

## SWAN CULTURE

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*“The Silver Swan, who living had no note,  
When death approached unlocked her silent throat,  
Leaning her breast against a reedy shore,  
Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more,  
Farewell all joys, O death come close to mine eyes,  
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.”*

— Orlando Gibbons. Madrigals & Motets 1612.

### Naming and Knowing

Few sights or sounds can be as stirring as that of a flock of Whooper Swans clamouring in flight as they plane down, their wings angled, their heads raised, and their feet and webs spread wide as air-brakes, onto their feeding or roosting grounds (see Figure 1). In a sub-Arctic winter setting, crisp with a brilliant blue sky, where deeply snow-custed ancient dormant volcanoes ring ice-covered lakes, and where steam curls skywards from thermal springs into the frigid air, little else can match the beauty of the Angels of Winter, or be pure enough to grace such sacred waters (Brazil in press; see Figure 2).



Figure 1. The attractive, graceful Whooper Swan has inspired oral and artistic traditions; Kussharo-ko, Hokkaido (Mark Brazil photo).

The striking beauty of the archetypal swans has lodged itself so powerfully in the human imagination that their massed annual leave-takings and arrivals have only served to heighten their mystery. As peoples and their oral traditions travelled across Asia and Europe, ancient tales of swans, of swan maidens and of swan knights were carried and inter-mingled, some spreading in mythical form far beyond the range of the swans themselves. These creatures of tale, myth, and legend became, somehow, linked too with the cult of the sun in such a way that now it is impossible to unravel the origins or the meanings of many of the ancient tales (Evans & Dawnay 1972).

Even if we did not have the evidence of Stone Age art to guide us, we could presume that the size, colour, stirring sounds and seasonal movements of the wild swans would have attracted the attentions of early man. Not surprising then that they feature so powerfully in folklore as creatures of mystery and magic from across their Palaearctic range. Ancient and widespread beliefs have it that human souls take on the form of a bird after death (the species varies from region to region), and it comes as no surprise that wild swans were also strongly associated with this powerful and final transformation. In particular, bird-maiden mythologies, which are of very ancient lineage throughout the northern regions of Eurasia, gave rise to the swan-maiden motif, amongst others, as an explanation of the

bird ancestry of humans (Armstrong 1958), a belief enshrined in ritual among the Siberian Buryats for example (see below).



Figure 2. The Angels of Winter; Kussharo-ko, Hokkaido (Mark Brazil photo).

The Swan-Maiden theme, among the most widespread of all legends describes, in its commonest form, the arrival of a flock of swans at a lake. Shedding their feathered garb, they take human form and bathe in the lake in the guise of attractive maidens. A man spying on them steals one of their garments and when the others flee one remains and becomes his wife. Years later, she finds the hidden garment and, taking on feathered form once more, she flies away. Variants on the tale abound, the oldest coming from India, though it is unlikely that they originated there being themselves fragments of older tales, but common to all variants is the inherent implication that the incident relates to a patriarchal society in which beauty is revered, making a man's dream of the bird of happiness come true (Armstrong 1958). Despite the tortuous, and long-lost routes, both geographical and psychological of the dissemination of this tale and the related Magic Flight tale, the Swan-Maiden tale nevertheless probably evolved in the far north where swans were common and nakedness rare.

Not only has the graceful swan achieved a very special place in human hearts and minds as a creature of silvern beauty, yet somehow, in some distant bygone age, it was also raised to the status of a powerful symbolic figure representing, in apparent contradiction, virginity, sexuality, and

even death. Certain owls, and several of the crows, have also been associated with death. Their attributes, blackness in the case of the crows, or their association with darkness in the case of the owls, were perceived by simple minds as clear and direct links with the fearful realm of death. To associate graceful white swans with death, however, seems to require a perverse combination of literary learning, superstition and biological ignorance (Brazil in press).

The magnificent Whooper Swan was known as a very special bird to the ancient Norse storytellers. They revered it as the progenitor of all swans, and the only creature pure and distinguished enough to grace the sacred waters of the Spring of Urd (Brazil 1990), or Urdarbrunnr, which flowed from beneath the sanctuary of the gods, the great sacred Ash Tree, the three-rooted Yggdrasil, or World Tree (see Figure 3). One of its roots extended into the underworld, Niflheim, one root reached into the land of the giants, Jötunheim, and the third reached up to the home of the gods, Asgard, and supported the sky. The three Norns, or Fates, the three maidens who wove the fate of men, Urd (goddess of the past), Verdandi (goddess of the present) and Skuld (goddess of the future) (Hutchinson 1996), are associated with the Whooper Swan, because it was their duty to water Yggdrasil, around which two pure swans swam. The spring of Urd was considered so holy that everything that came into contact with its waters became "as white as the film that lies within an eggshell". Thus the original swans were pure white, and from them, all other swans were supposed to have originated (Evans & Dawnay 1972; Wilmore 1974). So the Whooper Swans as we know them now originated in the very heart of purity, and became the progenitor of all swans, a mythical feature later echoed in Linnaean taxonomy.

In the great tale- and saga-weaving societies of Scandinavia, the Whooper Swan was also associated directly with the gods, particularly with Freyr, the god of sunshine, rain, and of fruitfulness or fertility. The white cumulus clouds that

formed Freyr's chariot were believed to be swans. The Whooper Swan was also linked with the Valkyries, who chose the slain from battlefields to be carried to the great hall of Valhalla to be received by the great Norse god Odin (Wilmore 1974). Perhaps, not surprisingly, therefore, the early Icelanders (according to Todd (1979) at least) also revered Whooper Swans as possessing supernatural powers and as undertaking an annual journey (their migration) to their ancestral homeland in Valhalla<sup>1</sup>.

It comes as no surprise that a country such as Finland, where the Whooper Swan has long been such a wide-ranging breeding bird, also has swan legends, or that a region as vast as Siberia has ancient tales that must also relate to the Whooper Swan, but it is far less obvious why somewhere such as India should also have a number of swan tales, with both Brahma and Buddha linked to swans in legend although little distinction was made it seems in some regions of Asia between swans and geese. The Whooper Swan is not merely a migrant in the biological sense moving seasonally from one geographical region to another. It has also travelled metaphorically, via various ancient traditions, down long lost routes of cultural transmission. Along the way, not only has its identity perhaps been intermingled with those of other swans (conceivably even with other birds), but its symbolic significance has shifted and varied too. While many of its symbolic meanings have overlapped or intertwined, others have been dramatically different, such as its surprising and incongruous link with death. In Ireland, for example, it was believed that the swans actually embodied the spirits of the dead, and that therefore they should not be disturbed (Armstrong 1958). A sensible reason for their reverence and protection, but on what was it based?

Yet to jump straight to such serious symbolism is to bypass much that is of modern interest.



Figure 3. Revered for its purity, the Whooper Swan was believed in as the progenitor of all swans; Kussharo-ko, Hokkaido (Mark Brazil photo).

