

“The Pelican in Her Piety”

In medieval Europe, the pelican was thought to be particularly attentive to her young, to the point of providing her own blood by wounding her own breast when no other food was available. As a result, the pelican came to symbolise the Passion of Jesus and the Eucharist and usurped the image of the lamb and the flag. A reference to this mythical characteristic is contained for example in the hymn by Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Adoro te devote" or "Humbly We Adore Thee", where in the penultimate verse, he describes Christ as the "loving divine pelican, able to provide nourishment from his breast". Elizabeth I of England adopted the symbol, portraying herself as the "mother of the Church of England". Nicholas Hilliard painted the Pelican Portrait around 1573, now owned by the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. A pelican feeding her young is depicted in an oval panel at the bottom of the title page of the first (1611) edition of the King James Bible. Such "a pelican in her piety" appears in the 1686 reredos by Grinling Gibbons in the church of St Mary Abchurch in the City of London. Earlier medieval examples of the motif appear in painted murals, for example that of circa 1350 in the parish church of Belchamp Walter, Essex.

The self-sacrificial aspect of the pelican was reinforced by the widely read medieval bestiaries. The device of "a pelican in her piety" or "a pelican vulning (from Latin vulno, "to wound") herself" was used in heraldry. An older version of the myth is that the pelican used to kill its young then resurrect them with its blood, again analogous to the sacrifice of Jesus. Likewise, a folktale from India says that a pelican killed her young by rough treatment, but was then so contrite that she resurrected them with her own blood.

The legends of self-wounding and the provision of blood may have arisen because of the impression a pelican sometimes gives that it is stabbing itself with its bill. In reality, it often presses this onto its chest to fully empty the pouch. Another possible derivation is the tendency of the bird to rest with its bill on its breast; the Dalmatian pelican has a blood-red pouch in the early breeding season and this may have contributed to the myth.

Ref:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelican#Christianity>