

Giovanni da Empoli (1483-1518): a florentine merchant in Portuguese Asia and the earliest specimens of birds of paradise in Europe (Passeriformes, Paradisaeidae)

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Abstract. According to the current literature, birds of paradise (Passeriformes, Paradisaeidae) arrived in Europe for the first time on 6 September 1522, when the single remaining ship of Fernão de Magalhães' fleet anchored in San Lúcar de Barrameda. It would therefore appear that the report by Florentine merchant Giovanni da Empoli concerning the presence of one these birds in Lisbon on 22 August 1514 – eight years earlier – has been entirely overlooked. Described by Empoli in a letter written in his own hand, composed in the Portuguese capital on 19 October 1514, this bird of paradise was acquired in Malacca and sent as a gift to Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, who had assumed the pontifical throne on 9 March 1513 as Leo X. The same document mentions that King Manuel also possessed a bird of paradise, pointing to the possibility that these birds participated in the commerce of exotic animals and their products conducted by the Portuguese not long after the voyage of Vasco da Gama. In any case, this discovery allows an unexpected revision of the history of birds of paradise in Europe and could promote a search of new textual and iconographic sources.

Keywords. Bird of paradise; Paradisaeidae; Passeriformes; Europe; Giovanni da Empoli; Dom Manuel, King of Portugal; Leo X; 16th century; Animal trade; History of Zoology; Animals in Art.

Resumo. Giovanni da Empoli (1483-1518): um mercador florentino na Ásia portuguesa e as primeiras aves-do-paraíso vistas na Europa. Para os autores contemporâneos, as aves-do-paraíso (Passeriformes, Paradisaeidae) só teriam chegado à Europa em 6 de setembro de 1522, data de ancoragem em San Lúcar de Barrameda do único navio remanescente da esquadra de Fernão de Magalhães. Por conseguinte, parece ter passado totalmente despercebido que o mercador florentino Giovanni da Empoli desembarcou em Lisboa com um desses pássaros no dia 22 de agosto de 1514 – de fato oito anos antes. Descrita por Empoli em uma carta autografada composta na capital portuguesa a 19 de outubro de 1514, essa ave-do-paraíso fora adquirida em Malaca e seria enviada como presente para Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, que assumira o trono pontifício em 9 de março de 1513 como Leão X. O mesmo documento relata que o rei Dom Manuel também possuía uma ave-do-paraíso, sinal de que esses pássaros talvez já participassem do comércio de animais exóticos e seus produtos conduzido pelos portugueses pouco depois da viagem de Vasco da Gama. De qualquer forma, tal descoberta abre espaço para uma inesperada revisão da trajetória das aves-do-paraíso na Europa e fomenta a busca de novas fontes textuais e iconográficas.

Palavras-Chave. Ave-do-paraíso; Paradisaeidae; Passeriformes; Europa; Giovanni da Empoli; Dom Manuel, Rei de Portugal; Leão X; Século XVI; Comércio de Animais; História da Zoologia; Animais na Arte.

INTRODUCTION

Born in Florence on 24 October 1483, Giovanni da Empoli was the son of an exchange broker named Leonardo, a follower of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola. After the latter's execution on 23 May 1498, the young Giovanni

chose to dedicate himself entirely to the world of business, going to Bruges, on 14 March 1502, in the employ of the mercantile house of Martino Scarfi and Giovanguilberto Buonagrazia. About nine years later, recruited by the Florentine merchants Antonio Gualterotti, Filippo Gualterotti and Girolamo Frescobaldi, he was sent to Lisbon

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for the purpose of sailing to India, embarking on one of the six ships of the armada commanded by the cousins Afonso and Francisco de Albuquerque, which left port on 6 April 1503¹. On that first trip to the Orient, he visited Kannur, Cochin and Kollam, the latter city previously unknown to the Europeans.