The Whooper Swan, and the other white swans, has had an impact on man in the past through traditional culture. Swans, largely Whooper Swans, were known to the ancients in the far north as symbols of summer, in the south they came in a flurry like snow-angels with impending winter, and in between these extremes their haunting voices would have been heard, and their graceful white forms seen, only on migration. Today, although reverence for them may have waned and beliefs in their symbolism faded, they nevertheless exercise a very different and very much more popular appeal than ever before, being a focus for the attentions of the general public, of tourist "sight-seekers", birdwatchers and photographers alike, in various parts of their northern Palaearctic range. At sites where Whooper Swans gather in winter, from the British Isles in the west to Japan in the east, people are attracted by their grace and by the frigid air of mystery that still surrounds these great white birds. But whereas in the west those visitors are likely to come armed with binoculars to watch them from afar, in the far east of Asia they are much more likely to come armed with packets of food (for it is the thrill of hand feeding them that is the main draw) or armfuls of expensive camera gear hoping to fulfil a dream of creating the perfect image of this perfect bird (Brazil in press).

<sup>1</sup> Although my modern Icelandic colleagues question the authenticity of such a tale.

Swans have appeared and played a significant role in the mythology, literature, and art of widely differing cultures spanning many millennia. Archaeological remains and ancient drawings of swan-like birds date back to the Stone Age and perhaps beyond. Cro-Magnon rock carvings in northern Russia dating to c18,000 BC (Wilmore 1974) may very likely have related to the Whooper Swans that those early people encountered on their boreal breeding grounds. Beliefs in the association between the soul, the swan, and death were already established during the Stone Age, and left their echoes down the ages. Whooper Swans were already Whooper Swans before modern humans existed!

Much later, tribal Tungus and Yakuts, and also shamans from Russia, revered the swan as a totem; Siberian tribes, according to Wilmore (1974), believed that the swans harboured human souls, and so they considered hunting them as taboo, in a traditional belief remarkably akin to that mentioned earlier in Ireland. The Siberian Khorinskies Buryats apparently considered the eagle to be the father, and the swan the mother of their people, and they greet the swans as they arrive in spring with gifts of tea and milk.

The Buryat bird ancestry myth is but another variant on the swan-maiden theme, though one found at a considerable geographical extreme. There, a hunter watched as three swans arrived at a lake to swim leaving their feathered cloaks on the shore. Taking one of the cloaks he married the woman to which it belonged. Many years later when he allowed her to try on her cloak once more she flew out of the smoke-hole of their tent<sup>2</sup> crying that each spring when the swans fly north and each autumn when they return south her husband must honour them with ceremonies. Those ceremonies were retained in the giving of prayers and libations to the first swans to arrive each year. The conjunction of ritual, or cere-

mony, with myth typically indicates a more archaic survival than either one without the other. Even if not actually the case here among the Buryats, where the garment-theft motif may have been incorporated later in to their cult, nevertheless it is among the likes of these Siberian peoples, from the range of the Whooper Swan, with their animistic bird-animal-human links, that the original swan-maiden legend may have originated (Armstrong 1958).

Whooper Swans were similarly considered sacred by the Evenks, Kets, Nganasans, Ostyaks, Sel'kups, Yakuts and Zyryans of Pribaikal'ye (the Lake Baikal region) and other regions of eastern Siberia, many of whom also believed that they were descended from the wild swans. Some tribes had taboos against hunting the wild swans, and among the Ugryns and Kumandins at least this is no doubt because of their belief that swans had been people in past lives. The belief that swans embody the souls of humans, often of women is widespread among Slavic peoples, as was the belief that it was a sin to shoot one and that misfortune would follow (Boreiko & Grishchenko 1999). Such beliefs from within the breeding and migratory range of the Whooper Swan could conceivably have provided the origins of that well-travelled and widespread myth of the swan maiden.

By the time of the Iron Age (around 500 BC) the depth of the taboo against killing Whooper Swans had clearly lessened, or perhaps it had never spread or been retained much beyond the range of the Buryats and the Irish. Whooper Swan bones have been identified from middens of that time, although nevertheless images and symbols of them were also appearing in stone, metal and legend, bearing witness to their continued reverence as magnificent magical, sacred and supernatural creatures (Wilmore 1974) while also, and more pragmatically, being welcomed as a source of food.

Iron Age records of Whooper Swan remains in Britain range for example from the dour stone

<sup>2</sup> An element strongly echoed in the Irish myth "The Wooing of Étaíne" dating probably to the 8th century in which Midir escapes with Étaíne from the hall at Tara via the smoke-hole and they fly off as swans.

brochs of Orkney to the wooden lake-village of Glastonbury. Whooper Swans were still occurring plentifully in southern England during the Roman era (AD 43–400) as evidenced by Whooper Swan bones found at the Roman settlement of Colchester. During the subsequent Dark Ages, the only proof of the Whooper Swan's continued presence in the British Isles comes from Ireland. Midden remains reveal that Whooper Swans were still being eaten, and continued to be so during Viking invasions of Britain and also of Iceland and Greenland. Its significance as a valued source of food should not be under-estimated; the meat is rich, dark, well flavoured, and sufficient to feed several families from one bird. The Mute Swan meanwhile was being domesticated, also for its meat, and it is that species that presumably forms the basis of the Swan Knight myths (see Wilmore 1974), but while the Mute Swan became favoured as food and so prospered in semi-domestication, it seems that the wild Whooper Swan retreated northwards possibly in response to a period of climatic cooling (Fagan 2000). Perhaps during historical periods, it was only ever a winter visitor to the once vast wetlands of England. Much earlier of course, as glacial ice retreated from the British Isles and northwest Europe in the steadily warming millennia after the last great glacial period that continued until about 10,000 years ago, swathes of boreal forest patch worked with wetlands would have spread across much of Western Europe, including Britain, at much lower latitudes than today, placing those regions well within the range of this species.

Swans are perceived as having innumerable characteristics, almost invariably positive or beneficial. Amongst Slavic peoples the close association between male and female swans was the embodiment of matrimonial fidelity and of beauty<sup>3</sup>. In some regions, they are considered

able to foresee the future, in others, they are portents. Their appearance over the sea betokens quiet and favourable travel for sailors, and in many areas they are honoured as the protective patrons of sailors. In yet other regions their arrival is believed to foretell rain or cold weather (Boreiko & Grishchenko 1999), and certainly their arrival and departure from many parts of their wintering range seems not only weather-dependent but also prophetic of changing conditions.

I have found only one account of swans representing a powerful negative force and its rarity makes it worth recounting as it is so far removed from all the other swan legends that are typically positive and often romantic. In this poem from among the Tartars, the hero Kartaga grappled with the anti-heroine Swan-woman year after year. Despite his strength, Kartaga was unable to vanquish the evil Swan-woman, because her soul was not in her body, only when he was aided by two magical horses that traced her soul to a golden casket contained inside a black chest at the foot of a copper rock was he finally able to defeat her (Frazer 1922).

