




"I am the mysterious Benu."

Jan Koek

In 1881 the "Royal Cache" of mummies at Deir el-Bahari was discovered by officials after up to ten years of having its treasures being drip-fed onto the Luxor antiquities market. One of the 21st-Dynasty priestly elite found inside the tomb was a woman named Tayuheret .

Now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the busy and brightly-coloured decoration on her coffins (CG 61032/JE 26196) include a typically Egyptian-looking deity: the standing figure of a man with the head of a bird (see page 57). On this occasion, the bird is a heron. This is Benu, the sacred bird of Heliopolis, often cited as the inspiration for the legendary phoenix and a powerful symbol of resurrection.

Benu had a starring role in the creation (and daily recreation) of the universe, and for 3,000 years, his words have been working their magic on the exterior of Tayuheret's outer coffin:



"I am Benu, he who came into being of himself..."



I have come to protect your body...



(and) to give life for eternity to your ba..."

In the last issue of **NILE** (#16, Oct–Nov 2018) we had a brief introduction to Benu—the bird of resurrection. Now, Jan Koek from the Mehen Study Centre for Ancient Egypt explores Benu in the ancient Egyptians' own hieroglyphic texts. We also look at the similarities between Benu and the legendary phoenix; did the story of the phoenix really come out of Egypt?



© JAN KOEK

The tomb of Nefertari (QV 66) in the Valley of the Queens. The upper west wall of the tomb's antechamber (Chamber C) features various gods flanking the queen's mummified body, lying on a lion-headed bier.

This is an illustrated vignette from Chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead; one of the most essential chapters in the "book",

which helps the deceased to identify themselves with Atum and Ra and be reborn into whatever form they wished.

On the left is one of the two lions of the akhet-horizon. In the centre is Benu, symbolising the power of the sun god as creator. Standing protectively at the head of the bier is the goddess Nephthys in her form as a kestrel.



One has to imagine a perch extending out of the waters of the Abyss. On it rests a grey heron, the herald of all things to come. It opens its beak and breaks the silence of the primeval night with the call of life and destiny, which 'determines what is and what is not to be.' Rundle Clark, "Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt" (1959)



BENU

Benu wasn't always a heron. When the first Pyramid Texts appeared around 2350 B.C., designed to steer and cushion the dead pharaoh's launch into the realm of the gods, Benu took the form of a small bird, possibly a wagtail.

The passage in the centre is from Utterance (or Spell) 600 from the Pyramid Texts, and describes the exact moment of creation.

Having this text on his burial chamber wall was an Old Kingdom pharaoh's ticket to eternal renewal. These rebirth rites appear to be written to be read aloud. In the darkness of the sealed tomb chamber, however, they were magically activated to recite on repeat forever. The burial chamber must have been a very noisy place.

As the Pyramid Texts trickled

down to become the Coffin Texts and now accessible to society's elite, Benu changed its appearance to that of the heron, which would be its standard form for the rest of Egyptian history. It's been theorised that the switch

from wagtail to heron may reflect a change in the climate from near the end of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2400 B.C.), which saw wagtail numbers dwindling. Around this time, large areas of the Middle East were hit with a significant drop in rainfall.

Within Utterance 600 Atum is called upon as the self-renewing force who presses "go" on creation, and Kheprer is the manifestation of the sun god bursting forth at dawn. Therefore, Atum-Kheprer refers to that "first sunrise".