After returning to the Portuguese capital on 16 September 1504, Giovanni da Empoli traveled to Bruges where he engaged in a long stint of accounting for the profitable trading that had been conducted. He arrived in Florence on 22 October 1506, where he recounted this first trip to the "Gonfaloniere" Pier Soderini and other notable figures². On 14 January 1507, however, he went back to Bruges and later Lisbon, as the Gualterottis had decided to send him on a second trip to Asia. Alongside Leonardo Nardi, a close collaborator of Bartolomeo Marchionni³, he set sail on one of the four ships of the squadron of Diogo Mendes de Vasconcelos, which departed on 16 March 1510 with the aim of conquering the Malacca Sultanate⁴. He returned to Lisbon on 22 August 1514, where he remained for eight months until being sent by King Manuel on the third and last of his trips to the Orient, leaving on 7 April 1515 aboard the fleet of Lopo Soares de Albergaria, the successor of Afonso de Albuquerque in the government of Portuguese India. Appointed as the overseer of the trading post established in 1511 in the port of Samudra Pasai, north of Sumatra, Giovanni da Empoli was also tasked with maintaining and furthering Portuguese control of the China-Pasai-Malacca trade route⁵. He died in Canton on 17 October 1518 during an epidemic – perhaps cholera – which also claimed the lives of eight of his shipmates, including fellow countrymen Raffaello Galli and Benedetto Pucci.

According to the current literature, birds of paradise (Passeriformes, Paradisaeidae) arrived in Europe for the first time on 6 September 1522, when the single remaining ship of Fernão de Magalhães' fleet anchored in San

Lúcar de Barrameda⁶. It has been entirely overlooked, therefore, that Giovanni da Empoli disembarked in Lisbon with one of those birds on 22 August 1514 – eight years earlier. Acquired in Malacca, this dried skin was described by Empoli in a letter written in his own hand, composed in the Portuguese capital on 19 October 1514 and conserved in the Archivio di Stato of Florence (Fig. 1)⁷.

Addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici, the missive in question related the exotic gifts sent to the members of that powerful Florentine family. To Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici – Lorenzo de' Medici's son who had assumed the pontifical throne on 9 March 1513 as Leo X⁸ – Giovanni da Empoli sent "a very beautiful dead bird that I brought from Malacca and which had arrived there from an even more faraway, recently discovered country, where cloves are grown⁹. The bird does not have feet and is always in the air without touching the ground – and it feeds from the air and broods its offspring on its rump, according to news from the aforementioned land". At the end of the sentence, da Empoli adds the surprising comment that "the King" – *i.e.* Dom Manuel, the King of Portugal – also possessed "one of these birds, about which the same things are said", which could suggest a specimen obtained at an even earlier date (see Appendix 1).

In some sense, this occurrence is in no wise astonishing, since the birds of paradise were not unfamiliar to the Portuguese at the time of Giovanni da Empoli¹⁰. Indeed, in his celebrated "Suma Oriental" written from 1512 to

¹ For further details about the life of Giovanni da Empoli, see Alessandrini (2010), Bausani (1970), Bertuccioli (1985), Caraci & Pozzi (1996), Gubernatis (1875), Hemsö (1846), Howgego (2003), Noonan (1989), Perez (1994), Romanini (2004), San Filippo (1874, 1875, 1885) and Spallanzani (1984, 1997, 1999).

² At that time, this was the title conferred to the leader of the city's civil government, who was also responsible for the execution of justice. A member of a traditional family, Pier Soderini was elected as "gonfaloniere" for life in 1502, but was deposed and exiled by the Medici in 1512.

³ As mentioned above, Giovanni da Empoli was a representative of the Gualterottis and Frescobaldis, the owners of an important trading house located in Bruges. These two families wound up associating with another Florentine resident in Lisbon – the famous Bartolomeo Marchionni, a powerful merchant and banker deeply involved with the Portuguese navigations. As the armada of Afonso de Albuquerque relied on the financing of these Italian traders, who were joined by Gerolamo Sernigi and Bernardo Gondhi, it is not surprising that Empoli traveled as a companion of Leonardo Nardi, one of Marchionni's workers (Almeida, 1994; Bertuccioli, 1985; Bruscoli, 2013, 2014; Howgego, 2003).

⁴ Dominating the strait between Malaysia and Sumatra, Malacca controlled the navigation between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, making it a main commercial hub of Southeast Asia. Diogo Mendes de Vasconcelos was sent there with orders from King Manuel to take possession of this strategic site while acting independently from the authority of the governor of Portuguese India, Afonso de Albuquerque. The latter, however, convinced Diogo Mendes to help him in the reconquest of Goa (25 November 1510) but then later imprisoned him and commanded the attack against Malacca himself, occupying it on 24 August 1511. For further details see Loureiro (2008), Oliveira e Costa & Rodrigues (2008) and Thomaz (1994, 2000).

⁵ Concerning the Portuguese domination in the northern Sumatra, see Alves (1999) and Mitrasing (2014).

