

Phoenix (mythology)

The **phoenix** is an immortal bird associated with Greek mythology (with analogs in many cultures) that cyclically regenerates or is otherwise born again. Associated with the sun, a phoenix obtains new life by rising from the ashes of its predecessor. Some legends say it dies in a show of flames and combustion, others that it simply dies and decomposes before being born again.^[1] In the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, a tool used by folklorists, the phoenix is classified as motif B32.^[2]

The origin of the phoenix has been attributed to Ancient Egypt by Herodotus and later 19th-century scholars, but other scholars think the Egyptian texts may have been influenced by classical folklore. Over time the phoenix motif spread and gained a variety of new associations; Herodotus, Lucan, Pliny the Elder, Pope Clement I, Lactantius, Ovid, and Isidore of Seville are among those who have contributed to the retelling and transmission of the phoenix motif. Over time, extending beyond its origins, the phoenix could variously "symbolize renewal in general as well as the sun, time, the Empire, metempsychosis, consecration, resurrection, life in the heavenly Paradise, Christ, Mary, virginity, the exceptional man, and certain aspects of Christian life".^[3] Some scholars have claimed that the poem *De ave phoenice* may present the mythological phoenix motif as a symbol of Christ's resurrection.^[4]

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Etymology

The modern English word *phoenix* entered the English language from Latin, later reinforced by French. The word first entered the English language by way of a borrowing of Latin *phoenīx* into Old English (*fenix*). This borrowing was later reinforced by French influence, which had also borrowed the Latin noun. In time, the word developed specialized use in the English language: For example, the term could refer to an "excellent person" (12th century), a variety of heraldic emblem (15th century), and the name of a constellation (17th century).^[5]

The Latin word comes from Greek φοῖνιξ *phoinīx*.^[6] The Greek word is first attested in the Mycenaean Greek *po-ni-ke*, which probably meant 'griffin', though it might have meant 'palm tree'. That word is probably a borrowing from a West Semitic word for madder, a red dye made from *Rubia tinctorum*. The word *Phoenician* appears to be from the same root, meaning 'those who work with red dyes'. So *phoenix* may mean 'the Phoenician bird' or 'the purplish-red bird'.^[7]

Early texts

Exterior to the Linear B mention above from Mycenaean Greece, the earliest clear mention of the phoenix in ancient Greek literature occurs in a fragment of the *Precepts of Chiron*, attributed to 6th century BC Greek poet Hesiod. In the fragment, the wise centaur Chiron tells a young hero Achilles the following,^[8] describing the phoenix's lifetime as 972 times the length of a long-lived human's:

A chattering crow lives out nine generations of aged men,
but a stag's life is four time a crow's,
and a raven's life makes three stags old,
while the phoenix outlives nine ravens,
but we, the rich-haired Nymphs
daughters of Zeus the aegis-holder,
outlive ten phoenixes.

Disputed origins

Classical discourse on the subject of the phoenix attributes a potential origin of the phoenix to Ancient Egypt. Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BC, provides the following account of the phoenix:^[9]

Phoenix



The phoenix, "unica semper avis" (ever-singular bird), 1583

Grouping Mythical creature

Folklore Greek mythology

Country Ancient Greece



A depiction of a phoenix by Friedrich Justin Bertuch, 1806)

[The Egyptians] have also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies. Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follow: The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible: that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.

In the 19th century, scholastic suspicions appeared to be confirmed by the discovery that Egyptians in Heliopolis had venerated the Bennu, a solar bird similar in some respects to the Greek phoenix. However, the Egyptian sources regarding the bennu are often problematic and open to a variety of interpretations. Some of these sources may have actually been influenced by Greek notions of the phoenix, rather than the other way around.^[10]

Depictions

The phoenix is sometimes pictured in ancient and medieval literature and medieval art as endowed with a halo, which emphasizes the bird's connection with the Sun.^[15] In the oldest images of phoenixes on record these nimbuses often have seven rays, like Helios (the Greek personification of the Sun).^[16] Pliny the Elder^[17] also describes the bird as having a crest of feathers on its head,^[15] and Ezekiel the Dramatist compared it to a rooster.^[18]

