In mythology the Phoenix bird was a fantastic creature that could regenerate itself. It is amazing that the people of ancient Greece and Rome believed that it actually existed. Many ancient writers wrote about it, including Ovid, Tacitus and Lactantius. The stories differed in detail, but all agreed that it was unique. The Greek historian, Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BC, said he had never seen the bird, which was a great rarity. He had seen pictures of it at Heliopolis in Egypt where it went once every five hundred years, and they showed that its shape and size were like an eagle and its plumage was partly red and partly gold.

It was generally believed that there was only one Phoenix, which lived in the east near the rising of the sun, in Arabia or India. When it was about to die it made a nest of aromatic branches, set it on fire, and was consumed in the flames. Then a new Phoenix rose from the ashes. In a variant account the bird dies and simply emerges like a worm from the decomposing body of its predecessor. According to Herodotus the new bird encased its
parent’s remains in a ball of myrrh and flew with it to Heliopolis where it was deposited in the temple of the sun-god, but he admitted that he found this incredible.

The story of the Phoenix would have had great resonance with the beliefs of the Egyptians for whom the Phoenix symbolized resurrection. The idea of life after death was fundamental to Egyptian religion, and embalming the dead was a frequent practice in Egypt. Also the image of a flaming red bird coming from the east was like the sun rising every morning, and worship of the sun-god, Re, played an important part in Egyptian religion. The bird is sometimes shown on coins with rays coming from its head, which presumably indicated that it represented the sun.

Following the incorporation of Egypt into the Roman Empire the Phoenix began to appear on Roman coins. It first appeared on coins of Hadrian (117-138 AD). He was a cultured man who visited all parts of his empire including Egypt in 130 AD, but it was in 118 AD that he issued a gold aureus in honour of his deified predecessor, Trajan. (Figure 1) The Phoenix appears on the reverse with a radiant halo. The absence of a legend suggests that its significance as a symbol of resurrection was well-known. Its appearance on this coin was very appropriate because just as it rose from the ashes, it was believed that Trajan would rise from the huge pyre that was set on fire to consume his corpse. He died at Selinus in Asia Minor and his body was cremated there, but the ashes were taken to Rome where they were interred at the base of his column, which still stands. (Figure 2)

On a gold coin issued during the period 119-122 AD the Phoenix stands on a globe held by Hadrian as he emerges from an oval frame. (Figure 3) It symbolizes the new golden age that Hadrian

Figure 2 – Trajan’s Column in Rome. A statue of Trajan at the top disappeared in the Middle Ages but was replaced by one of Saint Peter in 1587 (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Szilas.)

Figure 3 – Aureus of Hadrian with his bust on the obverse. On the reverse he holds the Phoenix on a globe as he steps out of an oval. Below: SAECVR. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 49, Lot 215)

Figure 4 – Aureus of Hadrian with Egypt personified as a woman on the reverse. An ibis stands at her feet. (Ponterio and Associates, Auction January 2013, Lot 5051)

Figure 5 – Billon tetradrachm of Antoninus Pius with the Phoenix on the reverse. The letters Lς below the bird stand for “year 6”, which is 143 AD. (Emporium Hamburg, Auction 68, Lot 354)
was bringing about, and the inscription below the oval is SAEC AVR (saeculum aureus), which means ‘the Golden Age’. On another gold coin of Hadrian issued in 136 AD Egypt is personified as a woman reclining and leaning on a basket with a snake nearby, perhaps to remind the viewer of Cleopatra and her death by snake-bite. The woman holds a sistrum, which was a sort of rattle and an attribute of the goddess Isis, and an ibis stands at her feet. (Figure 4) Its long curved beak is clearly shown, and its appearance here is warranted by its frequency in Egypt, especially in the Nile delta.

It was sacred to the Egyptians, as was a heron known as the benu. Like the Phoenix the benu was associated with sun-worship and symbolized life after death, and notions about the Phoenix and the benu tended to merge in Hellenistic times. In his book, *The Myth of the Phoenix* according to Classical and early Christian traditions, Roelof Van den Broek says that the myth of the Phoenix is related to that of the Egyptian benu but it did not develop directly from it. His book of 487 pages, published in 1972, is a detailed, scholarly account of the myth. It includes a comprehensive list of the ancient coins with black-and-white photos.

Hadrian was succeeded by Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD). The aureus that he issued to honour Hadrian shows him flying up on an eagle. Probably he wanted the symbolism to be more Roman and less Egyptian. In Egypt, however, he did issue a coin with the Phoenix on the reverse, and the bird is shown with a crest on its head, which is what Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) described it as having. (Figure 5) Antoninus was devoted to his wife Faustina and when she died in 141 AD he was devastated and he issued a large number of coins in her honour. The irony here is that she was apparently not devoted to him. In the Historia Augusta, written in the 4th century, it is recorded that “many things were said about the great looseness and heedless living of his wife.” Anyway he issued sestertii with the divine Faustina on the obverse, and Eternity personified as a woman on the reverse. Eternity sits on a throne (Figure 6) or stands (Figure 7) and holds the Phoenix on a globe.