⁶ Under the orders of Juan Sebastián del Cano and crew with just 18 enfeebled sailors, the battered "Victoria" arrived in San Lúcar de Barrameda on 6 September 1522, and was towed to the port of Seville two days later (Castro *et al.*, 2007). The exotic articles collected during three years of sailing included bird-of-paradise dried skins from the Moluccas, considered by countless authors as the first such specimens ever seen in Europe. This view is held, for example, by Andaya (2017), Attenborough & Fuller (2012), Bogdan & Mužinić (2009, 2013), Doughty (1975), Eichberger (1998), Eisler (1995), Frith & Frith (2010), Fuller (1995), George (1980), Gilliard (1969), Iredale (1950), Konrad & Somadikarta (1975), Koreny (1985), Lawrence (2018a, 2018b), López (2014), Mason (2009), Mužinić *et al.* (2009), Ogilvie (2006), Stressemann (1954), Swadling (2019), Swan (2015) and Wendt (1956).

⁷ Archivio di Stato de Firenze, Mediceo avanti Principato, collection 116, n° 405 (*teste Spallanzani*, 1984). The text of this handwritten letter was published by Berchet (1892-1896), Giorgetti (1880) and Spallanzani (1984, 1999).

⁸ A notable appreciator of animals and curiosities from distant lands, Leo X maintained a "menagerie" at the Vatican during his pontificate (1513-1521). Seeking to safeguard the interests of Portugal in Europe and overseas, King Manuel very aptly sent to Rome a gift able to satisfying any sybarite, which included superb garments and ornaments along with Chinese porcelain, pearls, gemstones, and other precious items. The rarities comprised Chinese and Mexican manuscripts as well as an impressive group of animals formed by parrots, a beautiful Persian horse, Oriental chickens and dogs, two leopards, a cheetah and a young elephant trained to dance and obey the orders of a mahout, a present which enthralled the pope (Barbosa, 1885; Bedini, 1998). It was without any doubt a very expensive largesse, as each of those pachyderms could cost up to 800,000 reais in its country of origin, a sum equivalent to 80% of the value paid for the construction of a ship (Gorgas, 1997; Lach, 1970).

⁹ A reference to the Moluccas. With the expedition of António de Abreu, the Portuguese reached the islands of Banda and Amboina in early 1512 (Andaya, 1993).

¹⁰ Vague information generally attributed to the birds of paradise already circulated in Europe in the mid-15th century thanks to the reports of Niccolò de' Conti. According to this Venice merchant, "in Great Java a very remarkable bird is found, resembling a wood pigeon, without feet, of slight plumage, and with an oblong tail. It always frequents trees. The flesh of this bird is not eaten, but the skin and tail are highly prized, being used as ornaments for the head". Conti left his native city in 1419 and took up residence in Damascus, having visited various parts of Asia throughout the following 25 years. Poggio Bracciolini composed an account of his travels in the book IV of the "*Varietate Fortuna*", which circulated in Europe as a manuscript. Although this work was completed in 1447, it was not fully published until the first quarter of the 18th century (Bracciolini, 1723). The book IV, however, was printed separately in the end of the 15th century under the title of "*India Recognita*" (Bracciolini, 1492). For further details, see Major (1857) and Nicolò de' Conti (2004).

+ Jhs ad dnmj doctor 1514 //

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Magnifico ^{se} la bausa. Alapescinte s'vamo alla magnifica signoria vostra
 diponde et semdo dipescinte tornato delniabis dimalassa doue ho amito
 moue d'olla tornata diuostrea s'ria alla cipta / simil d'illa ch'ualho del sommo
 pontefice et il d'camde esaltamento diuostro stato / Et p' esnoj staj sempre
 buonj suidorj et afezionarj diuostrea bausa no amito tanto piacere quanto
 iddio fa et no remoute et remdo infinite d'ualho al sommo iddio sua tornato
 dupribato stato et honore. homo ferio a Job p' omde lacipta nostra nesia
 empallata piacca ardis dar alla ^{sua} nostra tale indichio et possi d'oxnar
 homsaluazione et honore anima et choepo /