The phoenix came to be associated with specific colors over time. Although the phoenix was generally believed to be colorful and vibrant, sources provide no clear consensus about its coloration. Tacitus says that its color made it stand out from all other birds.^[19] Some said that the bird had peacock-like coloring, and Herodotus's claim of the Phoenix being red and yellow is popular in many versions of the story on record.^[20] Ezekiel the Tragedian declared that the phoenix had red legs and striking yellow eyes,^[18] but Lactantius said that its eyes were blue like sapphires^[21] and that its legs were covered in yellow-gold scales with rose-colored talons.^[22]

Herodotus, Pliny, Solinus, and Philostratus describe the phoenix as similar in size to an eagle,^[23] but Lactantius and Ezekiel the Dramatist both claim that the phoenix was larger, with Lactantius declaring that it was even larger than an ostrich.^[24]

According to Pliny's *Natural History*,^[25]

aquilae narratur magnitudine, auri fulgore circa colla, cetero purpureus, caeruleam roseis caudam pinnis distinguuntibus, cristis fauces, caputque plumeo apice honestante.

—Pliny the Elder, "*Naturalis historia*", X: 2

The story is that it is as large as an eagle, and has a gleam of gold round its neck and all the rest of it is purple, but the tail blue picked out with rosecoloured feathers and the throat picked out with tufts, and a feathered crest adorning its head.

—translated by Harris Rackham, 1940, LCL: 353, pp. 292–294

According to Claudian's poem "The Phoenix",^[26]

arcanum radiant oculi iubar. igneus ora cingit honos. rutilo cognatum vertice sidus attollit cristatus apex tenebrasque serena luce secat. Tyrio pinguntur crura veneno. antevolant Zephyros pinnae, quas caeruleus ambit flore color sparsoque super ditescit in auro.

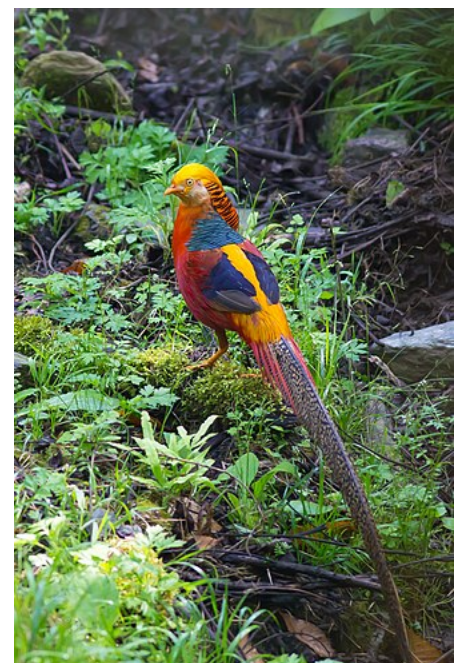
—Claudian, "*Phoenix*", ll. 17–22

A mysterious fire flashes from its eye, and a flaming aureole enriches its head. Its crest shines with the sun's own light and shatters the darkness with its calm brilliance. Its legs are of Tyrian purple; swifter than those of the Zephyrs are its wings of flower-like blue dappled with rich gold.

—translated by Henry Maurice Platnauer, 1922, LCL: 136, pp. 224–225



According to the *Catalogue of the Greek Coins* in the British Museum, the "Numidian crane" represents the phoenix on the coinage of Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161)^{[11][12]}



According to Harris Rackham, Pliny the Elder's description of a phoenix in *Natural History* "tallies fairly closely with the golden pheasant of the Far East"^{[13][14]}

Appearances

According to Pliny the Elder, a senator Manilius (Marcus Manilius ?) had written that the phoenix appeared at the end of each Great Year, which he took to have occurred "in the consulship of Gnaeus Cornelius and Publius Licinius", that is, in 96 BC.^[25] Another of Pliny's sources, Cornelius Valerianus, is cited for an appearance of the phoenix in 36 AD "in the consulship of Quintus Plautius and

Sextus Papinius".^[25] Pliny states that a purported phoenix seen in Egypt in 47 AD was brought to the capital and exhibited in the Comitium in time for the 800th anniversary of the foundation of Rome by Romulus, though he added that "nobody would doubt that this phoenix was a fabrication".^[25]

Diffusion in later culture

In time, the motif and concept of the phoenix extended from its origins in ancient Greek folklore. For example, the classical motif of the phoenix continues into the Gnostic manuscript *On the Origin of the World* from the Nag Hammadi Library collection in Egypt generally dated to the 4th century.^[28]

Thus when Sophia Zoe saw that the rulers of darkness had laid a curse upon her counterparts, she was indignant. And coming out of the first heaven with full power, she chased those rulers out of their heavens and cast them into the sinful world, so that there they should dwell, in the form of evil spirits upon the earth.

