

THE PHCENIX

BY AN UNCERTAIN AUTHOR. ATTRIBUTED TO *LACTANTIUS* 2007

There is a happy spot, retired²⁰⁰⁸ in the first East, where the great gate of the eternal pole lies open. It is not, however, situated near to his rising in summer or in winter, but where the sun pours the day from his vernal chariot. There a plain spreads its open tracts; nor does any mound rise, nor hollow valley open²⁰⁰⁹ itself. But through twice six ells that place rises above the mountains, whose tops are thought to be lofty among us. Here is the grove of the sun; a wood stands planted with many a tree, blooming with the honour of perpetual foliage. When the pole had blazed with the fires of Phaethon, that place was uninjured by the flames; and when the deluge had immersed the world in waves, it rose above the waters of Deucalion. No enfeebling diseases, no sickly old age, nor cruel death, nor harsh fear, approaches hither, nor dreadful crime, nor mad desire of riches, nor Mars, nor fury, burning with the love of slaughter.²⁰¹⁰ Bitter grief is absent, and want clothed in rags, and sleepless cares, and violent hunger. No tempest rages there, nor dreadful violence of the wind; nor does the hoar-frost cover the earth with cold dew. No cloud extends its fleecy²⁰¹¹ covering above the plains, nor does the turbid moisture of water fall from on high; but there is a fountain in the middle, which they call by the name of “living;”²⁰¹² it is clear, gentle, and abounding with sweet waters, which, bursting forth once during the space of each²⁰¹³ month, twelve times irrigates all the grove with waters. Here a species of tree, rising with lofty stem, bears mellow fruits not about to fall on the ground. This grove, these woods, a

2007 [A CURIOUS EXPANSION OF THE FABLE SO LONG SUPPOSED TO BE AUTHENTIC HISTORY OF A NATURAL WONDER, AND PROBABLY DERIVED FROM ORIENTAL TALES CORROBORATED BY TRAVELLERS. SEE VOL. I. P. 12; ALSO III. 554. YEZEEDDEE BIRD-WORSHIP MAY HAVE SPRUNG OUT OF IT.]

2008 Remotus. The reference is supposed to be to Arabia, though some think that India is pointed out as the abode of the phœnix.

2009 Hiat.

2010 Cædis amore furor. There is another reading, “cedit.”

2011 Vellera, “thin fleecy clouds.” So Virg., *Georg.*, i. 397; *Tenuia nec lanæ per cœlum vellera ferri.*

2012 Vivum.

2013 Per singula tempora mensum.

single²⁰¹⁴ bird, the phoenix, inhabits,—single, but it lives reproduced by its own death. It obeys and submits²⁰¹⁵ to Phœbus, a remarkable attendant. Its parent nature has given it to possess this office. When at its first rising the saffron morn grows red, when it puts to flight the stars with its rosy light, thrice and four times she plunges her body into the sacred waves, thrice and four times she sips water from the living stream.²⁰¹⁶ She is raised aloft, and takes her seat on the highest top of the lofty tree, which alone looks down upon the whole grove; and turning herself to the fresh risings of the nascent Phœbus, she awaits his rays and rising beam. And when the sun has thrown back the threshold of the shining gate, and the light gleam²⁰¹⁷ of the first light has shone forth, she begins to pour strains of sacred song, and to hail²⁰¹⁸ the new light with wondrous voice, which neither the notes of the nightingale²⁰¹⁹ nor the flute of the Muses can equal with Cyrrhæan²⁰²⁰ strains. But neither is it thought that the dying swan can imitate it, nor the tuneful strings of the lyre of Mercury. After that Phœbus has brought back his horses to the open heaven,²⁰²¹ and continually advancing, has displayed²⁰²² his whole orb; she applauds with thrice-repeated flapping of her wings, and having thrice adored the fire-bearing head, is silent. And she also distinguishes the swift hours by sounds not liable to error by day and night: an overseer²⁰²³ of the groves, a venerable priestess of the wood, and alone admitted to thy secrets, O Phœbus. And when she has now accomplished the thousand years of her life, and length of days has rendered her burdensome,²⁰²⁴ in order that she may renew the age which has glided by, the fates pressing²⁰²⁵ her, she flees from the beloved couch of the accustomed grove. And when she has left the sacred places, through a desire of being born²⁰²⁶ again, then she seeks this world, where death reigns. Full of years, she directs her swift flight into Syria, to which Venus herself has



2014 Unica, “the only one.” It was supposed that only one phoenix lived at one time. So the proverb “Phœnice rarior.”

2015 Birds were considered sacred to peculiar gods: thus the phoenix was held sacred to Phœbus. [Layard, *Nineveh*, vol. ii. p. 462.]

