

Rome's Imperial Fate Sealed: Tacitus' Phoenix and Germanicus

1. The Phoenix Account (*Ann.* 6.28)

¹ Paulo Fabio L. Vitellio consulibus post longum saeculorum ambitum avis phoenix in Aegyptum venit praebuitque materiem doctissimis indigenarum et Graecorum multa **super eo miraculo** disserendi. de quibus congruunt et plura ambigua, sed cognitu non absurda promere libet.

² sacrum Soli id animal et ore ac distinctu pinnarum a **ceteris avibus diversum** consentiunt qui formam eius effinxere: de numero annorum varia traduntur.

³ maxime vulgatum quingentorum spatium: sunt qui adseverent mille quadringentos sexaginta unum interici, prioresque alites Sesoside primum, post Amaside dominantibus, dein Ptolemaeo, qui ex Macedonibus tertius regnavit, in civitatem, cui Heliopolis nomen, advolavisse, **multo ceterarum volucrum comitatu novam faciem mirantium.**

⁴ **sed antiquitas quidem obscura:** inter Ptolemaeum ac Tiberium minus ducenti quinquaginta anni fuerunt. **unde non nulli falsum hunc phoenicem neque Arabum e terris credidere, nihilque usurpavisse ex his quae vetus memoria firmavit.**

⁵ confecto quippe annorum numero, ubi mors propinquet, suis in terris struere nidum eique vim genitalem adfundere ex qua fetum oriri; **et primam adulto curam sepeliendi patris, neque id temere sed sublato murræ pondere temptatoque per longum iter, ubi par oneri, par meatui sit, subire patrium corpus inque Solis aram perferre atque adolere.**

⁶ **haec incerta et fabulosis aucta:** ceterum aspici aliquando in Aegypto eam volucrem non ambigitur.

¹ In the consulship of Paulus Fabius and Lucius Vitellus, after a long cycle of ages a bird known as the phoenix came into Egypt and offered subject-matter to the most learned of the indigenous people and the Greeks for discussing many things **about this wonder.** Concerning which things they agree and the many things that are ambiguous, but not absurd to recognize it is pleasing to publish.

² This animal is sacred to the Sun and they who illustrate its form agree it was **different from the other birds** in its beak and a distinctness of its wings; Various things are handed down concerning the number of the years it appears.

³ The interval of 500 years is most common: There are those who contest that 1,461 years are interposed, and that the earlier birds, first with Sesosis ruling, then with Amasis, next with Ptolemy, who ruled third out of the Macedonians, had flown to the state, which is called Heliopolis, **with a great accompaniment of other birds admiring the new figure.**

⁴ **But antiquity is indeed obscure;** between Ptolemy and Tiberius, there were less than two hundred fifty years. **Because of this, some believed that this phoenix was false and not from the lands of the Arabs, and it had performed nothing out these things, which old memory had established.**

⁵ Indeed with the number of years having been completed, when death was near, in its own land it constructs a nest and into it pours forth its generative power from which a chick arises; **and the first care for the adult is burying the father; nor is it done randomly but with a weight of myrrh taken up and tested through a long journey, when it is equal to its burden, equal to its travel, it takes up its father's corpse and bears it onto the altar of the sun and cremates it.**

⁶ **These things are uncertain and exaggerated by fabulous elements:** but it is not disputed that sometimes this bird is seen in Egypt.

2) Spectacular Bird at Otho's Death (Hist. 2.50.2)

ut conquirere **fabulosa** et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim, ita vulgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim. die, quo Bedriaci certabatur, **avem invisitata specie** apud Regium Lepidum celebri luco consedissee incolae memorant, nec deinde coetu hominum aut circumvolitantium alitum territam pulsamve, donec Otho se ipse interficeret; tum ablatam ex oculis: et tempora reputantibus **initium finemque miraculi** cum Othonis exitu competisse.

i) sacrum Soli id animal et ore ac distinctu pinnarum **a ceteris avibus diversum** consentiunt consentiunt qui formam eius effinxere (6.28.2).

ii) praebuitque materiem doctissimis indigenarum et Graecorum multa **super eo miraculo** disserendi (6.28.1).

iii) haec incerta et **fabulosis** aucta (6.28.6).

Just as I would believe it far from the seriousness of the work undertaken to investigate **incredible marvels** and amuse spirits of readers with fiction, in the same way I would not dare to discredit common stories and traditions. On the day which the battle at Bedriacum occurred, the inhabitants recall that **a bird of unfamiliar appearance** had perched in a popular grove near Regium Lepidum, from there it was not terrified or driven away by the gatherings of men and birds flying around it, until Otho committed suicide; then it vanished from sight: and to those calculating the timing, **the beginning and end of the marvel** had coincided with the death of Otho.

This animal is sacred to the Sun and they who illustrate its form agree it was **different from the other birds** in its beak and a distinctness of its wings.

and [it] offered subject-matter to the most learned of the indigenous people and the Greeks for discussing many things **about this wonder**.