[...], so that in their world it might pass the thousand years in paradise—a soul-endowed living creature called "phoenix". It kills itself and brings itself back to life as a witness to the judgement against them, for they did wrong to Adam and his race, unto the consummation of the age. There are [...] three men, and also his posterities, unto the consummation of the world: the spirit-endowed of eternity, and the soul-endowed, and the earthly. Likewise, there are three phoenixes in paradise—the first is immortal, the second lives 1,000 years; as for the third, it is written in the sacred book that it is consumed. So, too, there are three baptisms—the first is spiritual, the second is by fire, the third is by water. Just as the phoenix appears as a witness concerning the angels, so the case of the water hydri in Egypt, which has been a witness to those going down into the baptism of a true man. The two bulls in Egypt posses a mystery, the Sun and the Moon, being a witness to Sabaoth: namely, that over them Sophia received the universe; from the day that she made the Sun and Moon, she put a seal upon her heaven, unto eternity. And the worm that has been born out of the phoenix is a human being as well. It is written concerning it, "the just man will blossom like a phoenix". And the phoenix first appears in a living state, and dies, and rises again, being a sign of what has become apparent at the consummation of the age.

The anonymous 10th century Old English *Exeter Book* contains an anonymous 677-line 9th-century alliterative poem consisting of a paraphrase and abbreviation of Lactantius, followed by an explication of the Phoenix as an allegory for the resurrection of Christ.^[29]

*Bisses fugles gecynd fela gelices
bi þam gecornum Cristes þegnum;
beacnað in burgum hu hi beorhtne
gefean
purh Fæder fultum on þar frecnan tid
healdap under heofonum & him
heanna blæd
in þam uplican eðle gestrynap.*

—In the original Old English

This bird's nature is much like
to the chosen servants of Christ;
pointeth out to men how they bright joy
through the Father's aid in this perilous time
may under heaven possess, and exalted
happiness
in the celestial country may gain.

—In Modern English translation
(1842)^[30]

In the 14th century, Italian poet Dante Alighieri refers to the phoenix in *Inferno* Canto XXIV:

*Così per li gran savi si confessa
che la fenice more e poi rinasce,
quando al cinquecentesimo anno
appressa;*

*erba né biado in sua vita non pasce,
ma sol d'incenso lagrime e d'amomo,
e nardo e mirra son l'ultime fasce.*

—In the original Italian

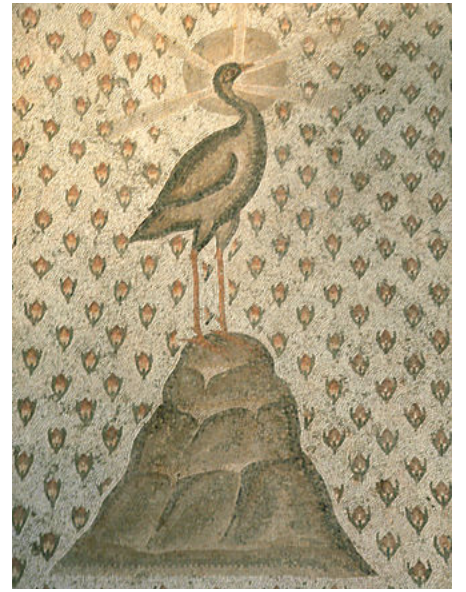
Even thus by the great sages 'tis
confessed
The phoenix dies, and then is born again,
When it approaches its five-hundredth
year;

On herb or grain it feeds not in its life,
But only on tears of incense and amomum,
And nard and myrrh are its last winding-
sheet.

