

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

Within book 6 of his *Annales*, Tacitus breaks up the historical narrative with an extraordinary account of the appearance of a mythical bird known as the phoenix in Egypt. Although the author treats this episode as fantastical and, as he himself admits, “*promere libet*” (6.28.1), it is clouded with ambiguity since Tacitus is only able to establish as fact that this sort of bird is seen in Egypt at times. Because of this it is difficult to discern what significance this episode has on the rest of the historical narrative. Many scholars, such as H. McCulloch (1984), E. Keitel (1999), and J. Davies (2004) have recognized the appearance of the phoenix as a prodigy foretelling the fall of Tiberius, and further, the reign of terror under the Julio-Claudian dynasty. However I argue that the narrative of the phoenix alludes to the death of Germanicus and along with him the hope of a return to the Republican customs and glory of *antiquitas*.

Instead of solely a portent of impending disaster, the wide parallels that the phoenix account shares with the presence of a spectacular bird at Otho's death in the *Historiae* suggest that the appearance of the phoenix represents the fall of a historical character. At the end of Otho's necrology in 2.50.2, Tacitus describes the obscure bird in a similar way to the phoenix in that both are *miracula* that must be discerned from the other *fabulosa* and are witnessed both by a crowd of humans and other birds. In addition to the similarities between the appearances of these extraordinary birds, there are many aspects of the phoenix narrative that harken back to Germanicus' funeral. Like the phoenix, the deceased Germanicus, attended by his wife and descendants, makes a trip from the far East to their proper resting place. Both are accompanied by a great multitude of witnesses to this spectacle, but more importantly both Germanicus and the latest phoenix do not complete their proper rites and honors that were given to their fathers. The divergence of this phoenix from its long established filial duties highlights the impending

reign of terror under the rest of the Julio-Claudians with the loss of a potential era of peace under Germanicus.

Germanicus also shares a strong connection to the account of the phoenix through the idea of *antiquitas*. At 2.59.1 of Tacitus' *Annales*, Germanicus makes a tour of Egypt, the purpose of which Tacitus describes as for the sake of "*cognoscendae antiquitatis*." As Germanicus turns his attention to the various *miracula* of ancient times, B. Kelly (2010) notes that all the sights are connected by a common theme of failed royal projects and the transience of ages. Likewise this motif of the cyclical fall of great eras over time is an important aspect of the phoenix account, which is also labeled as *antiquitas* (*Ann.* 6.28.4). In addition to the reign of Tiberius, Tacitus cites that the phoenix has appeared three other times under the rule of pharaohs who were known for their achievements and were markers of transitions between great eras within Egypt. The most recent and uncertain sighting of the phoenix seems to mark a perversion in these cycles of great rulers caused by the death of Germanicus, the champion of Republican values.

It is clear that Tacitus believed Germanicus to be able to usher in a reign of renewed morality, an era worthy to be marked by the appearance of the phoenix. Instead though Germanicus and his descendants are snuffed out, and his heir Caligula turns out to be a false hope as well, since he did not hold the same values like Germanicus and Drusus before him. The deviant appearance of the phoenix represents this vain hope in Germanicus and his family to restore the values of *antiquitas* in the face of the looming catastrophe for Rome brought about under the Julio-Claudians.

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