, dependence, transfer, and change through relation. This relational structure explains why the pelican could move so readily among theology, family ethics, charity, literature, education, and transformative symbolism.

At the same time, continuity should not be confused with a timeless universal essence. The historical evidence does not support the claim that the pelican has always or everywhere meant sacrifice and rebirth. Biblical desolation, Christian redemption, Shakespearean betrayal, and alchemical circulation are historically distinct. A more cautious conclusion is that Western pelican symbolism is a layered tradition in which older meanings remain available while new contexts select, invert, and abstract particular elements. Its durability results from a balance between recognizable structure and semantic adaptability.

5.3 Contribution and Limitations

The contribution of this synthesis is threefold. First, it separates important historical layers, especially the biblical reception of the pelican from the fully developed Christological bird of the *Physiologus* and medieval culture. Second, it distinguishes historical alchemy from Jung's later psychological interpretation, avoiding the anachronistic assumption

that alchemists consciously pursued Jungian individuation. Third, it proposes costly transformation as an integrative concept that can account for both the positive and negative dimensions of the symbol across religious, literary, artistic, and alchemical contexts.

The study also has limitations. The strongest documentary evidence considered here belongs to European and Christian traditions; it should not be generalized to all cultures in which pelicans occur. Ancient bird names cannot always be identified securely with modern species, and the sources examined belong to different genres that require different interpretive methods. Further research should investigate non-European pelican traditions, contemporary ecological and conservation imagery, children's literature, popular culture, and institutional uses to determine whether the older structure of sacrifice and renewal continues to shape the modern symbolic bird.

6 CONCLUSION

The history of the pelican demonstrates that cultural symbols endure not because they remain unchanged but because they can be reinterpreted while preserving recognizable relationships. The natural bird's parental feeding behavior provided a basis for an image of bodily nourishment; the Physiologus transformed nourishment into blood and Christian redemption; medieval art and heraldry stabilized the self-wounding bird as an emblem of piety, charity, and service; literature humanized and complicated the symbol through loyalty, betrayal, and creative suffering; devotional tradition connected it with Eucharistic nourishment and purification; and alchemy transformed the sacrificial event into a cyclical process of dissolution, return, and regeneration.

Across these transformations, the deepest continuity lies in the relationship between loss and renewed possibility. The pelican therefore is more adequately described not simply as a symbol of maternal love or self-sacrifice but as a historically layered symbol of costly transformation. Its cultural power comes from joining vulnerability and generativity in the same image: something is opened, wounded, given, or dissolved, and that cost creates the possibility of life, meaning, purification, or a new form. At the same time, the symbol retains a productive ambiguity, because sacrifice may nurture or exhaust, redeem or destroy. This unresolved tension between wound and renewal helps explain the pelican's remarkable persistence across religious, literary, artistic, and transformative traditions.

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