These things are uncertain and exaggerated **by fabulous elements**.

3) Agrippina's Journey and Grief (Ann. 2.75.1)

At Agrippina, quamquam defessa luctu et corpore aegro, omnium tamen quae ultionem morarentur intolerans ascendit classem cum cineribus Germanici et liberis.

i) et primam adulto curam sepeliendi patris, neque id temere sed sublato murrae pondere temptatoque per longum iter, ubi par oneri, par meatui sit, **subire patrum corpus** inque Solis aram perferre atque adolere (6.28.5).

But Agrippina, although exhausted by grief and physically ill, but still intolerant of everything which might delay her revenge she boarded a fleet accompanied by the ashes of Germanicus and by her children

And the first care for the adult is burying the father; nor is it done randomly but with a weight of myrrh taken up and tested through a long journey, when it is equal to its burden, equal to its travel, **it takes up its father's corpse** and bears it onto the altar of the sun and cremates it.

4) The Crowd Greet Agrippina (Ann. 3.1.3)

atque ubi primum ex alto visa classis, complentur non modo portus et proxima maris sed moenia ac tecta, quaque longissime prospectari poterat, maerentium turba et rogantium inter se silentione an voce aliqua egredientem exciperent.

i) in civitatem, cui Heliopolis nomen, advolavisse, **multo ceterarum volucrum comitatu novam faciem mirantium** (6.28.3).

And as soon as the ship was seen out at sea, not only the harbor and nearby surf, but the walls and roof and wherever it afforded the farthest view were filled with a crowd of those lamenting and asking among themselves whether they should greet her arriving with silence or some utterance.

... that [it] had flown to the state, which is called Heliopolis, **with a great accompaniment of other birds admiring the new figure**.

<p>5) <u>Germanicus in Egypt (Ann. 2.59.1)</u></p> <p>M. Silano L. Norbano consulibus Germanicus Aegyptum proficiscitur cognoscendae antiquitatis.</p> <p>i) sed antiquitas quidem obscura (6.28.4)</p>	<p>In the consulship of Marcus Silanus and Lucius Norbanus, Germanicus set out for Egypt for the sake of learning about antiquitas.</p> <p>But antiquitas is indeed obscure</p>
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<p>6) <u>Lack of Funerary Honors (Ann. 3.5.1-2)</u></p> <p>sed tanto plura decora mox tribui par fuisse quanto prima fors negavisset. non fratrem nisi unius diei via, non patrum saltem porta tenus obvium. Fuere qui publici funeris pompam requirerent compararentque quae in Drusum patrem Germanici honora et magnifica Augustus fecisset. ipsum quippe asperrimo hiemis Ticinum usque progressum neque abscedentem a corpore simul urbem intravisse; circumfusas lecto Claudiorum Iuliorumque imagines; defletum in foro, laudatum pro rostris, cuncta a maioribus reperta aut quae posteris invenerint cumulata; at Germanico ne solitos quidem et cuicumque nobili debitos honores contigisse. sane corpus ob longinquitatem itinerum externis terris quoquo modo crematum: sed tanto plura decora mox tribui par fuisse quanto prima fors negavisset. non fratrem nisi unius diei via, non patrum saltem porta tenus obvium. ubi illa veterum instituta, propositam toro effigiem, meditata ad memoriam virtutis carmina et laudationes et lacrimas vel doloris imitamenta?</p> <p>i) unde non nulli falsum hunc phoenicem neque Arabum e terris credidere, nihilque usurpavisse ex his quae vetus memoria firmavit (6.28.4)</p>	<p>There were those who asked after the procession of the public funeral and compared what honorable and magnificent things Augustus had instituted for the father of Germanicus Drusus. They said that indeed Augustus himself in the harshest part of winter had proceeded as far as Ticinum and had entered the city while not leaving the body; that images of the Claudii and Julii had been spread on the bier; he was lamented in the forum, praised before the rostra, everything devised by their ancestors or what things posterity invented were piled high, but that Germanicus had received not even those honors that were customary and owed to every nobleman. Reasonably because of the length of travel his body was cremated in foreign lands in whatever manner: but then it would have been fair that as many and more honors were given, as fortune had denied the first of these. Neither his brother except for the journey of one day, nor his uncle met him at the least as far as the gates. Where were those institutions of the ancients, the effigy placed on the bier, the poems composed in memory of his virtue, and the commendations and the tears – or at least the imitations of grief?</p> <p>Because of this, some believed that this phoenix was false and not from the lands of the Arabs, and it had performed nothing out these things, which old memory had established.</p>
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<p>7) <u>Hope for Germanicus (Ann. 1.33.2)</u></p> <p>quippe Drusi magna apud populum Romanum memoria, credebaturque, si rerum potitus foret, libertatem redditurus; unde in Germanicum favor et spes eadem.</p>	<p>Indeed the memory of Drusus was great among the Roman people, and it was believed that, if he should be in charge of affairs, he would return <i>libertas</i>; from this there was the same favor and hope for Germanicus.</p>
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