The intermingling of relatively modern Christian traditions with more ancient pagan traditions and rituals is widely prevalent; one only has to consider the various symbolic features of paganism that are retained and form elements of both Christmas and Easter. This pagan/Christian melding even incorporates swans. In parts of northern Russia, for example, the birthday of Mary, the virgin mother of Christ, was celebrated on 21 September with the release of a pair of swans into the wild (Boreiko & Grishchenko 1999).

Throughout much of Scandinavia, across Siberia and in northern Japan, the overlap between the ranges of earlier tale-weaving peoples and swans provides sufficient justification for believing that even their general references to swans may be taken as relating quite specifically to the Whooper Swan. Elsewhere, such tales may have

3 In another example of the transference of a common belief but to a different species, in Japan marital fidelity is embodied by the Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* and presentation of a pair of these in symbolic form to young married couples is not uncommon.

related to white swans in general. For all the confusion that exists over the precise origins of literary, musical, or artistic references to swans, and whatever the original artist, oral traditionalist, or later author or musician truly meant, the viewer, once exposed to the inspiring grace and beauty of the Whooper Swan, is unlikely to be too concerned about just how precisely the cultural image relates to the species being observed. Knowledge of such literary and musical material serves only to heighten the personal experience of encountering the Whooper Swan in a wild setting. But first, what of that name?

The Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* bears a noble name of considerable antiquity. This is in fact the definitive swan (and not merely in ancient mythological terms), as it was the first to be given a Latin binomial by Carl Linnaeus (1758), who originally named it *Anas cygnus*. Today, both its current generic (*Cygnus*) and specific (*cygnus*) names in Latin are derived from the Greek for swan, which was kuknos “the honker”, its generic name having been reassigned, from *Anas* to *Cygnus*, in 1836 by Bechstein (Hoyo *et al.* 1994). In its borrowed form, in Latin, its name took two forms, spelled either *cygnus* or *cygnus*, though in modern ornithology we use only the latter form. Thus the scientific name in use today for the Whooper Swan can trace its roots backwards through Latin, to classical Greek and ultimately to the words used for swans in the language of the ancients whose language, and descendent languages, travelled westwards to Europe from regions far to the east. Modern names for the Whooper Swan in the Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese) are closely derived from the Latin as will be seen below, while even in English the Latin link is seen in the origin and continued use of the word ‘cygnet’ to mean a young swan. The scientific name of this bird, has not, however, been immutable, for not only was it changed from Linnaeus’ *Anas cygnus* to *Cygnus cygnus* by Bechstein (Hoyo *et al.* 1994), but for a while it was, rather poetically I feel, also changed to *Cygnus musicus* (Hudson 1926), then subsequently back

again to *Cygnus cygnus*.

The English word “swan” meanwhile is also of interest as it dates back, still in the same form, to both Middle and Old English in which it meant “the sounder.” “Swan” is derived from the root “swen-”, “to resound”, and is the base of the Latin word for a sound, “sonus”, and of an array of other related English words such as consonant, sonorous and sonnet (Potter & Sergeant 1973).

Although many place names in England begin with the form Swan, as in Swanmore, Swanbourne, Swanley, and Swanage, many such names, attractive though they are, are unfortunately ambiguous and may not in fact refer to the bird at all. The Old English word for a farmhand or a herdsman, generally a swineherd, was “*swän*”, and this epithet too has provided us with some English place names. Yet in the old Indo-Aryan language Sanskrit, the archaic precursor of Indo-European languages dating back to approximately 1800 BC, the word for swan is “*svanati*”, and perhaps from this distant source we have derived the Germanic “*svanur*”, and the modern English swan. Place names beginning with swan are all the fewer than they might be because another word for swan also competes for eponymous commemoration. In Old English, an alternative name for the bird was “*ielftu*”, with “*elpt*” its equivalent in Old Norse, which formed, presumably, the origin of “*álf*”, which is used in modern Icelandic. This alternative name for swan can be found in such places as Elterwater, the name of a Lancastrian lake derived from Old Norse “*Elptarvatn*” meaning swan lake (Airey 1955) and thus while Swanmore in Huntingdonshire and Swanbourne in Berkshire illustrate the use of one name, the other is found more frequently, as in Elveden, in Suffolk (Potter & Sergeant 1973). This alternative tracing of a path via Old Norse does, I feel, relate specifically to the Whooper Swan. As Kear (1990) pointed out, such names are commoner in the north and east of England where Whoopers would, and still do, occur, and so we have in Yorkshire Aldmire and in Durham Elvet Hall, although Professor Arnthor Gardars-

son (in litt.) has raised the pertinent consideration that this might perhaps be coincidental and those areas might correspond with old Norse colonies, to which familiar Norse names may have been carried.

Toponymic celebration of the significance of swans is by no means confined to Iceland and Britain and probably occurs in each of the Old World regions where the “northern swans” occur. In Russia, for example, where ‘Lebed’ is the term for swan, the memory of swans is kept alive in place names such as Lebedin City in the Sums-kaya Region, and Lebedivka near Kiev, while there are rivers too that bear the names of swans such as Lebedinka, Lebedishka and Lebedinets in the Carpathians (Boreiko & Grishchenko 1999).

It was the Whooper Swan that the past occupants of Scandinavia would have been most familiar with, so for them “*elpt*”, as in the modern Icelandic “*álft*”, meant not just any swan, but specifically the Whooper. Similarly in Britain, the earliest swan reference appears to be to migratory Whooper Swans “*ylfete*”, in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, of about 700 AD, concerning the Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, Scotland (Stanford 2000; Stanford in litt.). In Iceland, place names bear witness to the long-established presence of these birds, as at Alftavatn and Alftafjörður (Gardarsson & Skarphedinsson 1984); although the swans long preceded human settlers there. No doubt the same is true of place names in many of the other Indo-European languages too. Could one trace an ancient range for the species based on its legacy in place names?

Old Celtic, the language of one of the large groups of human migrants who reached south-

west Europe, brings us the word “*elaio*” for the Whooper Swan meaning “the rising one” (perhaps based on observations of the ‘wild’ swan’s nervousness prompting it to take flight quickly when disturbed). From “*elaio*”, which is allied in characteristics with both “*ielfetu*” Old English and “*elpt*” in Old Norse, come the Gaelic “*eala*”, and the Welsh “*alarch*”. It was from the Old Celtic “*elaio*” that a Celtic source derived the poetical Latin word “*olor*”, which is now, somewhat confusingly, best known as the specific appellation in the scientific name of the Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (Potter & Sergeant 1973), which is just another way of showing that such “swans” are related.