Io mamdo al sommo pontefice p' una nave si viene apisa uno ucello morto molto
 bellissimo et io ho portato dimalassa et d'ila viene dipiu lombe paese s'mou
 am e s'ito disloperito doue naschono li d'erosanj / lucello no tiene pie sta s'oz
 nella aere senza tobarre terra et daert s'nutrice et inasce bienera l'isidolj
 s'oz il d'odrone s'elomdo se amito notilia daquelli d'illa terra / et re na amito
 uno bonlamedesma informahio / inoltre mamdo uno roccetto d'una tela biseta
 molto bella / et uno peggio diligno aloes balambudj molto fine / et al magnifico
 buliano mamdo una adassa bella et corte alio ^{se} / et simil mamdo alla
 s'ria nostra alcune altre chost / lephi tunc uamo nuna bausa la q' ho q'ij
 d'omsegnata al numfio et hosti a auenir ilu et potra vostra manbrifila
 s'ria ueder ilu et posto. Et le host no s'ieno di quella sustanzia et meriterobono
 uicena. d'ame l'ania bona uolonta et desiderio et ho d'iservir la bausa nostra
 la qual p'edo iddio homferij et d'uard infato. disalua ho d'ill'anima et choepo

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Simil h'io d'oz d'illa magnifica s'ria sua / Giovanni da Empoli in Lisbona

Figure 1. Letter by Giovanni da Empoli to Lorenzo de' Medici, written in Lisbon on 19 October 1514 (in Spallanzani, 1984). Archivio di Stato, Florence.

1515 – the first Portuguese description of the Orient – the apothecary Tomé Pires talks about the “birds of God” that come “from heaven,” which were brought from the Aru Islands in the Moluccas and constituted a highly demanded merchandise¹¹. Besides their loose feathers, this trade highly prized the specimens prepared by the natives of New Guinea and the neighboring islands, which were nothing more than the dried skins normally without feet and wings (Fig. 2)¹². As the great majority of people never saw anything beyond the material destined for commerce, this belief that the actual birds themselves lacked feet and wings gained momentum. And this conception was coupled with the notion that such an improbable creature may only have originated in heaven – or in paradise in the vision of Islam, the dominant religion in that region since the 13th century¹³.

As demonstrated by Giovanni da Empoli’s comments, the Europeans soon adopted this fable, which was reworked according to their own parameters, giving rise to Christian myth of the birds of paradise, a belief that lasted more than 200 years. Perhaps the most unusual aspects of this legend were expressed by the Italian polymath Girolamo Cardano, who stated that these birds – not possessing feet – needed to float in the air and rested by mooring on trees with their feathers (Fig. 3). They fed on dew and their eggs were laid and incubated in a cavity on the male bird’s back¹⁴.

DISCUSSION

Upon arriving in the Orient, the Portuguese and Spanish fought for space in an age-old trade involving a wide range of articles, including the remains of animals such as parrots and birds of paradise, which were already known in various parts of Asia since at least the 8th century onward. From New Guinea and adjacent islands, the feathers and dried skins of the *Paradisaeidae* arrived at the Moluccas, proceeding from there to Malacca and then to China and India, where they were passed on by Bengali traders to Arab merchants who brought them to Persia and Turkey¹⁵. Although their plumes were used as showy ornaments for well-known Middle Eastern characters as the janissaries, there is no concrete information

to indicate that birds of paradise arrived in Europe before the overseas travels to the Orient¹⁶.

As would be expected, a great part of the few specimens reported in Europe up to the mid-16th century were linked to Magalhães’ expedition, which brought back between two and five skins depending on the author considered¹⁷. These, however, are not sufficient to explain all the known records, an inconsistency that has led some to speculate that perhaps new birds of paradise had been imported by the Portuguese to Europe around 1550, something which demonstrably occurred – as evidenced by Giovanni da Empoli’s letter – even before the Spanish circumnavigation¹⁸. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the Archduchess Margaret of Austria possessed a specimen as early as 1523¹⁹ and another one had entered the collection of the Augsburg humanist Konrad Peutinger before his death, in 1547. Very attentive to the great navigations, Peutinger maintained close links with various important people of Lisbon – such as the editor and notary Valentim Fernandes – while he was also the son-in-law and partner of Anton Welser, the Elder, a very rich merchant banker with significant interests in overseas trade²⁰.

