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Folks Used to Believe

by ALVIN F.
HARLOW

THE PHENIX



THE earliest description we have of that wonderful bird which has given its name to insurance companies and other business, to clubs and what not, which has bequeathed to orators and writers that time-worn expression, "arising, phoenixlike, from its ashes," is in Herodotus (484-424 B. C.). He says that every 500 years the bird appeared, coming from Arabia to Heliopolis, Egypt, bringing its father embalmed in a ball of myrrh, and buried him in the Temple of the Sun. The phoenix was described to Herodotus as having red and golden plumage and closely resembling an eagle in size and shape. It is this conception of it which is generally used in emblematic designs.

Pliny says that there is only one phoenix at a time, and that at the end of his long life he builds a nest of cassia and frankincense, in which he dies; from the body comes a worm which grows into the young phoenix. Tacitus claims that the young bird lays its father on the altar in Heliopolis and burns him there.

The commonest conception is that of the *Physiologus*, a collection of early Christian legends, in which the phoenix is said to be an Indian bird subsisting on air, who, at the end of 500 years, loads himself with spices, flies to Heliopolis, enters the Temple and is burned to ashes on the altar. From the ashes arises the young phoenix, which by the next day is feathered. On the third day, fully grown, he salutes the priest and flies back toward India. The period at which he appears is usually given as 500 years, though other writers go as high as 1,461 or even 7,006 years.

Tacitus says the bird first appeared under Sesostris (a legendary Egyptian king), then about 550 B. C., then about 225 B. C., and then in 34 A. D., though many questioned whether this last one was a real phoenix, as it came too soon. The phoenix shown in Rome in 47 A. D. was generally admitted to be an imposture. Ezechiel, a Jewish writer, and others speak of the sweet song of the phoenix, which was said to accompany the rising of the sun.