As already mentioned, modern Icelandic has retained the use of the Old Norse “*elpt*” for the Whooper Swan in the form “*álft*”, but uses the alternative Icelandic word for swan *svanur* for other species. The Icelandic word *svanur*, apparently equally old both in Indo-European languages as a whole and in Icelandic, refers to sound. In Icelandic, it is associated with more affected and written language (it was used for example in medieval tales and 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and even sounds foreign to some ears. When Finnur Gudmundsson stabilized official Icelandic bird names in the 1960s, he retained *álft* for the only local swan, but used *svanur* for the genus and as the suffix in the names “*Dvergsvanur*” (= dwarf swan, for Bewick’s Swan) and *Hnúðsvanur* (= knob swan, for Mute Swan) (Gardarsson in litt.), neither of which breed in Iceland, indeed the former was only first recorded in that country as recently as 1978 (Brazil 1980).

And so from a few ancient sources, we now have a host of modern names for just the one species—the Whooper Swan. Sandberg (1992) gathered together those names from fifteen of Europe’s languages. Among some of them linguistic links and affinities are clear, and so we have amongst the Germanic languages: *Sangsvane* (in Norwegian and Danish), *Sångsvan* (in Swedish) and *Singschwan* (in German); while in the Romance tongues it is also known as *Cygne*

4 *Álft*, also spelled *álpt*, plural *alftir* or *elftur*, is both the colloquial and now the official name of *Cygnus cygnus*. It appears even in folk poetry such as the old lullaby:  
 Bí-bí og blaka, álftirnar kvaka.  
 Ég laet sem ég sofi, en samt mun ég vaka”.  
 [Bee-bee and flap the wings, the whoopers quack.  
 I pretend to sleep, although I shall stay awake”.]

*chasseur* or *Cygne sauvage* in French, *Cigno selvatico* in Italian, *Cisne cantor* in Spanish, and *Cisne bravo* in Portuguese. In English it is currently known as the Whooper Swan, but it was previously also known as the Wild Swan, and nearby, in Dutch, it is still the *Wilde Zwaan*.

Languages descendent from the Slavonic branch of the northwest European group of languages have a very distinctive form for the Whooper Swan, but one that is also derived from the same source by the early translocation of the letter L between Slavic and western Indo-European languages. Thus in modern Polish we have *Labedz krzykliwy*, in Czech *Labut zpevna* or *Labut spevava*, in Serbo-Kroatian *Labud*, in Bulgarian *Lebed* and in Russian *Lebed klikun*. Though of their origins and derivations, however, I have failed to find an explanation. Moreover, in Romanian (a modern romance language rather than Slavonic) the swan has retained the name *Lebada*, perhaps from a time before that country's conquest by Rome. In the Ural-Altai languages, in Hungarian it is *Enekes hattyú*, in Finnish it is *Laulujoutsen*, and in related Estonian it is *Laululuik*, while in Lithuanian it is *Gulbé giesmininke*, and in Latvian *Ziemeļu gulbis*, names which diverge more radically from other modern forms. In Manx it is *Olla chiaullee*. In the Celtic tongues it is *Eala* in both Irish and Gaelic, *Alarch* in Welsh, *Alar'ch* in Breton, and *Elerch* in Cornish (Potter & Sergeant 1973; Lipsberg 1983; Kear 1990; Leibak *et al.* 1994; Zhalakevichius 1995; Gorman 1996; Hagemeyer & Blair 1997). In Asian languages it is *Gangar Khun* in Mongolian, *Da Tian'E* (meaning Great Swan, or Greater Heaven Goose) in Chinese (in Mandarin at least), *Huang zui Tian'E* (Yellow billed Swan, or Yellow-billed Heaven Goose) in Taiwan, *Keun-goni* in Korean, and in Japanese it is *O-hakucho* (meaning simply the great white bird) (Brazil 1991; Bold & Fomin 1996; MacKinnon & Phillipps 2000; Lee *et al.* 2000). In the Chinese, and perhaps in the Japanese name too, implicit in the reference to large size is an association with heaven, thus in these cultures the name can equally be considered to mean 'heavenly bird' (Ma

& Cai 2000).

The sonorous flight-call of the Whooper Swan is one of the most far carrying of any bird. Its bugling notes serve during both day and night, during foul weather and fine, to keep families and flocks together throughout their long migrations. They are also highly vocal on their wetland wintering grounds, a fact that cannot have been ignored by early observers. Many of the vernacular names used for the Whooper Swan are simply descriptive, of the fact that it is beautifully and hauntingly vocal, or of its size and demeanour. In English, Whooper Swan is clearly of onomatopoeic origin, derived from the similarity of its loud, deep bugling "whoop whoop" or "whoop-a, ahng-ha" call to the Middle English "whope", or "whowpe", the "whoop"ing cry given by falconers and huntsmen at a kill. Thus it became the Whooper Swan-the swan that whoops or shouts (Potter & Sergeant 1973), although in times past it has also been known as the Whistling Swan, though for very different reasons.

Previously known in English as the Hooper (e.g. Coward 1920) (and even as the whistling swan, wild swan, whopper, elerch and elk(e)), the full name Whooper Swan seems to have been first in use by 1566 although alternatives such as *elke* were still in use until the early 1800s (OED 1971). Despite the early (1566) usage of the name Whooper Swan, two centuries later the name issue became more confused when in 1768 the author Pennant chose the Dutch-like Wild Swan as his standard name for the bird. Just under two decades later, in 1785, he altered this to Whistling Swan, a name which Coward (1920) believed, reasonably I feel, was derived from the sound of its wings and not from its call. Thereafter, until Yarrell chose Hooper in 1843, all three names, Hooper (and its variant Whooper), Wild Swan, and Whistling Swan, were widely used (Martin 1993). Since Yarrell's day, however, the change to Whooper in English appears to have stuck, though when reviewing the lability of the historical record one must wonder for how long!



### Bird of Myth, Legend and Symbolism

Swans have provided inspiration for countless generations of artists, musicians, and poets, even choreographers, and little wonder, for archaeologists have discovered mural paintings of swans dating to before the Stone Age (Bradshaw 1986), while among the more famous of tales from Greek mythology are stories concerning swans, the most popular being the story of 'Leda and the Swan'. This legend tells how the nymph Leda, on the eve of her wedding to King Tyndareus of Sparta, was visited by the great god Zeus, God of gods, who disguised himself in the form of a swan. Seduced by the great god Zeus, Leda bore just two eggs, but each contained a pair of twins! One pair was said to be the god-children of divine Zeus, the Dioscuri, the sons of Zeus, Castor, and Pollux, and the other pair the human children of mortal Tyndareus, one of whom was Clytemnestra, the other the famed Helen of Troy. Zeus' miraculous seduction of Leda in swan form was immortalised in the heavens by the creation of the largest symbol to male ardour known - the constellation Cygnus.