"To say: O Atum-Kheprer,



you have become high on the hill,

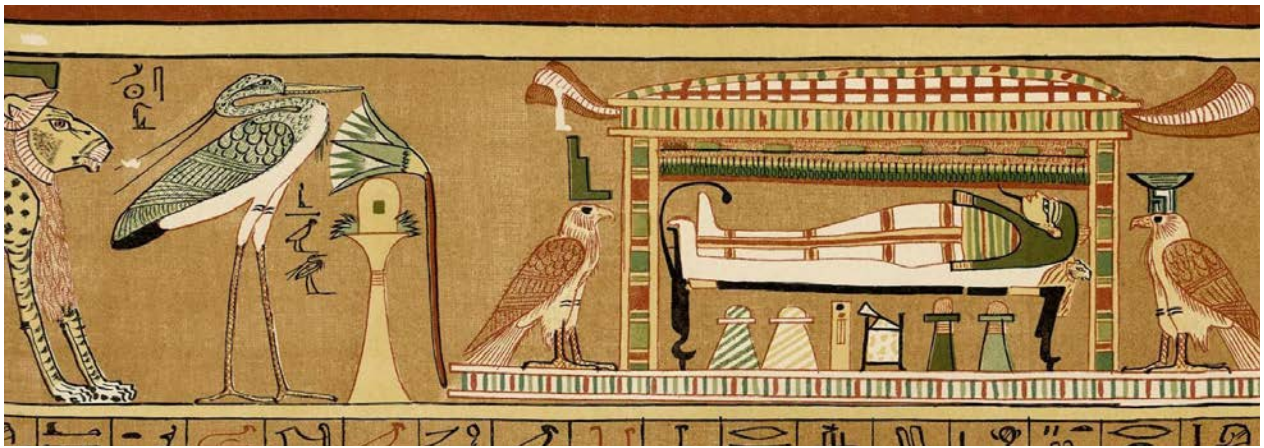


you rise up as the Benben,



in the House of Benu in Heliopolis."

(Pyramid Texts, Utterance 600)



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(ABOVE)

The papyrus of Ani, Royal Scribe and Granary Overseer for Ramesses II, ca. 1250 B.C. (British Museum, EA 10470). This scene is similar to that in the Tomb of Nefertari (previous page), illustrating Chapter 17 in the Book of the Dead.

Here Benu—identified by the hieroglyphs in front of his legs—stands before an altar with a vase and a lotus flower, another symbol of cyclical renewal.

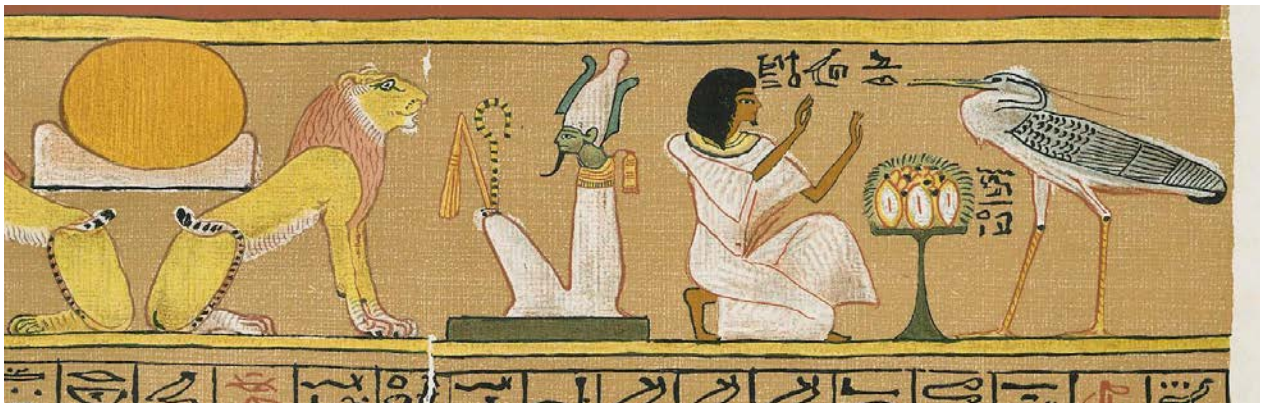
It's interesting that although Ani was himself a scribe, his papyrus was prefabricated, with his name and titles inserted into spaces that had been left for them. Perhaps he had died before could start work on his own—or maybe he simply wanted the luxury of outsourcing it to someone else!

(BELOW)

So popular was Chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead (and so crucial to a successful forever after) that James P. Allen (Brown University, Rhode Island) describes it as “the most frequently copied of all major Egyptian funerary texts”.

This example comes from a papyrus scroll (British Museum EA 9901) discovered in the tomb of Hunefer, who was a “Scribe of the Divine Offerings” under King Seti I—around 25 years earlier than Ani. It was found rolled up inside a figure of Osiris, also now in the British Museum (EA 9861).

We see Hunefer kneeling before a table of offerings in adoration of Benu. The text before Benu states that he is the “ba (manifestation and power) of Ra”.



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THE CITY OF THE SUN

“Ground Zero” for creation was Heliopolis (*iunu* 𓂏𓏏 to the ancient Egyptians). This was the centre of sun worship from the Old Kingdom on (and now a hemmed-in archaeological site surrounded by suburban Cairo, noisy as an Old Kingdom pyramid’s burial chamber). Its ancient significance is echoed in the name “Heliopolis”, coined by the Greeks, which means “city of the sun”.

