

The Phoenix according to Pliny (1)

Æthiopia and India, more especially, produce birds of diversified plumage, and such as quite surpass all description. In the front rank of these is the phœnix, that famous bird of Arabia; though I am not quite sure that its existence is not all a fable. It is said that there is only one in existence in the whole world, and that that one has not been seen very often. We are told that this bird is of the size of an eagle, and has a brilliant golden plumage around the neck, while the rest of the body is of a purple colour; except the tail, which is azure, with long feathers intermingled of a roseate hue; the throat is adorned with a crest, and the head with a tuft of feathers. The first Roman who described this bird, and who has done so with the greatest exactness, was the senator Manilius, so famous for his learning; which he owed, too, to the instructions of no teacher. He tells us that no person has ever seen this bird eat, that in Arabia it is looked upon as sacred to the sun, that it lives five hundred and forty years, that when it becomes old it builds a nest of cassia and sprigs of incense, which it fills with perfumes, and then lays its body down upon them to die; that from its bones and marrow there springs at first a sort of small worm, which in time changes into a little bird: that the first thing that it does is to perform the obsequies of its predecessor, and to carry the nest entire to the city of the Sun near Panchaia, and there deposit it upon the altar of that divinity.

The same Manilius states also, that the revolution of the great year is completed with the life of this bird, and that then a new cycle comes round again with the same characteristics as the former one, in the seasons and the appearance of the stars; and he says that this begins about mid-day of the day on which the sun enters the sign of Aries. He also tells us that when he wrote to the above effect, in the consulship of P. Licinius and Cneius Cornelius, it was the two hundred and fifteenth year of the said revolution. Cornelius Valerianus says that the phœnix took its flight from Arabia into Egypt in the consulship of Q. Plautius and Sextus Papinius. This bird was brought to Rome in the censorship of the Emperor Claudius, being the year from the building of the City, 800, and it was exposed to public view in the Comitium. This fact is attested by the public Annals, but there is no one that doubts that it was a fictitious phœnix only.

Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, X II, 1-9. Translation John Bostock, H.T. Riley, courtesy of the Perseus Collection