Today, mythical imagery of the archetypal swan has permeated the minds not merely of musicians and poets. The fanciful, serene and dramatic images created affect all who are exposed to them, and so, repeated in variation upon variation, paintings of Leda and Zeus in swan-form hang in the world's top galleries, the most famous representation amongst them all being the sexually aggressive sculpture of Michelangelo (1475-1564) depicting the most bizarre of all hybridisations. The poet W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) describes the very scene of that human-swan mating that Michelangelo painted, in his own poem entitled "Leda and the Swan."

*"A sudden blow, the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless, breast upon his breast."*

Not only in galleries, but also in concert halls

and theatres are swans commemorated. In performances of Wagner's Lohengrin and Parsifal, the swan-knight will live on forever, while Tschai-kovsky has, perhaps done more than anyone in recent centuries to immortalise the swan through his world famous ballet "Swan Lake".

The physical form of swans has been associated not merely with beauty, inspiration, and virginal purity and sexuality, but, as mentioned before, also with death (see Figure 4). This surprisingly unattractive and unfortunate symbolic link between these beautiful birds and the end of mortality for example, has been considered as probably having arisen from amongst the early myths of Neolithic Europe (Bradshaw 1986). These myths apparently featured a divine hierarchy dominated by a powerful mother-goddess. There was a time wherein the king was merely the mother-goddess's temporary consort, and he was sacrificed at the end of the year to be replaced by another. The passing of the solar year was measured then using a turning wheel, the wheel of Nemesis. Nemesis, the daughter of Nyx, or night, was the personification of the fate that metes out happiness to the just and punishment to the unjust, relentlessly pursuing the sinner. At the midway point, when the wheel of fate had turned half way and the solar year was half gone, the hapless king was acknowledged as due "to meet his Nemesis", that is to die. How the gods were cheated! For in practice, the king, not satisfied with his allotted temporary role as consort, avoided his divine fate by having a boy selected to serve in his place for that one day and thus to be sacrificed in his stead! The soul of the ritually sacrificed king was taken up by migratory swans who carried it with them when, each summer they flew north to their unknown breeding grounds. For their pious role they were considered sacred. To the imaginative mind, the haunting calls of the wild swans, as they disappeared northwards on their annual migration, were cries of mourning for the Mother Goddess's consort (Evans & Dawnay 1972). For them to have been so visibly migratory, and so vocal, there is no doubt that they were "northern

swans”, giving me some justification in laying claim to these early myths as relating to Whoopers.



**Figure 4.** A watchful Whooper Swan rests in sub-zero temperatures; Kussharo-ko, Hokkaido (Mark Brazil photo).

This early myth, linking sacred swans to the death of the Mother-Goddess’s consort was further embellished in later eras, when it was generally believed that the soul of the dead king was conveyed to paradise by Apollo, the Greek sun-god. Apollo was the son of the seductive god Zeus and of Leto/Leda, and a twin with Artemis. Was this then the origin of the intricate link between the swan and the sun, or merely an example of that myth? The sun god Apollo travelled in a swan-drawn chariot to and from the land of the Hyperboreans, the paradise that was believed to exist ‘at the back of the north wind’, where men lived for a thousand years. There, in everlasting spring, the Hyperboreans dwelt under Apollo’s tutelage; he was like a father to them and he retreated to their land each year when the sun withdrew in winter. Swans were not merely Apollo’s aerial steeds, but they are also credited with having been present at his birth, and thus shared with him the gift of prophecy. And coincidentally in Slavic mythical traditions too swans formed the escort for the sun god (Evans & Dawnay 1972; Boreiko & Grishchenko 1999).

The entwinements of symbolism begin to become as tortuous as the stems of a climbing wisteria, with the beauty of swans honoured in their association with gods, with death, and with

the sun at one and the same time. There are further entwinements too, for Apollo was not only sun god, but also god of music, and thus his association with the swans that disappeared northwards each year, and sang as they did so, is made yet more powerful. This link with the migratory habits of these wild birds is further strengthened by the belief that Apollo’s visits to the Hyperboreans were never for less than three months, and thus akin to the breeding period of the swans. Did such ancient myths amongst the Greeks really relate to migratory wild swans? Swans are not common in Greece today, but perhaps in the past they were. Could such myths in fact date back much further, closer to the end of the last ice age in Europe some 10,000 years or more ago when the ranges of northern species must have extended much further south (Brazil in press)?

The mournful sounds of the wild swans calling as they disappeared carrying off the dead king’s soul, led inevitably to their association with death and perhaps also helped to engender that peculiar belief that they only sing just before they themselves die. And so we have the classical Latin proverb: “*The swan sings before death*”.

Yet for the most part it was believed that swans were silent, or poorly voiced, and perhaps as much for that reason as any other, the swan bred and reared in semi-domestic form and thus which became most familiar, became known in English as Mute. Only at the end of life, at the moment of direst stress, were swans able somehow to force out a sound. There are many references to the swan in this form, either as a bird of poor voice, or as a moribund songster:

So Virgil (70–19 BC), in the *Aeneid* (XI 458) described:

*“Dant sonitum rauci per stagna loquacia  
cycni”*

(“The hoarse-voiced swans are calling where the pools are noisy”; Potter & Sargent 1973).

Much later, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was to write, with no great originality, in his "Epigram on a Volunteer Singer", "Swans sing before they die" (perhaps taken directly from the Latin tag) though his conclusion was perhaps more amusing than most:

*"Swans sing before they die" — 'twere no  
bad thing  
Did certain persons die before they sing."*

Another theory regarding the supposed silence of the swans has been expounded; where a drab, unadorned nightingale's beauty lies in its voice, the brilliant peacock's beauty lies in its tail, while its call is a horrible scream. Similarly, the swan may not both look and sound beautiful, so the striking swan's first song must be its last (Bradshaw 1986).

There are many such references to swans singing their death-songs, and this myth was so powerful that among the ancient Greeks, Plato (428-348 BC) thought it worthy of being put into the mouth of Socrates (c470-399 BC) on the day of his death (Phaedo 85). The legend necessarily enshrines both fancy and fact, and it may have begun with the inspiring sight of these great white migratory birds gleaming high overhead in the sunlight. In this way the migratory Whooper Swan became, for the ancients of Europe, the bird of Phoebus Apollo. In its fall to earth, as its life ebbed away, the connection between the swan and the Lord of the Sky, the Inventor of the Lyre, was revealed by its utterance of sweet music as it died. Prosaically put, it is the Whooper Swan that is believed to have given rise to the 'swan-song' legend, the music is the imaginative equivalent of the death-rattle, occasioned by the last prolonged exhalation through the twists of the bird's long trachea producing a series of musical notes (Potter & Sargent 1973; Martin 1993). Martin (1993) considered, reasonably, that it is the Whooper Swan's extra loop of the trachea within the sternum that makes its voice deeper, more powerful and more far-carrying than that of either Bewick's Swan or the Mute Swan. Yet, whereas in

general the concept of the swan-song contains within it the sadness of ending, in Aesops' fables (6<sup>th</sup> century BC), the dying swan was considered to be rejoicing in song at finally being delivered from the risks and tribulations of life, the hunter's snares and guns, and from hunger, and thus its song was of release from the travails of life.