—In English translation

In the 17th-century play *Henry VIII* by English playwrights William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, Archbishop Cranmer says in Act V, Scene v (http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=henry8&Act=5&Scene=5&Scope=scene) in reference to Elizabeth (who was to become Queen Elizabeth I):

... Nor shall this peace sleep with her; but as when
The bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix,



5th-century mosaic of a nimbate phoenix from Daphne, Antioch, in Roman Syria (Louvre)^[27]



Detail from the 12th-century *Aberdeen Bestiary*, featuring a phoenix

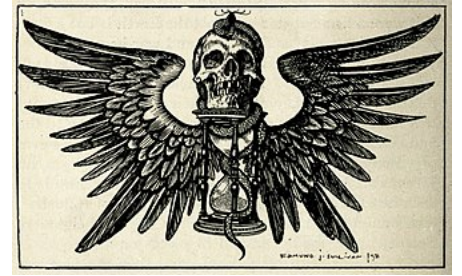


The phoenix rising from flames was the symbol of the Greek Mountain Government and the Regime of the Colonels in the mid-20th century

Her ashes new create another heir
As great in admiration as herself;
So shall she leave her blessedness to one,
When heaven shall call her from this cloud of darkness,
Who from the sacred ashes of her honour
Shall star-like rise as great in fame as she was,
And so stand fix'd ...

In the 19th-century novel *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh remarks on the "burning of a World-Phoenix" and the "*Palingenesia, or Newbirth of Society*" from its ashes:

When the Phoenix is fanning her funeral pyre, will there not be sparks flying! Alas, some millions of men, and among them such as a Napoleon, have already been licked into that high-eddy Flame, and like moths consumed there. Still also have we to fear that incautious beards will get singed. For the rest, in what year of grace such Phoenix-cremation will be completed, you need not ask. The law of Perseverance is among the deepest in man: by nature he hates change; seldom will he quit his old house till it has actually fallen about his ears. Thus have I seen Solemnities linger as Ceremonies, sacred Symbols as idle Pageants, to the extent of three hundred years and more after all life and sacredness had evaporated out of them. And then, finally, what time the Phoenix Death-Birth itself will require, depends on unseen contingencies.—Meanwhile, would Destiny offer Mankind, that after, say two centuries of convulsion and conflagration, more or less vivid, the fire-creation should be accomplished, and we to find ourselves again in a Living Society, and no longer fighting but working,—were it not perhaps prudent in Mankind to strike the bargain?^[31]



"Time and Death", 1898 illustration by E. J. Sullivan for *Sartor Resartus*

Phoenixes are present and relatively common in European heraldry, which developed during the High Middle Ages. They most often appear as crests, and more rarely as charges. The heraldic phoenix is depicted as the head, chest and wings of an eagle rising from a fire; the entire creature is never depicted.^[32]

In modern era popular culture

In the modern era, the phoenix motif continues to see use in a variety of contexts. Elon University's sports teams became known as the Phoenix in 2000, stemming from the college's fire and subsequent recovery in 1923. University trustees at the time announced their intentions to make Elon "rise from the ashes".

Swarthmore College's newspaper has been named "The Phoenix" since the college's fire in 1881,^[33] the phoenix bird was considered emblematic of the college's rebirth from its ashes. More recently, "Phineas the Phoenix" has become the official mascot^[34] of Swarthmore College, with a dancing student inside a costume of plush plumage.

The flag of San Francisco features a phoenix in its center, often thought to be symbolic of the city's rebuilding following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. However, the phoenix had been a civic symbol of San Francisco at least since 1852, when it featured on the first official seal of the city.

The club crest of Coventry City Football Club features a phoenix rising from the flames, in recognition of how the City of Coventry was rebuilt after being destroyed by the Nazi German Luftwaffe during the Blitz bombing campaigns of World War II.

Coventry University use a phoenix rising from the flames as their emblem, tying in with the city they are based, and the same reason Coventry City Football Club carry a phoenix on their club crest.

