CHAPTER TWO

THE EGYPTIAN BENU AND THE CLASSICAL PHOENIX

The Classical reports on the phoenix provide some grounds for the assumption that the myth concerning this bird originated in Egypt or at least that a strong Egyptian influence on its early development must be taken into account. Herodotus says that his information about the phoenix was based on reports of the priests of the Egyptian Heliopolis.¹ This city also plays a large part in the traditions concerning the death and resurrection of the bird: the young phoenix brings his dead predecessor there to render him the last honours in the temple of the sun or the old phoenix undergoes there his fiery death and rebirth.²

In the nineteenth century the thesis of the Egyptian origin of the myth seemed to have been confirmed by the discovery that the ancient Egyptians in Heliopolis had indeed worshipped a sun bird that was called benu (bnw) and showed certain points of agreement with the Classical phoenix.

In the analysis of the phoenix myth we shall be faced more than once with the question of whether in the modern literature an Egyptian background has been correctly assumed for a given detail. Furthermore, anyone who examines the Egyptological literature on the benu will be struck by the fact that in the most recent studies by Classicists use is made of outmoded and even quite incorrect views about this Egyptian sun bird. It is therefore desirable to start here by reviewing the information about the benu provided by Egyptology. As has already been mentioned, for anyone who is himself unable to read the sources in question, this is a precarious undertaking, the more so since the results of the investigations carried out by Egyptologists differ, and the translations, which in any case offer only rather unsteady support, are mutually divergent. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made.³

¹ Herodotus, II, 73; see also below, p. 190-193, 401-403.
² See p. 146-150.
³ In connection with the following review I wish to acknowledge my in-
Just how the benu was visualized in the time of the Old Kingdom is not entirely clear. It is usually assumed that it was thought to resemble the yellow wagtail. At a later period it was always represented as a heron bearing two long feathers at the back of its head.\textsuperscript{1} In Roman times the Egyptian manner of representing the benu was merged with the Classical iconography of the phoenix.\textsuperscript{2}

The benu played a role in the creation traditions of On-Heliopolis from the earliest times. There is a pyramid text in which it is considered, together with kheprer, the scarab (later called khepri), as one of the forms taken by Atum, the ancient god of Heliopolis, who was early associated with the sun god Re. In this text a relationship is established between Atum and the benu and between the hill which arose from the primeval waters at the creation and the so-called benu, a roughly conical stone in the temple at Heliopolis. The phoenix and the benu are respectively symbols of the god of creation and the hill of creation.\textsuperscript{3}

debtedness to Professor J. Zandee (University of Utrecht), whose contribution of literature references and suggestions made it possible to avoid several serious misconceptions and omissions. Needless to say, I bear sole responsibility for the final result.

\textsuperscript{1} For the various interpretations of the earliest and later representations of the benu, see e.g. Bonnet, 594. Good illustrations of the benu as heron can be found in such works as E. A. W. Budge, The Book of the Dead, fac-similes of the papyri of Hunefer, Anhai, Kerasher and Netchemet…, London, 1899, pl. VIII; A Lothe, Chefs-d’œuvres de la peinture égyptienne, Paris, 1954, pl. 63 (sarcophagus of Senedjem) and pl. 152 (tomb of Irenifer; see also here pl. I, 1); G. Posener, Dictionnaire de la civilisation égyptienne, Paris, 1959, 223 (tomb of Anorchchawi). A number of vignettes from the Book of the Dead with representations of the benu are given in E. Naville, Das aegyptische Todtenbuch der XVIII bis XX Dynastie, I, Berlin, 1886, pl. XXVIII (Ch. 17) and pl. XCV (Ch. 83). See also G. Roeder, Die ägyptische Religion in Text und Bild IV: Der Ausklang der ägyptischen Religion, Zürich, 1961, 342, fig. 27 (Rap. Rind).

\textsuperscript{2} See below, p. 238-246.

\textsuperscript{3} Pyramid text, no. 1652; another interpretation in R. O. Faulkner, The Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Oxford, 1969, 246, but see e.g. W. B. Kristensen, Het leven uit de dood, 2nd ed., Haarlem, 1949, 111; H. Kees, Der Götterglaube im alten Aegypten, Leipzig, 1941, 217; R. T. Rundle Clark, The origin of the phoenix. A study in Egyptian religious symbolism, in University of Birmingham Historical Journal, 2, 1949-1950, 14-16; cf. also J. Zandee in BiOr, 10, 1953, 113-114. For the primeval hill in general, see e.g. Kristensen, o.c., 89-114 and A. de Buck, De Egyptische voorstellingen betreffende de oerheuvel, Thesis Leiden, Leiden 1922; for Heliopolis, 23-24.