Aside from Benu (a manifestation of Atum), the chief symbol of creation day was the Benben Stone, kept in the House of Benu at Heliopolis. This divine stone, erected as early as the First Dynasty (ca. 3100 B.C.), symbolised the mound which emerged from the pre-creation watery abyss, personified as Nun, and from where Atum first appeared as the shimmering Benu—as he did with each sunrise.

The Benben Stone has long disappeared, but early inscriptions in the Pyramid Texts show it as a standing stone with a rounded top. However, as Egyptologist Barry Kemp explains in *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, “the rounded shape more frequently jarred on the aesthetics of the Egyptians. It lacked geometric purity. They preferred

to convert the rounded top into a purer geometric shape, a pyramid, and the complete stone into a truncated obelisk.”

It is likely that the original Benben Stone became the prototype for the pyramidions (apexes) of pyramids and obelisks. The ancient Egyptian name for these pointed tops was *benbenet* 𓂏𓏏𓏏𓏏.

Akhenaten, probably the greatest solar devotee in Egypt’s history, returned the Benben to a shape closer to its earliest form when he commissioned a new, round-topped Benben Stone for his new city at Amarna (see page 60).

Fifty years later, Seti I—more a fan of the pointy-top look—created something akin to a granite forest of obelisks at Heliopolis. Although most have been hauled away over the centuries by occupying forces, an inscription on one of Seti I’s obelisks, now in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome speaks of the vast number that he was responsible for:



“(he) fills Heliopolis with obelisks of shining rays.”

HERODOTUS AND THE PHOENIX

It has long been thought that Benu was probably the basis for the Classical myth of the phoenix—the bird that consumes itself in fire before rising triumphantly from the ashes. While the phoenix first appears in a riddle by Greek poet Hesiod around 700 B.C., it was Herodotus who, over three centuries later, rooted the tale of the phoenix in Western imagination after his (supposed) travels in Egypt. This is rather ironic, as Herodotus himself admits that he wasn't really sure that what he was hearing was true:

“There is another sacred bird, too, whose name is phoenix. I myself have never seen it, only pictures of it; for the bird seldom comes into Egypt: once in five hundred years, as the people of Heliopolis say. It is said that the phoenix comes when his father dies... What they say this bird manages to do is incredible to me [as in, ‘I’m struggling to believe this’]. Flying from Arabia to the temple of the sun, they say, he conveys his father encased in myrrh and buries him at the temple of the Sun...”

It is clear that the phoenix was thought to be of eastern origin, and there is no mention of the phoenix dying in a show of flames in this early version—the first allusion to that appears in the first century A.D. in *Epigrams* by Roman poet Martial. Here the poet compares the fiery nest of the phoenix to the destruction and rebuilding of Rome after the great fire during Nero's reign in A.D. 64:

“As when the fire renews the Assyrian nest, whenever one bird has lived its ten cycles, so has new Rome shed her bygone age.”

While Martial doesn't describe the bird, Herodotus does: “His plumage is partly golden and partly red. He is most like an eagle in shape and size.” It seems Herodotus' description is closer to a bird of prey (falcon?), with the parent bird being anointed with herbs and then mummified before burial.

Even if Herodotus got it mostly wrong, the symbolism of the phoenix has resonated ever since. The city of Phoenix, Arizona, for example, owes its name to one of its early civic fathers, Englishman, Darell Duppa, who was inspired by the remains of canals built by the Hohokam indigenous culture that once thrived there (ca. A.D. 700–1400). Duppa's vision was that “a new city will spring phoenix-like upon the ruins of a former civilization.”


Was Benu the origin of the fiery phoenix? Probably not. See the featurette on this very topic from page 61.

THE HOUSES OF BENU

One thing on which most versions of the phoenix tale agree is the bird having its sights set on Heliopolis. For the Egyptians, however, a journey to the House of Benu at Heliopolis to share in his resurrection may not have always been an option, and it seems there may have also been a House of Benu at Thebes.

On the 17th April, 1904, in the courtyard in front of the Seventh Pylon at Karnak Temple, Georges Legrain made a wonderful discovery. Actually, across a three-year-period, he and his team made around 20,000 of them. They were

unearthing the Karnak Cache, a massive clean up of predominantly priestly statues that had been deliberately buried there, possibly around 200 B.C.

