

Phoenix, in ancient Egypt and in Classical antiquity, a fabulous bird associated with the worship of the sun. The Egyptian phoenix was said to be as large as an eagle, with brilliant scarlet and gold plumage and a melodious cry. Only one phoenix existed at any time, and it was very long-lived—no ancient authority gave it a life span of less than 500 years. As its end approached, the phoenix fashioned a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, set it on fire, and was consumed in the flames. From the pyre miraculously sprang a new phoenix, which, after embalming its father's ashes in an egg of myrrh, flew with the ashes to Heliopolis ("City of the Sun") in Egypt, where it deposited them on the altar in the temple of the Egyptian god of the sun, Re. A variant of the story made the dying phoenix fly to Heliopolis and immolate itself in the altar fire, from which the young phoenix then rose.



Phoenix plucking at vegetation (left) and lying in flames waiting to be reborn from the ashes (right), 12th-century Latin bestiary. *The British Library/Heritage-Images*

The Egyptians associated the phoenix with immortality, and that symbolism had a widespread appeal in late antiquity. The phoenix was compared to undying Rome, and it appears on the coinage of the late Roman Empire as a symbol of the Eternal City. It was also widely interpreted as an allegory of resurrection and life after death—ideas that also appealed to emergent Christianity.

In Islamic mythology the phoenix was identified with the 'anqā' (Persian: *sīmorgh*), a huge mysterious bird (probably a heron) that was originally created by God with all perfections but thereafter became a plague and was killed.