Antoninus Pius was succeeded by Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD) who was also devoted to his wife, Faustina Junior. She also had a reputation for marital infidelity, but when she died in 175 AD he was grief-stricken and he issued many coins in her honour. On some of the bronze, silver and gold coins she is seated

**Figure 6 – Sestertius of Antoninus Pius with a bust of his deceased wife, Faustina, on the obverse. On the reverse Eternity personified as a woman sits on a throne and holds the Phoenix on a globe. The obverse legend means ‘Divine Faustina’. (Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 155, Lot 548)**

**Figure 7 – Sestertius of Antoninus Pius like Figure 6 but Eternity is standing. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 46, Lot 584)**

**Figure 8 – Sestertius of Marcus Aurelius with a bust of his deceased wife, Faustina Junior, on the obverse. On the reverse she sits on a throne. In her right hand she holds the Phoenix on a globe. The reverse legend is DIVAE FAUSTINAE PIAE (to the divine Faustina, the Dutiful). (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 74, Lot 312)**

**Figure 9 – Antoninianus of Aemilian. On the reverse Roma stands holding a spear and a shield. In her right hand she holds the Phoenix on a globe. The reverse legend is ROMAE AEterni (to eternal Rome). (ArtCoins Roma, Auction 6, Lot 1176)**
holding the Phoenix on a globe. (Figure 8) The reverse legend is MATRI CASTRORVM (to the Mother of the Camps), a title that refers to her accompanying her husband on his military campaigns.

The Phoenix occasionally appears on coins of the 3rd century. Aemilian, who reigned for only a few months in 253 AD, issued a lot of coins, one of which showed Rome personified as a woman holding the Phoenix on a globe. (Figure 9) Carinus (283-285 AD) issued a billon antoninianus with Aeternitas (Eternity) standing and holding the Phoenix on a globe. (Figure 10)

The Phoenix is resurrected in the 4th century on bronze coins of Constans and Constantius II, sons of Constantine the Great, who was the first Christian emperor. On the reverse of a very common coin the emperor stands on a galley steered by Victory. With his left hand he supports a standard with the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ on it, and in his right hand he holds the Phoenix on a globe. (Figure 11) The sons also issued bronze coins with only the Phoenix on the reverse. The bird stands either on a globe (Figure 12) or a pyre (Figure 13). On all these coins the reverse legend is FEL TEMP REPARATIO (happy times restored), which explains that the Phoenix symbolized a new age replacing the old.

Although the sons of Constantine were nominally Christian their behaviour was far from Christian. Within six months of their father's death in 337 AD they conspired to murder their half-cousins Delmatius and Hanniballianus together with most of their family members and followers. For genuine Christians the Phoenix was important as an example of resurrection. As in the religion of ancient Egypt, belief in resurrection was fundamental to Christianity, and the Phoenix featured in early Christian mosaics (Figure 14) and other art forms.
Clement of Rome, who is listed as the third bishop of Rome after St Peter, wrote a letter in about 95 AD in which he said that the Phoenix was a sign that resurrection could occur. It was written to the Christians in Corinth, and in the second century it achieved almost scriptural status in several churches in the Roman Empire.

In the early Christian era misunderstanding resulted from the Greek word φοινιξ (phoenix), which could be translated as purple, Phoenician, palm tree or as the Phoenix bird. The word occurs in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) in Psalm 91:13 (92:12 in the English version), and early Christians, alert to references to resurrection in the Bible, translated the verse as: “The righteous will flourish like a Phoenix”, but the correct translation (as in the Hebrew version) is: “The righteous flourish like the palm tree.” Tertullian, an important 3rd century theologian, quotes the mistranslated verse and claims that the Phoenix is evidence for resurrection. In De Resurrectione Mortuorum 13 (Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead, Section 13) he wrote, “What more manifestly and with better attestation meets the case, what other fact has such a proof?”

Even in the 12th century the Phoenix was cited as proof of Christ’s Resurrection. In this regard these writers were wrong. The Phoenix was just a fantasy: it never existed. Jesus certainly did...
exist and Christians believe that he was resurrected. After his crucifixion something tremendous happened to convince a small group of fearful Jews that he had risen from the dead and to change their belief into the world religion we know today as Christianity. In 2008 Roy Williams, an Australian lawyer, wrote a book to explain why he and modern Christians believe in God and the Resurrection. It was entitled, *God, Actually*, and it was published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC Books).

It was not until the 16th century that people began to question whether the Phoenix bird existed, and as people realized that it belonged completely to the realm of fable, it appeared less often in Christian art. It persisted as a symbol of the Resurrection, occasionally being incorporated into ecclesiastical heraldry. (Figure 15) Sometimes it appeared on coins and medallions, as on a medallion of Christina, Queen of Sweden (1626-1689). This large silver medallion was made by the renowned medallist, Sebastian Dädler, to celebrate her succession. Christina was a devout Christian and she commemorated the death of her father, Gustav II Adolphus, by the symbolism of the Phoenix being resurrected. (Figure 16) Ferdinand III, who was the king of Sicily from 1759 to 1825, issued large silver coins with the Phoenix on the reverse. (Figure 17) When Greece achieved independence in 1827 the Phoenix was chosen as a symbol of the rebirth of the nation, and under its first president, John Capodistrias (1827-1831), copper and silver coins were issued showing the bird rising from the flames with a cross above. The silver coin was called a phoenix. (Figure 18) The bird is still a popular subject for artists who deal in the fantastic, and some modern designs are striking. (Figure 19)

The Phoenix has meant many things to many people. It has represented the sun, renewal, immortality, rebirth, resurrection and even Christ himself. The idea of the Phoenix as the human spirit rising from the ashes of despair was put into words in the song, *Rise Like a Phoenix*. It won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest and was sung by Conchita Wurst (Figure 20):

*I rise up to the sky  
You threw me down but  
I’m gonna fly  
And rise like a Phoenix  
Out of the ashes.*

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