On this occasion, it was a small “block statue” of Panupeker , a 22nd-Dynasty (ca. 800 B.C.) Theban priest who officiated at the House of Benu at Karnak. The statue today is in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 36938/CG 42271). Part of the inscription reads:



“May he [Amun] allow me to remain near his shrine.



“My statue having been established in the hwt-bnw...”

Later in the text, his son says to Panupeker:



“May you be established in the hwt-bnw in Thebes.”

Panupeker's titles included “Opener of the Doors of Heaven in Karnak”, suggesting he was entitled to access the super-sacred innermost parts of the temple. Where it was located, however, is still a mystery; no remains have yet been found.




Benu, with a head of a heron and the body of a man, on the coffin of Tayuheret. For a translation of the hieroglyphs on the right-hand columns, see page 54. The text above Benu's head calls him the “ruler of the west”—a reference to his link with Osiris. See the next page for an explanation.

THE BENU/OSIRIS CONNECTION

The statue of Panupeker also calls on another god, Osiris, lord of the realm of the dead, and links him with Benu:



“Osiris, residing in the hwt-bnw.”

As a symbol of renewal and rebirth, Benu was also considered a manifestation of the resurrected Osiris. One of the forms of Osiris was “Osiris-Neb-Heh” , “Osiris, Lord of Eternity” who appeared in the form of a mummy with the head of Benu. Coffin Texts Spell 335 makes an even stronger connection between Benu and Osiris:



“I am the great Benu,



who is in Heliopolis.



Who is he? He is Osiris.”

It is through this association that Benu can also be found on heart amulets, to ensure that the deceased’s heart gave a positive account of their life at judgment before Osiris.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. ROGERS FUND, 1930. ACC. NO. 30.3.31.

A symbol of sunrise and the renewal of life. Benu perches on the primeval hill at the moment of creation, and every morning thereafter when the reborn sun breaks at dawn.

This papyrus is inscribed with a collection of texts from the “Book of the Dead” belonging to a Theban woman named Nany. She lived during the 21st Dynasty when, responding to a power vacuum (the royal house had moved to the Delta), the High Priests of Amun at Karnak stepped-up and ruled as titular kings.

Nany’s titles tell us that she was a Mistress of the House, a Chantress of Amun, as well as a King’s Daughter (likely the High Priest and “king” Pinudjem I):



We’ve spoken a lot about the moment of creation, and its renewal every 24 hours as the sun emerges from the netherworld at daybreak, but what happens next?

In the Heliopolis creation myth, after his spontaneous debut, Atum created the first divine couple by spitting them from his mouth: Shu, the god of luminous space, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. Benu played a part in this as well. Coffin Texts Spell 76 tells us that Shu was infused with the life-giving power of Benu’s breath. The passage also paints a dramatic picture of the conditions in that first morning:



I (Shu) was wrapped with the breath that came from the throat of Benu



on the day when Atum came into being,

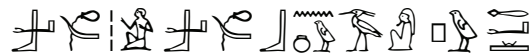


in the flood, in the waters of Nun,



in the darkness and in the gloom.”

Benu’s divine breath of life is also referred to in Chapter 125 from the Book of the Dead, where the deceased declares their innocence before the gods of judgement:



“My purity is the purity of the great Benu,



who is in Heracleopolis



because I am the nose of the lord of breath



who gives life to all mankind,



on that day of completing the wedjat in Heliopolis...”

Heracleopolis, just south of the Faiyum, was one of several religious centres where Benu was worshipped. The “lord of breath” is Shu. The completion of the *wedjat* (“Eye of Horus”) is the arrival of the winter solstice sun, heralding the start of the plantation season and the return of longer days as the sun rises a little higher each day.

Chapter 83 of the Book of the Dead enabled the deceased’s ba (free-moving incarnation) to become Benu. As a form of Osiris and Atum, with their ability to eternally create and be reborn it’s no wonder the Egyptians wished to be identified with the “mysterious Benu”.



“Spell for being transformed into Benu”

"I'M YOUR VENUS...."

The brightest object in the night sky—after the moon—is the planet Venus, and its daily debut inspired the Egyptians to connect it with Benu. For 263 days, Venus arrives as the “Morning Star”, hovering low over the eastern predawn sky. Appearing just before sunrise, Venus makes for a bright precursor the sun’s triumphant “coming forth”. As Venus makes its way around the sun, its orbital interplay with Earth sees the planet disappearing for a short while before becoming the “Evening Star” for another 263 days, appearing low in the west just after sunset.