Human endeavour, in the literary arts, has been associated with swans since at least Pythagoras' day (582-500 BC) when it was believed that, on death, skilled poets became swans. So Virgil became known as the Mantuan Swan; and, much later, the great English bard William Shakespeare was known as "The Swan of Avon". Poets, bards, story-tellers, all have served to spread tales of swans far and wide beyond the ranges even of the swans themselves, it is fitting then that they themselves should be dubbed swans. Tales have crossed innumerable cultural and international boundaries changing in the telling, perhaps even shifting from species to species. Mythologies of the Mediterranean should perhaps be associated with the more southerly dwelling Mute Swan (although did those tales really arise there? And if they did, did they do so in a bygone age with a different climate and a very different natural history?). Those myths of Iceland, Scandinavia, and much of northern Russia, however, were no doubt inspired by the grace and beauty of the most wide-ranging swan of all-the Whooper Swan.

The ancient poetic expression of many an accurate observation shames the abilities of most modern writer/biologists. Thus Homer (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century BC) wrote in his Iliad:

*"Not less their number than the embodied  
cranes,  
Or milk-white swans in Asius' watery plains.  
That, o'er the windings of Cayster's springs,  
Stretch their long necks, and clap their rustling wings,  
Now tower aloft, and course in airy rounds,  
Now light with noise; with noise the field  
resounds."*

(Translated by Alexander Pope).

Aristotle (384–322 BC), the founder of natural science, in his *Historia Animalium*, also revealed the perspicacious quality of observation of his period, albeit mixed with a little fanciful imagination, in noting the social and migratory behaviour of the swans. In much the same way that modern biologists pose theories based on the knowledge available to them at the time, so Aristotle's thoughts, though they may seem quaint and ignorant to us, did at the time, we must remember represent the dizzy heights at the forefront of swan biology.

*“Swans are web-footed, and live near pools and marshes; they find their food with ease, are good-tempered, are fond of their young, and live to a green old age. If the eagle attacks them they will repel the attack and get the better of their assailant, but they are never the first to attack. They are musical, and sing chiefly at the approach of death; at this time they fly out to sea, and men, when sailing past the coast of Libya, have fallen in with many of them out at sea singing in mournful strains, and have actually seen some of them dying.”*

(Translated by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson)

No doubt some great depth of understanding lies behind simple proverbs too. However the meaning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century proverb, *“All his geese are swans”*, remained opaque to me until I learned that in modern Icelandic there is the saying *“Everyone thinks his own bird is beautiful - although it is both dirty and skinny,”* referring to the common human self-deception in which we may each represent our own belongings, or attributes, as better than they actually are.

Much later, poets seem to have relied less upon direct observation of the bird in question and more on pre-existing mythology and on their own literary imaginings, and so Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), English poet laureate, penned the line: *“The wild swan's death-hymn took the*

*soul...”* and in Tithonus, I, he wrote:

*“The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan.”*

The English poet James Elroy Flecker (1884–1915), in *“The Old Ships”*, seemed at least to have admired the swan's grace on the water in person, though I feel that he was most likely referring to the raised-winged Mute Swan:

*“I have seen old ships sail like swans asleep”*

Ben Johnson (1572–1637), another English poet laureate, in his *“To the memory of Shakespeare”* wrote of the *“Sweet Swan of Avon!”* His work, and that of various other poets too, is ambiguous. There seems today an obvious link with the Mute Swan, long established on the River Avon which runs through Stratford, yet the tradition of referring to a bard as a swan is a very much older one, that perhaps reached British shores from much further afield. Other poets more likely referred to the wild swans of the north, to the Whooper and Bewick's swans, but which? These two were only distinguished by ornithologists first in the early 1800s (Yarrell 1830), and how soon did poets become aware of such a discovery?

William Wordsworth (1770–1850), also an English poet laureate, referred to swans in his *“Yarrow Unvisited”*.

*“The swans on still St. Mary's Lake  
Float double, swan and shadow.”*

But were they Whoopers? The swan was so powerful an image that many of the great English poets used its symbolism in their works. Many, no doubt, referred merely to the symbolic, indeterminate swan using it as a device; some poets were inspired by the familiar feral Mute Swan, but perhaps not all of them.

Other versifiers, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) in particular, referred to the haunting vision of the wild Whooper Swans returning each winter to a favourite place of the poet and gave a sense of one of the eternal seasonal patterns of nature in his ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ (Yeats 1994).

The Wild Swans At Coole

*The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty Swans.*

*The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.*

*I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trod with a lighter tread.*

*Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.*

*But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?*

More symbolically inclined poets knew their birds esoterically, and so in the now unfamiliar Beth-Luis-Nion order of the familiar vowels (A.

O. U. E. I.) wherein the order is also represented by both a numerical and a seasonal sequence, in Bardic lore, a bird stood for each of the seasonal references. Thus E, the day of the autumn equinox, was represented by Ela (the Whistling = the Whooper Swan, and was close to the Gaelic name) and also by Erc (rufous red), because at this time of the year, around the autumn equinox, the migrant Whooper Swans were preparing for flight from their northern breeding grounds, and because rufous red is both the colour of autumnal foliage, and also of the swan's iron-stained neck feathers (Graves 1961). Coincidentally, there is an astronomical link too as a number of the stars in the region of the constellation cygnus are orange or red.

Swan tales are innumerable and they are, not surprisingly, abundant amongst those peoples who would have been familiar with the birds themselves. In Finland, for example, a country that had several different tribal cultures the Whooper Swan was viewed differently in the different parts of Finland: in west Finland it was considered a game bird, while in the east it was considered sacred.

Despite their sacred status, in a pattern repeated in so many parts of the world for so many different species, the spread of firearms led to their steady extermination until by the 1950s just a few pairs hung on in the north of Finland. Popular endeavour was its saviour through another shift in technology and of attitudes. The tenacious efforts of one man helped save this species; Yrjö Kokko, a vet in Enontekiö, Lapland, dreamed of shooting a nesting Whooper Swan - but with a camera, not with a gun. His book, “Laulujoutsen” published in 1950 documenting the life of the Whooper Swan was the culmination of his experiences, and made modern Finns aware of the Whooper Swan. That new-found awareness made its protection and recovery possible, so that the population has increased a hundredfold in only 40 years. From being revered as sacred to a target of hunters and once more to being protected, the fortunes of the Whooper Swan have swung

back and forth. Once associated with swimming on the “River of Death”, the Whooper Swan was brought back from the “death” of near extinction in Finland by people. It has now taken on a new symbolism, no longer considered sacred as such, it is however still associated with cleanliness, purity and naturalness and as such it is used commonly in Finland in that modern form of mythology - advertising. In the Nordic countries a swan label is used to indicate to consumers that a particular product is environmentally sound (Finland.org 2000).