2016 Gurgite.

2017 Aura. So Virg., *Æneid*, vi. 204: “Discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit.”

2018 Ciere.

2019 Aëdoniæ voces. The common reading is “Ædoniæ,” contrary to the metre.

2020 i.e., strains of Apollo and the Muses, for Cyrrha is at the foot of Parnassus, their favourite haunt.

2021 Aperta Olympi, when he has mounted above the horizon.

2022 Protulit.

2023 Antistes.

2024 Gravem, i.e., a burden to herself.

2025 Fatis urgentibus; others read “spatiis vergentibus.”

2026 Studio renascendi.

given the name of Phoenix;²⁰²⁷ and through trackless deserts she seeks the retired groves in the place, where a remote wood lies concealed through the glens. Then she chooses a lofty palm, with top reaching to the heavens, which has the pleasing²⁰²⁸ name of phoenix from the bird, and where²⁰²⁹ no hurtful living creature can break through, or slimy serpent, or any bird of prey. Then Æolus shuts in the winds in hanging caverns, lest they should injure the bright²⁰³⁰ air with their blasts, or lest a cloud collected by the south wind through the empty sky should remove the rays of the sun, and be a hindrance²⁰³¹ to the bird. Afterwards she builds for herself either a nest or a tomb, for she perishes that she may live; yet she produces herself. Hence she collects juices and odours, which the Assyrian gathers from the rich wood, which the wealthy Arabian gathers; which either the Pygmæan²⁰³² nations, or India crops, or the Sabæan land produces from its soft bosom. Hence she heaps together cinnamon and the odour of the far-scented amomum, and balsams with mixed leaves. Neither the twig of the mild cassia nor of the fragrant acanthus is absent, nor the tears and rich drop of frankincense. To these she adds tender ears²⁰³³ of flourishing spikenard, and joins the too pleasing pastures²⁰³⁴ of myrrh. Immediately she places her body about to be changed on the strewed nest, and her quiet limbs on such²⁰³⁵ a couch. Then with her mouth she scatters juices around and upon her limbs, about to die with her own funeral rites. Then amidst various odours she yields up²⁰³⁶ her life, nor fears the faith of so great a deposit. In the meantime her body, destroyed by death, which proves the source of life,²⁰³⁷ is hot, and the heat itself produces a flame; and it conceives fire afar off from the light of heaven: it blazes, and is dissolved into burnt ashes. And these ashes collected in death it fuses,²⁰³⁸ as it were, into a mass, and has an effect²⁰³⁹ resembling seed. From this an animal is said to arise without limbs, but the worm is said to be of a milky colour. And it suddenly increases vastly with an imperfectly formed²⁰⁴⁰ body, and collects itself into the appearance of a well-