Chapter 13 in the “Book of the Dead” sees the deceased merging with the course of the sun, which provides him with daily renewal. The deceased is first identified with Horus, son of Osiris, joining the setting sun in the netherworld. After the sun unites with Osiris, the dead become Benu—a manifestation of the reborn Osiris. Every sunrise repeated the original moment of creation, and the deceased/Benu/Venus now forged the path for the sun to rise again above the boundless waters and set time in motion. The cosmic cycle loops around to the end of the day with the deceased/Benu/Re rejoining Osiris in the “beautiful west”.



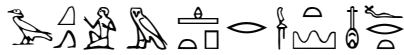
“I have entered as a falcon,



I have gone forth as Benu.”



the morning star that opens the way for him,



who enters in peace into the beautiful west.”

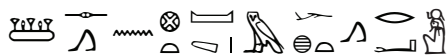
To the Egyptians, Benu’s power of self-creation symbolised the “rebirth” of Venus as it emerged from below the horizon. Chapter 180 in the Book of the Dead describes Benu in step with the daily march of the sun:



“I am the representative of Re,



I am the mysterious Benu.



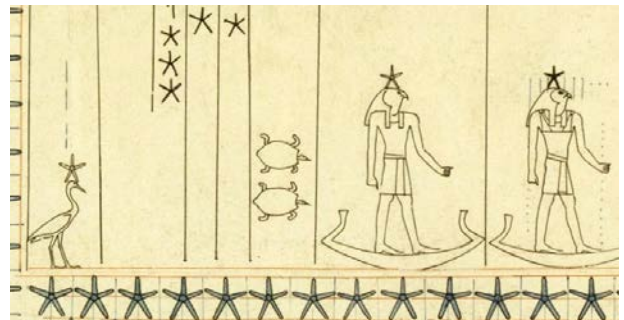
... who crosses the nethersky (i.e. the night sky) in the following of Re.”

At the Ramesseum on Luxor’s West Bank, recent cleaning work has seen previously obscured hieroglyphs emerge from beneath centuries of soot and grime. The photo to the right is from what is sometimes called “the Astronomy Room”, for the roof served as a liturgical calendar that

appeared as a schematic guide to the night sky. The decoration includes the planet Venus, represented by Benu.

The first such “astronomical ceiling” appeared some 200 years earlier (ca. 1490 B.C.) at Deir el-Bahari, as part of the decor in TT 353—the tomb of Senenmut, Queen Hatshepsut’s well-known courtier.


A detail of the ceiling is shown below. In the bottom left-hand corner is Venus, depicted as a heron (Benu) with a star on its head. In front of Venus are two falcon-headed men representing Jupiter and Saturn. The tortoises have been identified as two bright stars known as Procyon and Gomeisa that form a small constellation known today as Canis Minor (“lesser dog”).



The “Astronomical Ceiling” from the Tomb of Senenmut (TT 353). Venus (bottom left) is symbolised by Benu crowned by a star. This scene was copied from Senenmut’s tomb by Charles K. Wilkinson, working for the graphic section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Egyptian archeological expedition. Decades later he was appointed as curator of Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

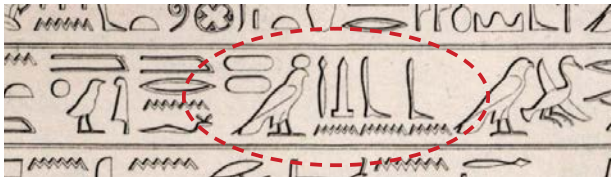
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. ROGERS FUND, 1948. ACC. NO. 48.105.52



The planet Venus in the form of Benu appears after meticulous cleaning and restoration work at the Ramesseum. The text above and behind Benu gives us the ancient Egyptian name for Venus: djay benu osiris , “Boat of Benu Osiris”.

AKHENATEN'S NEW BENBEN

An 18th-Dynasty stela at the sandstone quarries of Gebel Silsila shows Amenhotep IV honouring Amun-Re. This dates to the early part of his reign, before changing his name to Akhenaten. It's a traditional scene. But in the text below, there are hints of things to come. It records that the stone here was being quarried for "the Great Benben of Re-Horakhty" at Karnak:



It also describes the king as the "High Priest of Re-Horakhty, who Rejoices in the Horizon in his name of Shu who is in Aten." There was change in the air.