A similar situation exists regarding the iconography of the birds, as a widely cited publication identifies only three illustrations previous to 1550, all of them specimens belonging to the genus *Paradisaea*²¹: a study in black and white by German artist Hans Baldung Grien, a miniature by the Croatian Julije Klović included in a prayerbook known as the “Farnese Hours,” and the tapestry “Barque of Venus-Fortune” by the Italian Giulio Romano. This list, of course, does not consider the lost drawing sent by Konrad Peutinger to the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner of the bird of paradise housed in his cabinet of curiosities. One of the two Gesner-Platter albums preserved at the University of Basel depicts a *Paradisaea* sp., but

¹¹ “Those which are prized more than any others come from the islands called Daru, birds which they bring over dead, called birds of God, and they say they come from heaven, and that they do not know how they breed. And the Turks and Persians use them for making panaches – they are very suitable for this purpose. The Bengalees buy them. They are good merchandise, and only a few come”, according to the reading of Cortesão (1944).

¹² After the flesh and bones were discarded – along with the wings, feet and sometimes the beak – the skins were rubbed with ashes and stretched onto a wooden rod, then placed into the smoke of a fire until they dried and became stiff. For further details, see Andaya (2017), Lesson (1830), Swadling (2019), Valentijn (1724-1726) and Wallace (1869).

¹³ As recorded by Transylvanus (1523a). It should be remembered that no European had ever seen a living bird of paradise until the visit of René Primevère Lesson to New Guinea between July and August 1824 (Lesson, 1830).

¹⁴ See Cardano (1550). The cultural aspects relating to the discovery of birds of paradise in the European scenario has attracted a great deal of attention, having been discussed by authors such as Andaya (2017), Arranz (1996), Bogdan & Mužinić (2009), Eisler (1995), Konrad & Somadikarta (1975), Lawrence (2018a, 2018b), López (2013, 2014), Mason (2009), Massing (2007) and Swan (2015).

¹⁵ See Meilink-Roelofs (1962), Spyer (2000) and Swadling (2019).

¹⁶ This is the attribution normally conferred to the observations made by the French naturalist Pierre Belon (1553) about the panaches worn by the janissaries. Nevertheless, a few authors (e.g. Andaya, 2017 and Taylor, 2003) comment that the plumes of the birds of paradise adorned the helmets of the knights of European courts during the 13th century, without offering further details on this subject.

¹⁷ Compare Pigafetta (in Alderley, 1874) with Transylvanus (1523a).

¹⁸ See Eisler (1995). According to authors such as Mužinić *et al.* (2009), out the supposedly five birds of paradise brought by Magalhães’ expedition, two remained with Emperor Charles V while another was sent by his secretary, Maximilianus Transylvanus, to Matheus Lang von Wellenburg, Cardinal of Salzburg. It is speculated that a fourth one was offered to Pope Clemente VII – Giulio di Giuliano de’ Medici, the cousin of Leo X – during Antonio Pigafetta’s visit to the pontifical court in the year 1523 (Lach, 1965). Although Clemente VII possessed a miter and two lappets embroidered with birds of paradise feathers (teste Benedetti, 1911), there are no reports about his possessing an actual specimen. As it was already mentioned, one bird of paradise had arrived previously into the hands of the Medici by way of Giovanni da Empoli. See following note.

¹⁹ As established by Swan (2015), an inventory dated from 1523-1524 reports a bird of paradise among the treasures that the Archduchess Margaret of Austria, Regent of the Habsburgs in the Lower Countries, kept in her cabinet of curiosities in the Belgian city of Mechelen (see Cremades, 2010; Freigang, 2009 and MacDonald, 2002). In light of the belief that there were only five birds of paradise in all of Europe at that date, it has been assumed that it was one of the skins brought by Magalhães’ expedition, another exotic item given to the regent by his nephew, Emperor Charles V. Although this is one possible provenance, this specimen may also have come from a different origin, considering that birds of paradise had already arrived in Portugal at an earlier date.

²⁰ Concerning Konrad Peutinger and his relationships with Portugal, see Lopes (2000, 2007, 2011) and Pohle (2015).

²¹ See Bogdan & Mužinić (2013).



Figure 2. Dorsal and ventral view of a bird of paradise (*Paradisaea* sp.) by an anonymous artist of the third quarter of the 16th century (ca. 1560). Graphische Sammlung, Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Erlangen.

