CHAPTER SIX

THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF THE PHOENIX

I. THE TWO PRINCIPAL VERSIONS OF THE MYTH

The essence of the phoenix myth is that by dying the bird renews its life. Although the many references to the myth in the Classical and Early Christian literature differ at various points, almost all of them can be reduced to one of two versions. In both these versions, when the old phoenix feels its death approaching it begins to collect aromatics.¹

According to the less common of these two traditions, the bird dies on the nest it has built of aromatic plants, after which it decomposes. From its decaying remains the new phoenix is generated, usually starting as a worm. The young bird then departs without delay for Heliopolis, in Egypt, carrying with it the remains of its predecessor, which it places on the altar of the god of the sun. The link between the phoenix and Egypt thus established was given the main emphasis by Herodotus, who makes no reference, however, to the bird’s origin.²

According to the other and more wide-spread tradition, the old phoenix burns with the collected aromatics, which are usually ignited by the heat of the sun; from its ashes the new phoenix arises. The intermediate stage of the worm is often inserted in this version too, although it has little point because the flesh of the old phoenix does not pass through a period of decomposition.³ It therefore seems very likely that the worm was borrowed from the other version. Many authors have the phoenix go from its native country to the Egyptian Heliopolis and burn itself on the altar there. It is possible that this

¹ See Chapter VI, 2.
² For a discussion of the tradition followed by Herodotus, see p. 190-193.
³ Epiphanius sensed the illogicality of the worm arising from the ashes and therefore assumed that it emerged after some time from bits of intact flesh that remained untouched by the fire; see p. 212. In the Graeco-Roman world it was known that organisms originate in a decaying body; see p. 187.
too did not belong to the original version but was added to re-affirm
the link between the phoenix and Heliopolis.

This idea is inescapable when one studies the texts in which India
is said to be the country of the phoenix. All the authors concerned
hold to the tradition in which the phoenix burns; most of them have
this take place in India itself, and therefore were seemingly unaware
of the flight to Heliopolis and the resulting link between the phoenix
and Egypt; none of them, furthermore, mentions the intermediate
stage of the worm. Before we draw any conclusions from this, we
must give some attention to the authors who do have the phoenix
journey from India to Egypt. We may start most conveniently with
Philostratus.

In Philostratus the mention of the phoenix is made by Apollonius
of Tyana. His entire report gives the impression of being an attempt
to reconcile the forms of the myth concerning India and Egypt, since
he distinguishes between “Egyptian” and “Indian” concepts of the
phoenix. He calls the bird’s journey to Egypt a special elaboration
of the Egyptians, but immediately adds that the Indians agree with
them. He assumes on the one hand that the phoenix burns itself,
but on the other, in mentioning the bird’s death, he uses a rather
vague word suggesting decomposition more than cremation. It
remains possible that here the otherwise extremely unreliable Phi-

1 Dionysius, De aucionio, I, 32; Sidonius, Carmina, VII, 353-354, XI, 326-
327; John Lydus, De mensibus, IV, 11 (but see p. 148); Schol. on Persius,
I, 46. The authors who give the Far East more in general as the abode of
the phoenix can also be included here: Claudian, Phoenix, 1-10, De consulatu
Stilichonis, II, 414-420, who after all ends by having the phoenix go to
Heliopolis (see p. 158 and also p. 225) and the Schol. on Lucan, VI, 680,
no. 1-4. Aristides, XVII, 2, XX, 19, XLV, 107 and Lucian, De morte
Peregrini, 27, Navigium, 44, mention India as the abode of the phoenix and
also the fire version, but are too brief to offer any indication of whether they
were aware of the bird’s flight to Egypt and the burning there.

2 Philostratus, Vita Apollonii Tyanaei, III, 49: & δὲ Αἰγύπτιοι περὶ αὐτοῦ
ξύδουσιν, ὡς ἐς Αἰγυπτον φέρεται, καὶ Ἰνθοὶ ξυμμαρτυροῦσι.

3 This is evident from έκκεδάμενοι τῶν ἄκτινον and his rendition of the
“Indian” conception that at its death the phoenix sings funeral hymns,
which lies in the direction of the prayer to the sun to ignite the pyre; see
p. 201.

4 Ibid.: τὸν φολικα τὸν ἐν τῇ καλῇ τηκόμενον, cf. Liddell-Scott, 1786-1787,
s.v., τῆκω and p. 203.