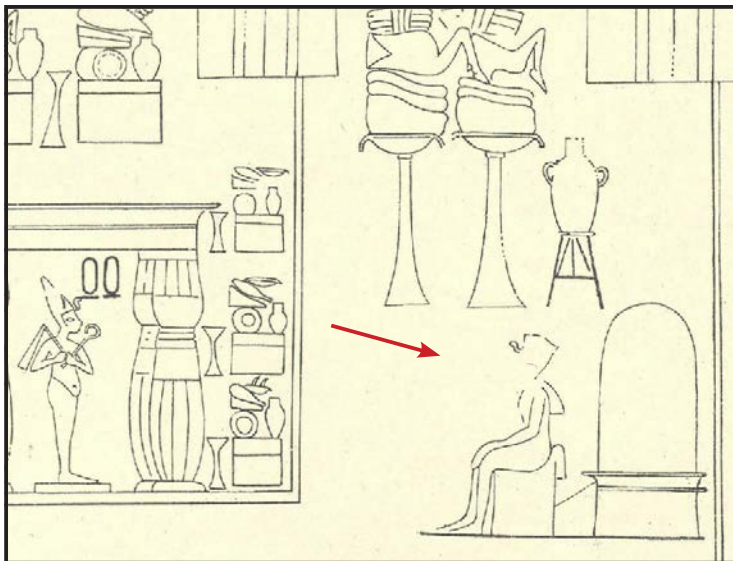
The Benben appears in hieroglyphic text as a squat obelisk, symbolic of the mound upon which Benu perched at the beginning of time. The original Benben was worshipped in the sun-temple at Heliopolis, but some of the stone being quarried at Gebel Silsila was also destined for a new sun-temple at Karnak, named "Mansion of the Benben". This name was reused when, in the fifth

year of his reign, Akhenaten transformed the sun disc, Aten, from simply being an aspect of Re, into the supreme creator deity and founded a new city at Amarna.

The central temple precinct, the "House of the Aten", included a new Mansion of the Benben, and it was close to here that a young Howard Carter excavated in 1892 for Flinders Petrie. Carter uncovered the fragmented remains of a large stela, today usually regarded as a new benben stone that Akhenaten had commissioned for his sun city. Petrie wrote that the stela was "built up of small blocks, and bore a life-size figure of Akhenaten (of which the head was found), and doubtless similar figures of the queen and princesses..." (Sadly, the head has since disappeared.)

Akhenaten had apparently reinvented the Benben as a large, round-topped stela standing on a ramped platform, and flanked it with a seated statue of himself wearing the "blue crown". Subsequent excavations have revealed small fragments of red quartzite, attributed to the stela, and diorite pieces of a blue-crowned royal sculpture that may correspond to the images of the statue accompanying the stela.

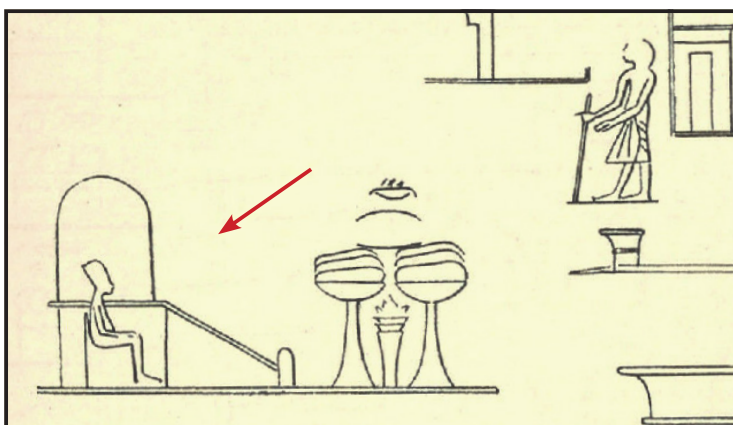
Some of the Amarna tombs of Akhenaten's aristocracy include Akhenaten's Benben stone as part of the layout of the Great Temple of Aten that decorates their tombs. Two are shown below.



Between 1901 and 1907, Norman de Garis Davies visited Amarna to document the decorated private tombs carved into the bay of cliffs that provide the eastern boundary to Akhenaten's dream.

On the nature of the Benben Stone, he wrote this: "What the Benben was is only known to us from its determinative (an obelisk or other monolith). In the pictures of the temple nothing is shown more nearly resembling this than the stela..."