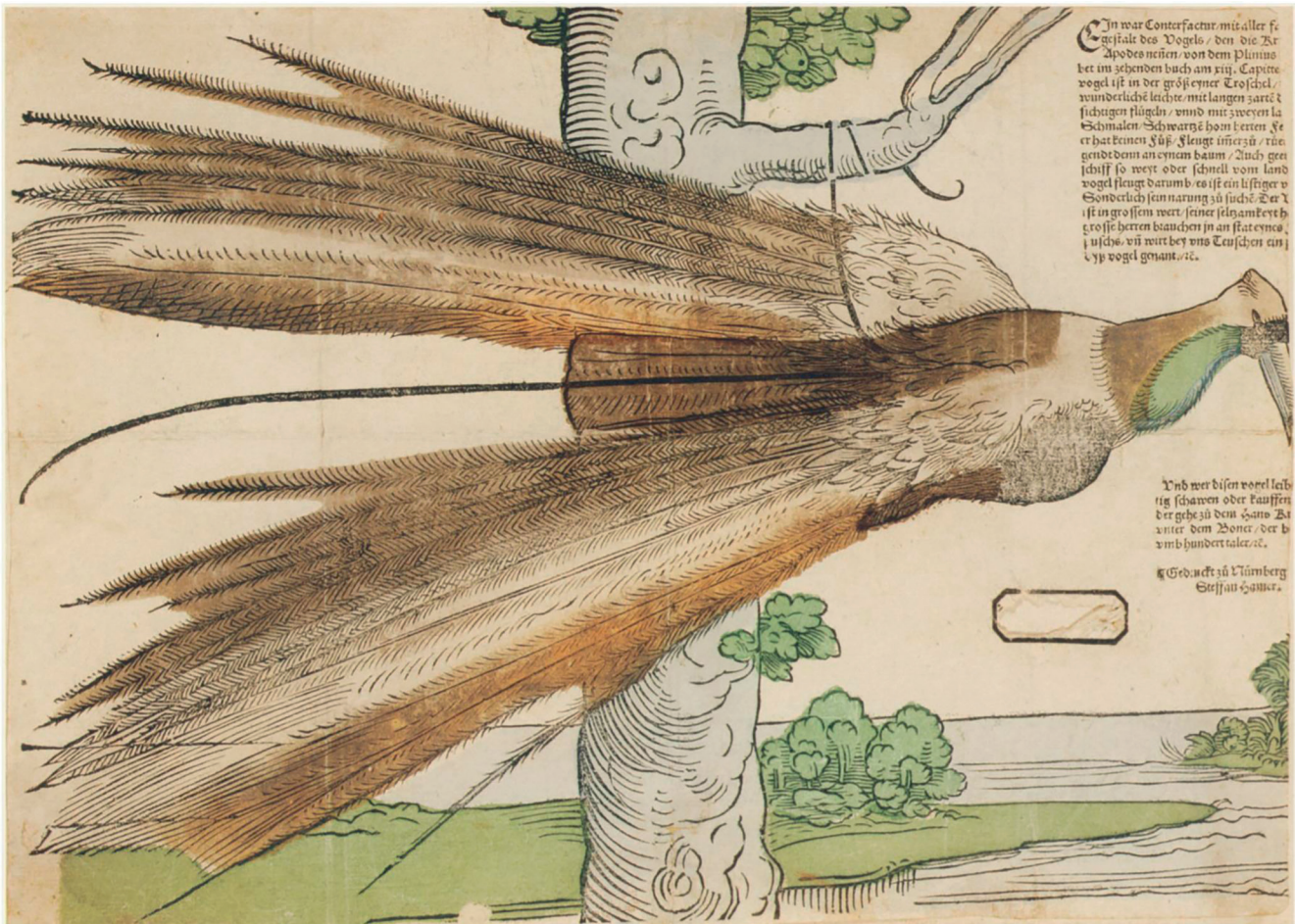


Figure 3. “Der Paradyss Vogel”, engraving of a bird of paradise (*Paradisaea* sp.) attributed to Steffan Hamer (1550-1555). Schlossmuseum, Kupferstichkabinett, Gotha.

this painting has no relation to Peutinger. It is usually attributed to Felix Platter, and represents a specimen belonging to Count Ulrich von Montfort, a close collaborator of Platter who died in 1574/1575 (Fig. 4)²².

Of the above-cited images, that of Hans Baldung Grien is the most interesting for having been dated between 1522 and 1525 according to the source considered (Fig. 5)²³. However, it seems to be very unlikely that a bird of paradise which arrived in the port of Seville in September 1522 would be depicted a few months later by an artist in a distant city. In fact, Hans Baldung Grien studied art from 1503 to 1507 with Albrecht Dürer in Nuremberg, to then take up residence in Strasburg in 1509. Except for an important service carried out in Freiburg im Breisgau between 1513 and 1516, it seems that Hans Baldung lived in Strasburg until his death in 1545, thus making it improbable for him to have had contact with a trade skin brought by Magalhães' expedition even in 1525. Nevertheless, his study gives

the distinct impression of having been based on a real specimen²⁴.