The enormous subject of swan tales, mythology, and symbolism is so well addressed by Armstrong (1958), Graves (1961), Evans and Dawnay (1972), Wilmore (1974), and Boreiko and Grishchenko (1999) among others, that I have only lightly touched on it here. Those interested in the subject would do well to refer to those authors, who have distilled many of these tales, which, to a large extent, are similar, linked, or even repetitive. In some cases they may refer to swans other than Whooper Swans, although the Russian, Scandinavian, and Irish tales in particular, are more than likely to have been referring to Whooper Swans specifically.

Though the details vary there are, no doubt, as many forms of the swan-maiden tale in existence as there are countries to which they have travelled and as centuries down which they have survived. The central theme nevertheless remains relatively constant, concerning the metamorphosis of God-like innocence to human frailty, from supernatural swan<sup>5</sup> to human form. The transformed heroine, half mortal, half supernatural, is safe in her human guise and becomes the willing, gifted wife of the human who finds or saves her as long as she alone remains in possession of her secret, or of her hidden feathered skin. The story’s twist lies in her fate, for she is immediately transformed into a swan again when her

secret is exposed or some other particular taboo is broken, and she must then depart her husband for ever.

Swans figure powerfully in Irish legend too, and there in the “swan-abounding-land”, it is the Whooper Swan that is the abundant bird and no doubt progenitor of taboos and beliefs that made it sinful to injure or kill a swan. There are interesting parallels between Irish and Nordic myths and those of Greece, even though the swans to which they relate are presumed now to be different, the Whooper Swan in the former case, and the Mute Swan in the latter. If, however, the myths date back several millennia to a time *before* the Celts moved westwards then perhaps they relate to the same birds after all. Thus in both Irish and Greek literature the swan is a metaphor for maiden, because of the swan’s inherent purity, and in Ireland in particular swans were believed to harbour the souls of dying virgins (Wilmore 1974).

The swan is linked not merely to virginal purity, because of its whiteness, but also to sexuality, because of its physical shape, and also as a female symbol because of its V-formation flights. So swans were linked with the gods, being sacred to Venus (Aphrodite, goddess of beauty), drawing her chariot, and being associated particularly with Leto, or Leda, mother of Apollo, and victim of the infamous seduction by Zeus in which he too took the form of a swan, and also sacred to Apollo drawing his chariot across the sky.

The swan was also an erotic symbol of opposites. In its whiteness and purity it represented the nakedness and chastity of womanhood. In its rounded body it represented the receptive feminine form, while at the same time, in the phallic length of its enormous neck<sup>6</sup> it also very potently encompasses the erotic image of the productive

5 Curiously, in Japan, the very same theme of metamorphosis from human to avian form has been transferred across the species barrier to the Japanese Crane *Grus japonensis*.

6 The swan’s neck is a record-breaker, containing 24-25 cervical vertebrae, compared with only 18-19 for geese. The longest-necked mammal, the giraffe, derived from an entirely different lineage, has a mere seven vertebrae despite its incredible length.

male, emphatically encompassed in the image of the great god Zeus (Evans & Dawnay 1972; Scott & The Wildfowl Trust 1972).

Swan myths and legends of Greece, probably themselves originating far to the north where other swans abounded, have also spread throughout Europe, with golden crowns and chains, and human/swan transformations linking tales such as those of the Children of Lir with those of the swan knight, and the innumerable variants on the swan-maiden theme, perhaps the best known of which is the Hans Christian Andersen version. The tale of Lir's Children<sup>7</sup> is of interest from various perspectives. Like so many tales it carries echoes of others, evidence of its long transmission both geographically and through time, in this case the echo is of the tale of God Zeus and nymph Leda, in as much as Lir's wife Eve<sup>8</sup> also gave birth to two sets of twins, a daughter (Finola) and a son (Aed), and two sons (Fiacra and Conn). Unfortunately Eve died, so Lir married her sister Eva. His first marriage was fated with sadness and his second with jealousy, for Eva resented the love universally held for her sister's children, so she condemned them with a curse to be swans for 900 years, spending 300 of those years on the Waters of Moyle, 300 on Lake Derravaragh and 300 on Inish Glora on the western sea, until a Christian bell was heard bringing the light of new faith over the land, or until a Prince of the North should marry a Princess of the South. Jealous Eva finally repented, but she could not repeal her magical spell and so could not release her sister's children from their transformation. She was, however, able to ease their lot, by giving them the power of human speech and the power of making sweet music. Their music cast a spell on all who heard it and flocks of birds gathered around them to listen. The enchantment finally ran its course and having found sanctuary with a Christian monk, and

linked with silver chains, they were restored, ancient and decrepit, and lived only long enough to be baptised. Seemingly an ancient myth had gained approval by the church (Armstrong 1958).

In Celtic mythology, and in the folklore of many other regions too, a binding chain motif often appears in association with a swan indicating that it is a creature transformed, a fairy or a god in disguise, often, like Zeus, in amorous pursuit. The joining, binding, or harnessing of swans with gold or silver chains is so widespread a motif that perhaps it has its origins in some magical belief or ritual. A Tibetan story tells of a more pragmatic use for such a chain, in the catching of a swan-maiden by a hunter (Armstrong 1958). Were the tellers of such tales simply passing on a compelling oral tradition, or were they also aware of the inspiring creatures themselves? Were the tellers of the ancient tale of the Children of Lir, in which King Lir's children are turned into swans and condemned to swim the seas between the Irish and Scottish coasts for 900 years, already aware of the annual winter movements of the Whooper Swans between these two regions confirmed by recent research? The originator of the tale of the Children of Lir certainly gave us an imaginative transformation, not merely from humans into swans, but from the silent swans of previous myths to full-voiced birds capable of "making sweet plaintive music" to soothe the minds and hearts of those willing to listen to them.

Though untransformed, in Indian folklore wild swans were already voiced. In fact they were able to speak and so performed the service of carrying messages between Princess Damayanti and her suitor, Rajah Nala. Swans as messengers are not new in the folk-lore history, however it is interesting to speculate how such a tale of swans should exist in India, where the birds themselves only occur as very rare vagrants indeed.

In the West there is a romantic attachment to swans, and there are dozens of myths and folktales surrounding them. Perhaps the best known

7 The Children of Lir, one of the "Three Sorrows of Storytelling," is a tale based on a theme that reached Ireland from the British kingdom of Strathclyde in the 8th century (Armstrong 1958).

