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Sacrifice and Sacred Animals

The idea of a connection between animals and divinities manifested itself in several ways in the Classical world. Beyond the many narratives of gods’ metamorphoses into animal forms and the mythological association of some gods with particular animals, in a practical sense this connection was put into practice in two ways: in the process of animal sacrifice, and in the designation or popular consideration of certain species and individuals as being associated with a god or a sacred precinct. Perhaps because of its remoteness from any equivalent modern practice, sacrifice has been the subject of fascination throughout the modern period and has inspired a wealth of scholarly studies: it remains the subject of intense scrutiny among Classical scholars and even in recent years provocative studies and theories continue to keep the subject alive.¹ Sacred animals in particular are rather less well studied, but many ancient texts attest to popular associations between animals and gods, and there is much evidence for the practice of keeping domestic animals in a sanctuary area as the property of a particular god.² Some connections between gods and animals are suggested in a passage of Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophistae* (375f), where an interesting discussion of words for various animals digresses on some well-known traditions of sacred animals including the details that at Praesus there were nuptial sacrifices made to the pig, and that boars were sacred on Crete, although we lack details of how this sacred nature was observed. In his *On absti-nence from animal food*, as part of his wider study on the injustice of killing animals Porphyry outlines his understanding of the nature of the sacred animal.

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1. Harden, *Animals in the Classical World* © Alastair Harden 2013
To men, then, because of their gluttony, animals do not seem to have reason (logos), but on the other hand, for gods and for godly men animals are honoured equally with suppliants. And indeed the god proclaimed to Aristodikos of Kyme that sparrows were his suppliants. Socrates also made oaths under them, as did Rhadamanthus before him. The Egyptians also think of them as gods, whether they considered them to really be so, whether they deliberately made images of gods with faces of oxen and birds and other animals so that they may equally be abstained from as with humans, or whether for some other more mystical reason. Thus indeed the Greeks also fastened a ram’s horns to the image of Zeus, but bull’s horns to that of Dionysus; they put together that of Pan from a man and a goat; and of the muses and sirens with wings, as well as Nike, Iris, Eros and Hermes. Pindar in his songs mentions all the gods, when they were chased out by Typhon, making them look not like men but the other animals. Zeus, as Pasiphae’s lover, became a bull, but now he’s an eagle, now a swan.