In the absence of a publication similar to the “*Moluccis Insulis*” by Maximilianus Transylvanus²⁵ – a key piece that went into the forging of the Christian variant of the legend about birds of paradise – the trade skins brought to Lisbon were immersed in the obscurity that almost always surrounded the trafficking of animals conducted by the Portuguese. Nevertheless, the exploration of the African coast and the later establishment of a sea route to the Indies led to a growing flow of spices and other valuable goods along with exotic animals and their products, a reality that contradicts the prevailing view of this trade as a marginal business undertaken only in the absence of goods of greater economic interest.

Besides a broad range of living animals – including large quadrupeds like elephants and rhinoceroses²⁶ –

²² With the death of Gesner in 1565, the Swiss anatomist and physician Felix Platter inherited part of his collection, including various zoological illustrations that were later organized into four volumes - the so-called Gesner-Platter albums – now conserved in the university libraries of Basel and Amsterdam (Egmond, 2013; Kusakawa, 2010; Nissen, 1966-1978). About Felix Platter and his relations with Count Ulrich von Montford, see Landolt (1972), Lötscher (1975) and Sackman (1991).

²³ Compare, for example, Attenborough & Fuller (2012), Bogdan & Muzinić (2013), Eichberger (1998), Eisler (1995), Frith & Frith (2010), Koreny (1985) and Massing (2007).

²⁴ Concerning the life and work of Hans Baldung, see Brady (1975), Curjel (1923, 1924), Fischer (1939), Hults (2005), Koch (1941), Koerner (1993), Martin (1950) and Osten (1983). That artist also depicted other exotic birds, such as some parrots from Africa and the New World present in his “Adam and Eve” from 1507.

²⁵ Printed in Cologne and Paris in 1523, the report by Transylvanus was issued as a new edition the following year (Transylvanus, 1523a, 1523b, 1524). This text was also published in other languages and wound up being included in various collectanea that came to light as early as the first half of the 16th century (e.g. Boemus, 1542; Huttich, 1537; Transylvanus & Pigafetta, 1536). For further details, see Roersch (1928a, 1928b).

²⁶ For further information, see Bedini (1998), Clarke (1986), Costa (1937) and Lach (1970).



Figure 4. Bird of paradise (*Paradisaea* sp.) belonging to the collection of Count Ulrich von Montfort. Painting attributed to Felix Platter (before 1560). Abbildungen von Vögeln von Felix Platter, Universitätsbibliothek, Basel.



Figure 5. Study of a bird of paradise (*Paradisaea* sp.) by Hans Baldung Grien (1522-1525). Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

imports to Europe involving pearls, ivory, turtle shells, corals, nautilus shells and murex purple, as well as the musks of beavers, civets and musk deer, plus large quantities of peacock feathers, the skins of many animals, and rhinoceros horns, the latter declared a royal monopoly from 1470 onward. In this context, the presence of birds of paradise is not really surprising, although they were among the less common and more expensive items. Speaking of these birds, Tomé Pires (1512-1515) said that “only a few come”, while Conrad Gesner – in the mid-16th century – mentions a brochure that circulated in Nuremberg offering a dried skin for the considerable sum of 800 talers, equivalent to the annual salary of a university scholar or skilled musician²⁷.

The growing fascination for novelties from overseas soon caught the attention of the economic agents involved with the Portuguese discoveries, who included the celebrated brothers Ulrich and Jakob Fugger, the wealthiest merchant bankers of their time. As early as 1505, the Fuggers had perceived the evident potential offered by exotic fauna, in which market they were soon joined by the aforementioned Welsers. At least until 1521, the Fuggers’ representatives in Lisbon were sending numerous living animals to their company headquarters in Augsburg, for example monkeys, peacocks, big cats, parrots and parakeets. This commerce moreover involved the remains of various species, particularly impressive shipments of peacock feathers and the skins of leopards, tigers and lions, products that were highly demanded for

the fabrication of luxury clothing and accessories. Only affordable for nobility and the wealthiest bourgeoisie, the peacocks were raised in large-scale around Neusohl (currently Banská Bystrica, Slovakia), in an operation that was still active in 1546.

