

The cinnamon birds of Herodotus

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Herodotus wrote that giant birds carried cinnamon sticks to cliff nests in Arabia, and that people lured them with heavy meat until the nests collapsed. It was a great story, and a useful one for anyone selling cinnamon.

The story

In Herodotus's account, people cut up large pieces of meat and left them near the nests. The birds carried the meat up, the nests broke under the weight, and the sticks fell to the ground for collection.

Why it may have spread

Modern writers often read the tale as trade cover. A difficult, dangerous source helped explain a high price and hid where the spice really came from. That reading is an interpretation, since we have no record from the traders themselves.

Pliny the Elder was already skeptical and called the story an invention to make people pay more.

5th c. BCE
Herodotus tells the story of the birds

1st century
Pliny calls it an invention to raise prices

c. 1230
The bird appears in a medieval bestiary

1518
Portuguese traders reach Ceylon

Dates as given in the sources below.

A long afterlife

The bird lived on in medieval bestiaries. Today the spice's trade route is far better documented, but the bird remains one of the more entertaining examples of marketing from the ancient world.

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Sources

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