2027 Venus was worshipped in Syro-Phœnice.

2028 Gratum; others read "Graiium," Grecian.

2029 Quà; another reading is "quam," that which.

2030 Purpureum. There may be a reference to the early dawn.

2031 Obsit.

2032 Some ancient writers place these fabulous people in India, others beyond Arabia.

2033 Aristas. The word is sometimes applied, as here, to spikenard.

2034 Et sociat myrrhæ pascua grata nimis; another reading is, "et sociam myrrhæ vim, Panachaia tuæ."

2035 In talique toro; others, "vitalique toro," i.e., on a death-bed.

2036 Commendat.

2037 Genitali, "productive;" observe the antithesis.

2038 Conflat.

2039 Effectum; others read, "ad fœtum seminis instar habent."

2040 Cum corpore curto; others read, "cum tempore certo."

rounded egg. After this it is formed again, such as its figure was before, and the phoenix, having burst her shell,²⁰⁴¹ shoots forth, even as caterpillars²⁰⁴² in the fields, when they are fastened by a thread to a stone, are wont to be changed into a butterfly. No food is appointed for her in our world, nor does any one make it his business to feed her while unfledged. She sips the delicate²⁰⁴³ ambrosial dews of heavenly nectar which have fallen from the star-bearing pole. She gathers these; with these the bird is nourished in the midst of odours, until she bears a natural form. But when she begins to flourish with early youth, she flies forth now about to return to her native abode. Previously, however, she encloses in an ointment of balsam, and in myrrh and dissolved²⁰⁴⁴ frankincense, all the remains of her own body, and the bones or ashes, and relics²⁰⁴⁵ of herself, and with pious mouth brings it into a round form,²⁰⁴⁶ and carrying this with her feet, she goes to the rising of the sun, and tarrying at the altar, she draws it forth in the sacred temple. She shows and presents herself an object of admiration to the beholder; such great beauty is there, such great honour abounds. In the first place, her colour is like the brilliancy²⁰⁴⁷ of that which the seeds of the pomegranate when ripe take under the smooth rind;²⁰⁴⁸ such colour as is contained in the leaves which the poppy produces in the fields, when Flora spreads her garments beneath the blushing sky. Her shoulders and beautiful breasts shine with this covering; with this her head, with this her neck, and the upper parts of her back shine. And her tail is extended, varied with yellow metal, in the spots of which mingled purple blushes. Between her wings there is a bright²⁰⁴⁹ mark above, as²⁰⁵⁰ Tris on high is wont to paint a cloud from above. She gleams resplendent with a mingling of the green emerald, and a shining beak²⁰⁵¹ of

2041 Ruptis exuviis. The same word is used by Virgil to describe the serpent slipping its skin—"positis exuviis."

2042 Tineæ.

2043 Tenues; others read "teneri."

2044 Thure soluto.

2045 Exuvias suas.

2046 In formam conglobat.

2047 Quem croceum. The word is properly used to denote the colour of saffron; it is also applied to other bright colours.

2048 Sub cortice lævi; the common reading is "sub sidere cæli."

2049 Clarum insigne; others read, "aurum...insigneque."

2050 Ceu; others read, "seu."

2051 Gemmea cuspis. Her beak is of horn, but bright and transparent as a gem.

pure horn opens itself. Her eyes are large;²⁰⁵² you might believe that they were two jacinths;²⁰⁵³ from the middle of which a bright flame shines. An irradiated crown is fitted²⁰⁵⁴ to the whole of her head, resembling on high the glory of the head of Phœbus.²⁰⁵⁵ Scales cover her thighs spangled with yellow metal, but a rosy²⁰⁵⁶ colour paints her claws with honour. Her form is seen to blend the figure of the peacock with that of the painted bird of Phasis.²⁰⁵⁷ The winged creature which is produced in the lands of the Arabians, whether it be beast or bird, can scarcely equal her magnitude.²⁰⁵⁸ She is not, however, slow, as birds which through the greatness of their body have sluggish motions, and a very heavy²⁰⁵⁹ weight. But she is light and swift, full of royal beauty. Such she always shows herself²⁰⁶⁰ in the sight of men. Egypt comes hither to such a wondrous²⁰⁶¹ sight, and the exulting crowd salutes the rare bird. Immediately they carve her image on the consecrated marble, and mark both the occurrence and the day with a new title. Birds of every kind assemble together; none is mindful of prey, none of fear. Attended by a chorus of birds, she flies through the heaven, and a crowd accompanies her, exulting in the pious duty. But when she has arrived at the regions of pure ether, she presently returns;²⁰⁶² afterwards she is concealed in her own regions. But oh, bird of happy lot and fate,²⁰⁶³ to whom the god himself granted to be born from herself! Whether it be female, or male, or neither, or both, happy she, who enters into²⁰⁶⁴ no compacts of Venus. Death is Venus to her; her only pleasure is in death: that she may be born, she desires previously to die. She is an offspring to herself, her own father and heir, her own nurse, and always a foster-child to herself. She is herself indeed, but not



2052 *Ingentes oculi*; others read, “*oculos*.”

2053 *Hyacinthos*; gems of this colour.

2054 *Æquatur*.

2055 i.e., the rays of the sun.

2056 *Roseus*; others read, “*roseo honore*.”

2057 The pheasant.

2058 *Magniciem*. Some take this as denoting the name of a bird, but no such bird is known.

2059 *Pergrave pondus*; others read, “*per grave pondus*,” by reason of the heavy weight.

2060 *Se exhibit*; others read “*se probat*.”

2061 *Tanti ad miracula visus*. [*Deut. iv. 17.*]

2062 *Inde*; others read, “*ille*,” but the allusion is very obscure.

2063 *Fili*, “the thread,” i.e. of fate.

2064 *Colit*. [*Badger's Nestorians*, vol. i. p. 122.]

the same, since she is herself, and not herself, having gained eternal life by the blessing of death.