Between 1520 and 1530, the booming trade conducted by the Fuggers was moved to Antwerp, which then became the port of entry of the company’s imports. Housed in a large park equipped with cages and other facilities, the workers were able to receive a large number of animals arriving on ships from Portugal, Spain or Italy, to then redistribute them to rich buyers throughout the rest of Europe, taking advantage of the fluvial transport offered by the Rhine River²⁸.

The flow of animals to Europe had an equivalent in the inter-Asian trade, leading the Portuguese to monopolize the export of Arabian horses to India and to assume the role of important suppliers of exotic species, maintaining an intense commerce able to connect such distant points as the Middle East, the Moluccas and Japan²⁹. Animals are a precious indicator of the attempts to dominate the long-established commercial networks, and the arrival of a bird of paradise in Lisbon through a Florentine merchant linked to the great navigations should be understood as an outstanding example of the magnitude and complexity of a process that would lead

²⁷ See Cortesão (1944), Gesner (1555) and Lawrence (2018a).

²⁸ Concerning the traffic of animals and their products during the 16th century, see Barbosa (1885), Braga & Braga (2015), Ferronha *et al.* (1993), Gorgas (1997), Gorgas & Schweinberger (1986), Loisel (1912), Meadow (2002), Teixeira (2011) and Teixeira & Papavero (2010).

²⁹ See Gorgas (1997) and Joaquim (2010).

the Christian West – for the first time – to gain control of a worldwide market between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, giving rise to modern capitalism. In any case, it is noteworthy that these birds were perhaps already in Portugal not long after the voyage of Vasco da Gama³⁰, a discovery that allows an unexpected revision of the history of birds of paradise in Europe and could promote a search of new textual and iconographic sources.

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³⁰ In a letter dated 27 June 1501, the aforementioned Bartolomeo Marchionni informed an unknown addressee that Cabral's fleet had reported "various birds and animals" never before seen, which demonstrated the truth of the narrative of Pliny the Elder's "*Historia Naturalis*", which up to then had been "regarded a liar" (Teixeira & Papavero, 2006).

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APPENDIX 1

Transcription of the letter by Giovanni da Empoli to Lorenzo de' Medici, written in Lisbon on 19 October 1514 (according to Spallanzani, 1984)

"Iesus, addì xviiiij d' ottobre 1514

Magnifico Signore, la chausa che la presente schrivo alla magnificha signoria vostra dipemede che, semdo di presemte tornato del viaggio di Malacha, dove ho avuto nuove della tornata di vostra signoria alla ciptà, simil dilla chreazione del Sommo Pomtefice et il ghrande esaltamento di vostro stato; che, per eser noi stati sempre buoni servidori et afezionati di vostra chasa, n'ò avuto tamto piacere, quamto Iddio sa, et n'ò remdute et remdo imfinite ghrazie al sommo Iddio, che v'à tornato duprichato stato et honore, chome fecie a Job. Per omde la ciptà nostra ne fia enxalzata; piacca a Idio dar alla signoria vostra tale imdirizo che possi ghovernar chom salvazione et honore d'anima et chorpo.

Io mamdo al Sommo Pomtifice, per una nave che viene a Pisa, uno ucello morto molto bellissimo, che io ho portato di Malacha et di là viene di più lomge paese, che nuovamente è sutto dischoperto, dove naschono li gherofani. L'ucello non tiene piè, sta sempre nella aere, samza tohare terra et d'aere si nutrisce et in aere gienera li figloli sopra il chodrione, sechomdo s'è avuto notizia da quelli dilla terra. Questo re n'à avuto uno chon la medesima imformazione. Inoltre mamdo uno roccietto d'una tela di seta molto bella et uno pezzo di ligno aloes chalambuch molto fine, et al magnificho Guliano mamdo una adagha bella et certe alttre chose; et simil mamdo alla signoria vostra alquene altre, le quali tutte vanno 'n una chassa, la quale ho qui chomsegnata al numzio et chostì à a venir il tutto, et potrà vostra magnificha signoria veder il tutto. Et posto che le chose non sieno di quella sustanzia che meriterebono, riceva da mme la mia bona volomtà, et desiderio che ho di servir la chasa vostra; la qual priegho Iddio chomservi et ghuardi in stato di salvazione dill' anima et chorpo.

Umil servidor dilla magnificha signoria vostra

Giovanni da Empoli in Lixbona"