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Transformations of the Phoenix: from the Church Fathers to the Bestiaries

Among all the animals the early and medieval Christians selected to teach religious lessons, the mythical phoenix bears the greatest burden as a symbol of resurrection, the foundation of Christian doctrine. The wondrous bird that dies in its nest and rises, reborn, from its own ashes already had a centuries-long classical history before a first-century Church Father adapted its fable as a proof of resurrection. The subsequent development of the phoenix in Christian art and literature is decidedly complex. While the body of Early Christian phoenix writings grew from two traditions, the image of the bird derived from a classical model independent of the texts. It was not until the twelfth- and thirteenth-century bestiaries that artists, illuminating pastiches of earlier texts, began to establish the phoenix image as we know it today.

The phoenix enters Christian dogma in St. Clement of Rome's first *Letter to the Corinthians* (c. A.D. 96), a papal rebuke of a rebellious laity. Clement credulously declares that in the regions of Arabia, "There is a bird which is called the phoenix." Every five hundred years the bird dies and decays in a nest of spices; a worm emerges from its remains and grows into a fledgling that carries its parent's bones to the Temple of the Sun in Heliopolis, Egypt. Clement ends the passage by asking how anyone could doubt God's promise of resurrection when He demonstrates it "by means even of a bird?" The pope's homily is an adapted compilation of phoenix details that can be traced back through Pliny the Elder, Mela, and Ovid, to Herodotus's fifth-century B.C. seminal account of the Western phoenix. Shortly after dissemination of Clement's epistle, the Greek *Physiologus*, basis of the later bestiaries, varies the phoenix fable, declaring that the bird is from India, that it dies in a flaming nest, and that it is reborn in three days, like Christ Himself. Only versions of the *Physiologus* and works influenced by them identify the bird with Christ and His Resurrection, including its rebirth in three days. Also, the bird's death in fire is distinctly different from the decomposition tradition adopted by Clement. Tertullian, St. Ambrose, other Church Fathers, and the later bestiaries are indebted to either or both of these versions of the Christian allegory. The only scriptural authority for the phoenix is Tertullian's mistranslation of Psalms 92:12 as, "The righteous shall flourish like the phoenix," and some Jewish commentators' readings of Job 29:18 as, "I shall die in my nest and shall multiply my days as the phoenix."

Early Christian iconography of the phoenix also derives from classical sources, but it is at odds with the descriptions of Herodotus and other Greco-Roman authors. The Greek historian based his story on what Heliopolitan priests had told him at the shrine of the sacred heron-like *benu*, but the pictures he saw of what he called the "phoenix" depicted a different kind of bird, one whose shape and size were "almost exactly that of the eagle." The Heliopolitan setting of the original phoenix story and Roman occupation of Egypt led to the syncretization of the Egyptian *benu* into a long-legged, radiate-nimbed phoenix on the reverse of imperial coins from the reign of Hadrian through those of the Constantine dynasty. Meanwhile, in Priscilla and other catacombs, persecuted Christians painted or scratched their earliest images of the bird: a nimbused figure similar to that of the Romans, but sometimes dying in the fire of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, prior to the resurrection to come. A different phoenix motif is widespread in Early Christian coffin sculpture and in apsidal mosaics such as that in the Roman church of SS. Cosma e Damiano. In scenes classified as *Traditio legis*, the resurrected bird perches in a date palm to the right of the risen Christ, saints, and apostles in the Heavenly Kingdom. Given their Greek homonymy, the bird of renewal and the ever fruitful and green palm tree had been closely linked from the bird's beginning.

Classical sources in the *Etymologies* (early seventh century) of St. Isidore, Bishop of Seville, helped redirect the expansion of the *Physiologus* into what become the bestiaries of the later Middle Ages. In the case of the phoenix, scribes commonly integrated Isidore's etymology along with paraphrases of the *Physiologus* and Ambrose's *Hexameron*. Such texts thus derived from different phoenix traditions established by the Church Fathers and *Physiologus*, seemingly without scribes' concerns for inconsistencies between sources. These passages, in turn, influenced phoenix iconography. By the twelfth century, the bird's Roman and Early Christian

nimbus disappear and the legs shorten in bestiary illuminations. This bird is typically portrayed in narrative pairs of pictures in which it gathers spices for its pyre and dies – or rises – in flames, often its wings spread in a pose of crucifixion or ascension. The common bestiary image of the eagle-like phoenix in a nest of fire is adapted in Renaissance heraldry, alchemy, emblem books and printers' marks – and eventually in modern logos and design, which usually symbolize renewal following destruction. The well-known emblem of twentieth-century novelist D.H. Lawrence is, in fact, derived from an illumination in the Ashmole Bestiary.