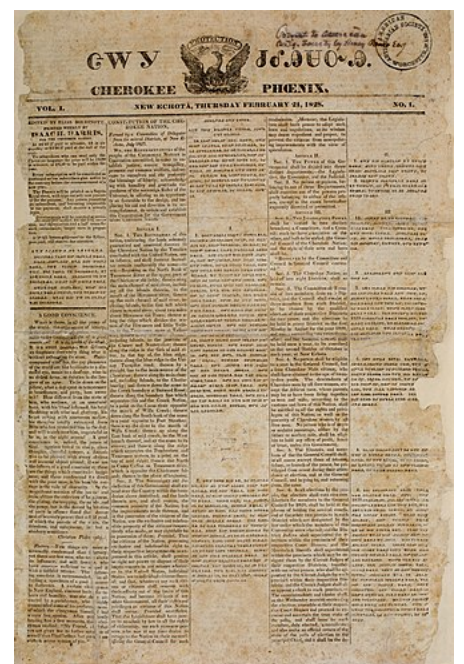
Portland, Maine's city seal depicts a phoenix rising from ashes, a reference to recovery from four devastating fires.^[35]

In Eiichiro Oda's manga *One Piece*, a character nicknamed as Marco the Phoenix ate the Tori Tori no Mi, Model: Phoenix, a devil fruit that gave Marco phoenix powers. The powers include but are not limited to immense regenerative healing properties through the blue fire, transforming into a phoenix or phoenix/human hybrid at will, and being able to warm others through the helpful flames. He can choose whether to heal or harm with his blue flames.

In the popular novel Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, the phoenix heals the titular main character Harry Potter, and blinds a basilisk.

Analogues

Scholars have observed analogues to the phoenix in a variety of cultures. These analogues include the Hindu *garuda* (गरुड) and *bherunda* (भेरुण्ड), the Russian firebird (жар-птица), the Persian *simorgh* (سیمرغ), the Georgian *paskunji*, the Arabian *anqa* (عنقاء), the Turkish *Konrul*, also called *Zümrüdü Anka* ("emerald anqa"), the Tibetan *Me byi karmo*, the Chinese *Fenghuang* (鳳凰) and *Zhuque* (朱雀), and the Japanese *Hō-ō* (鳳凰).^[36] These perceived analogues are sometimes included as part of the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature phoenix motif (B32).^[2]



The first issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, a Cherokee language newspaper named after (and depicting) the phoenix. Published in New Echota by the Cherokee Nation, 1828.

See also

- [Firebird](#)
- [Chalkydri](#)
- [Chol](#) (Bible), a Hebrew word sometimes glossed as *phoenix*

Notes

1. [Van der Broek 1972](https://books.google.com/books?id=jwIVAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA146), p. 146 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=jwIVAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA146>).
2. [Thompson](#). (2001: 581).
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6. [Barnhart 1995](#), p. 564.
7. [Van der Broek 1972](#), pp. 62–66.
8. [Evelyn-White](#) (1920: 75).
9. [Herodotus](#), *The Histories (1858 translation)*, Book II (<http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.2.ii.html>) Trans. G. Rawlinson (1858)
10. [Van der Broek 1972](#), pp. 14–25.
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14. [Pliny](#). *Natural History*. Volume III: Books 8–11.
15. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 233.
16. [Van der Broek 1972](#), pp. 246–247.
17. *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*, edited by Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Irene Berti, 2016, p. 172
18. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 257.
19. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 253.
20. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 259.
21. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 256.
22. [Van der Broek 1972](#), pp. 257–258.
23. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 251.
24. [Van der Broek 1972](#), p. 252.
25. [Rackham, H.](#), ed. (1940), *Pliny. Natural History, Volume III: Books 8-11* (https://www.loebclassics.com/view/claudian_claudianus-shorter_poems/1922/pb_LCL136.225.xml), Loeb Classical Library 353, translated by Rackham, H., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 292–294, doi:10.4159/DLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938 (https://doi.org/10.4159%2FDLCL.pliny_elder-natural_history.1938)
26. [Loeb Claudian Volume II](#) (1922), [Platnauer, M.](#) (ed.), translated by [Platnauer, M.](#), "Claudian: Shorter Poems: "Phoenix" " (https://www.loebclassics.com/view/claudian_claudianus-shorter_poems/1922/pb_LCL136.225.xml), *Claudian: On Stilicho's Consulship 2–3. Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship of Honorius. The Gothic War. Shorter Poems. Rape of Proserpina*, Loeb Classical Library 136, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 222–231, doi:10.4159/DLCL.claudian_claudianus-shorter_poems.1922 (https://doi.org/10.4159%2FDLCL.claudian_claudianus-shorter_poems.1922)
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36. [Garry & El-Shamy 2005](#), pp. 84–87.

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