8 Eve was Daughter of King Bov the Red.

of these is Hans Christian Andersen's "Eleven Wild Swans". Many such tales involve humans turning into swans or swan maidens taking human form, but in Japan tales in a similar vein are applied not to the wild swan, but to the Japanese Crane instead (Brazil 1990). Swans appear infrequently in classical Japanese art and literature - it is the crane that holds sway - thus the situation at Kominato, a small town on the coast of Aomori Prefecture, in northernmost Honshu, is unusual. There *O-hakucho*, the great white bird, is revered as a messenger of Raiden, god of thunder and lightning. It was believed in that region that harming birds would earn divine punishment; so sick swans were nursed to health at the local shrine, where hunting was prohibited as early as 1896. In 1920, the area was designated a sanctuary, and in 1931 it became a natural monument (Brazil 1991). Today thousands of people visit the shore at Kominato to feed the wintering swans visiting from eastern Russia.

Of the three species of swans occurring in China, it is the Whooper Swan that is particularly famous, because of its elegance, size, and pure white plumage. It is considered symbolic of angelic beauty, of nobility, purity, a sign of good luck and representative of honesty, loyalty, faithfulness and courage (Li 1996; Ma & Cai 2000). Documented allegorical references to virtuous swans date back more than 2,300 years in both Europe (see the reference to Aristotle above) and in China, where Liu Bong (ca 202 BC), the first emperor of the Han dynasty, even wrote a "Song of the Swans" (Ma & Cai 2000), but ancient Chinese authors were perspicacious observers of migrating swans too, thus Guan Tze (d. 645 BC) observed that "Wild swans fly to the north in Spring, to the south in the Autumn and they never miss their timing" (Ma & Cai 2000). We should not be surprised therefore at a very much more ancient association between people and swans, perhaps as indicated by the origin of the swan-maiden myth in some Siberian tribal culture. Furthermore, because the outline of the north-eastern province of Heilongjiang is considered to resemble a standing Whooper Swan, that bird has

(since 1985) been designated there as the provincial emblem, confirming that though despite the passing of millennia the universal appeal of wild swans is retained and that the appeal is trans-cultural.

In China's close neighbour, Japan, swans are not so anciently recorded, though they do appear as early as 712 AD in the *Kojiki* and in 720 AD in the *Nihonshoki*, among the earliest of Japanese literature. Heavenly swans flying overhead were credited in the *Nihonshoki* with having helped the mute son of Emperor Suinin to learn to speak and so began the tradition of the imperial court capturing and rearing swans. To this day, swans grace the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. From the indigenous Ainu in the north of Japan (where Whooper Swans are common on migration and in winter) to the Okinawans in the south (where any swans are accidental; Brazil 1991) there are stories relating to reverence for swans. Their qualities were seen as including courage and strength and people offered prayers to them in the hope of emulating their virtues. Remnants of that reverence are retained at a handful of "Shiratori" (literally white bird) shrines in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Miyagi Prefecture where altars exist to honour swans as protective deities. Birds depicted at "White Bird" shrines in China are clearly Whooper Swans, (Ma & Cai 2000), and one cannot help wondering whether the reverence arose independently in Japan or whether it was carried there as an element of cultural transmission, as has been the case with so many elements of supposed Japanese culture. As in Iceland, Britain, and Russia, in Japan too place names and people's names reflect an ancient link with these birds; Shiratori is not an uncommon surname for example, just as Lebed is in Russian.

Not all swan "mythologies", however, are ancient, and not all depend on the time-honoured oral tradition. In Japan, where the Whooper Swan is known as the 'Angel of Winter', it has achieved a tremendous following through different media, still and moving pictures, and it has a degree of popular appeal unknown elsewhere in



its range. The living beauty of the Whooper Swan is captured on what must amount to hundreds of kilometres of 35 mm film each winter, and is nowhere more effectively embodied than by the photographs of Teiji Saga, the doyen of Japanese swan photographers, now in his mid 80s, who has for decades travelled throughout Japan following the swans in search of the ultimate swan image (Brazil 1984).

At an increasing number of localities, visitors gather to view, feed and photograph clamouring hordes of Whooper Swans that have learned that man at close range brings no harm. This was not, however, always the case. Hunting of swans was once as widespread in Japan as that of geese and other waterfowl (Brazil 1991) and during and immediately after the Second World War, when protein was in seriously short supply in Japan, waterfowl were seen as a vital resource (Austin 1949).

In January 1950 a few timid Whooper Swans took refuge at a small reservoir at Suibara in Niigata Prefecture. Then obscure, Hyoko is now internationally renowned. There, against a backdrop of the snow-covered Japanese Alps, the swans found a resting place and an ally. Juzaburo Yoshikawa was smitten by the magic of the swan flock that grew to 46 birds during February 1950. Not only did he succeed in talking the mayor and local hunters into declaring obscure Hyoko a swan sanctuary, he also began feeding them and protecting them from dogs and disturbance. By 1954, the swans at the lake were declared a natural monument and, thanks to the dedication of one man, the swans prospered and increased to over 1,000 birds.

By the time of my first visit there in 1980, Juzaburo's role as swan-keeper had been passed on to his son Shigeo (himself now retired), with Shigeo dressed in the same familiar attire as his father so as not to disturb the established tradition of feeding. Protection continued and had already spawned other newer "traditions" - those of visitors feeding and photographing at "swan

lake" and then elsewhere too. Film and television have made the Whooper Swan, the "Angel of Winter," a familiar image to the Japanese people, and their arrival each autumn is as well announced in the media, as is the first cuckoo in spring in England (Brazil in press).

A more modern tradition still began in Hokkaido as recently as 1988. In that year Mr Yoshinao Yoshida was inspired to attempt to entice swans to visit Onuma, a large shallow lagoon nestling in the almost flat lands between the twin capes of northernmost Hokkaido by calling them. His passion for swans, his use of broadcast calls and the subsequent provision of food, has turned Onuma from a swan-less water to a significant stop-over point for many thousands of Bewick's swans and lesser numbers of Whooper migrating between Japan's main island of Honshu and the Russian island of Sakhalin, which is just visible hazily from Hokkaido on the northern horizon.

Swan legends are interlinked throughout Eurasia, and some of the elements at least are ancient. Frequently depicted in Bronze and Iron Age art, it seems that the earliest beliefs were modified by successive waves of cultural transmission and invasion. There is good reason to assume that the swan-maiden myth travelled part way with the megalith builders of Europe, but that its origins predate them and thus we can date them at least to the early Bronze Age (Armstrong 1958).

When the plain metal iron, rather than the recordable DVD disc, represented the height of modern technology, there were already ancient links between supernatural swans, gold, fairy peoples, and the warding strength of iron, against the older generation of magicians and craftsmen, with links even to Vulcan, and that great smith Wayland, and to the swan-maiden. These fascinating mythical tales are so convoluted, the elements so intertwined from culture to culture, that they stretch the imagination almost as much as the biological aspects of a species the range of

which spans the Old World, that visits the New, and migrates between temperate and sub-arctic zones (Brazil in press; see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Cultural transmission in stone continues; Odaito, Hokkaido (Mark Brazil photo).

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