CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PHOENIX AS BIRD OF THE SUN

I. EXTERNAL APPEARANCE

It has become evident that in all the versions of the phoenix myth a connection between the bird and the sun was understood with respect to the bird’s death and resurrection. A number of authors mention it explicitly. The Roman Senator Manilius said, according to Pliny, that in Arabia the phoenix was consecrated to the sun; the same is found in Tacitus. For the later poets in particular the term “sun bird” had become the established indication for the phoenix. Horapollo calls the bird a symbol of the sun. We shall see that its abode was often sought in the extreme East, where the sun rises: in this sense Lactantius has it live in the “grove of the sun”.

The close connection between the phoenix and the sun is also expressed in the external appearance assigned to the bird. This holds especially for the attributes usually associated with the head of the phoenix: a nimbus with or without rays. Before going further into this point it should be mentioned that a more natural adornment of the head was also described. In his report of the phoenix Pliny says that its head is ornamented with a crest of feathers. We shall see in due course that in Classical times the appearance of the phoe-

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2 Pliny, X, 4: sacrum in Arabia Soli esse; Tacitus, Ann., VI, 28: sacrum Soli id animal.
5 See p. 311.
6 Pliny, X, 3: caputque plumeo apice honestante.
nix was compared to that of the peacock.\textsuperscript{1} This led some medieval scholars to claim that both birds also had the same kind of head array.\textsuperscript{2} But this view, which also found expression in art,\textsuperscript{3} does not occur in the available Classical and Early Christian sources. Pliny even made an explicit distinction between the crest of the phoenix and that of the peacock: the phoenix has a row of feathers on its head, a longer one projecting above the others in the middle, the peacock has "hairy little trees".\textsuperscript{4} The pointed shape of the crest is also mentioned by Solinus; Claudian speaks of a comb.\textsuperscript{5} In art, this natural decoration without the addition of a nimbus or rays occurred only occasionally. On a gem in Berlin the phoenix is represented with six vertical feathers on its head, the fourth from the front bearing a small bulbous tip, making it unlikely that an aureole was intended. In the phoenix mosaic in Edessa the bird bears a cruciform figure on its head, and on the early Christian sarcophagus in Verona the head clearly carries a kind of comb.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{1} See p. 252-253.


\textsuperscript{3} See e.g. the phoenix in the \textit{Bestiarium} in the British Museum (Harley, 3244) in O. E. Saunders, \textit{English illumination}, II, Florence-Paris, 1928, pl. 51b. The same head ornament is carried by the phoenix in an early edition of the \textit{Travels of John Mandeville}, see A. Schramm, \textit{Der Bilderschmuck der Frühdrucke}, IV, Leipzig, 1921, 19, pl. 91, no. 597 (Anton Sorg, Augsburg, 1481); in other editions it wears a crown: Schramm, XXI, Leipzig, 1938, pl. 76, no. 409 (Bernhard Richel, Basel, ca. 1481) and, almost identical, Schramm, XX, Leipzig, 1937, pl. 128, no. 1044 (Johann Priss, Strassburg, 1483).

\textsuperscript{4} Pliny, XI, 121: \textit{... apices, diversi quidem generis: phoenici plumarum serie e medio eo exeunte alia, pavonibus crinitis arbusculis}.

\textsuperscript{5} Solinus, 33, 11: \textit{capite honorato in conum plumis extantibus}, on which depends Theodoric, \textit{De mirab. mundi}, 762: \textit{surgit honoratus plumis a vertice cones}. Claudian, \textit{Phoenix}, 19: \textit{cristatus apex}; In his description of the head ornament of the phoenix, Claudian made very free use of the data in Pliny, see p. 236

\textsuperscript{6} See pl. X, 2; XIII; XXVI, 2.