This scene from Davies' *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna I* (London, 1905) is a depiction of the "House of Aten" in the tomb of Meryre (TA 4), Akhenaten's "High Priest of Aten". The arrow points to an isolated platform with a ramp supporting the purported Benben-Stela—a variation of the Benben Stone—flanked by a seated statue of the king.



Tomb TA 6 at Amarna is that of Panehsy, "Chief servant of the Aten" and "Overseer of cattle of the Aten in Akhet-Aten". Provisioning the Great Temple with beastly offerings was apparently important to the king. A slaughter yard was located with the temple precinct, with the Benben Stela and royal statue built right next to it!

In *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna II* (London, 1903), Davies describes this detail from Panehsy's tomb: "On the left hand of the gateway was a great stela set on a high pedestal and reached by a flight of steps or a ramp... which may have been the "Benben..."



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART. SAMUEL H. KRESS COLLECTION. ACC. NO. 1957.14.668.a-b

The phoenix sacrifices itself on a pyre, looking up at the sun's rays bursting through a cloud. This bronze medal was cast in 1485 in Mantua, northern Italy. The text around the edge reads *EXEMPLVM VNICVM FOR[MAE] ET PVD[ICITIAE]* ("A unique example of beauty and modesty"), which refers to the profile of a young girl on the other side of the medal.

She was *Giulia Astallia da Gazzuolo*, a character from a story by Italian author Matteo Bandello (*Novella*, i, 8). According to the tale, young Giulia drowns herself after being sexually assaulted by the servant of the bishop of Mantua. Giulia Astallia was thus held up as a 15th-century embodiment of chastity and self-sacrifice.

The Renaissance-era artists used the phoenix to symbolise something unique or extraordinary, a tradition perhaps inspired by the Roman poet Ovid, who lived during the time of Augustus. He described the phoenix as the "only bird of his kind." Within Christian doctrines, the ultimate self-sacrifice was that by Christ, and the early Christian writers interpreted the phoenix as a symbol of the resurrection.



THE ORIGINS OF THE PHOENIX

Did the Classical story of the phoenix develop out of the Egyptian self-renewing Benu? Probably not. But they are, in the end, very likely related. To explain, let's explore the early versions of the phoenix legend.

The story of the phoenix was clearly familiar and probably accepted as fact when, in the 1st-century A.D., Saint

Clement of Rome wrote a letter to some rebellious members of the early Christian church. To encourage them to toe the line, and reinforce the truth of Jesus Christ's resurrection (and therefore, the promise of resurrection if they were good), Clement used the story of the phoenix as an example of actual resurrection from the natural world:



IMAGE FROM BRITISH LIBRARY MANUSCRIPT HARLEY 4751 f. 45, CIRCA 1225–1250

The phoenix was born out of its own burning nest. This image of the phoenix burning is from a 13th-century bestiary, a "book of beasts". It illustrates the Latin text that explains when the phoenix felt that it was growing old, it would make its own funeral pyre and allow itself to be consumed in the flames, which it fanned with its wings. It would then rise again from the ashes.

Bestiaries were hugely popular in the Middle Ages, and consisted of illustrated volumes—both real and fabulous (and fiery). They often drew religious and moral allegories from the stories and legends.

Bestiaries could often contain colourful vignettes to help the illiterate who knew the stories and could remember the moral teaching when they saw the beast.

"Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in Eastern lands.... There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix. This is the only one of its kind, and lives 500 years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense, and myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parent, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun, and having done this, hastens back to its former abode. The priests then inspect the registers of the dates, and find that it has returned exactly as the five hundredth year was completed."

Clement then makes the point, "Do we then deem it any great and wonderful thing for the Maker of all things to raise up again those that have piously served Him in the assurance of a good faith, when even by a bird He shows us the mightiness of His power to fulfil His promise?"

Although swapping the self-immolation element—central to many phoenix retellings—for a worm from which the new bird grew, Clement's account of the phoenix owed much to a version that has become the foundation for much of the bird's mythology. This was recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus some 500 years before. Herodotus' version, however, was far from the earliest Classical reference to the phoenix. Around 700 B.C., a Greek poet named Hesiod penned *In The Precepts of Chiron*, in which he

stresses the phoenix's longevity of over 30,000 years:

"A chattering crow lives out nine generations of aged men,
but a stag's life is four times a crow's,
and a raven's life makes three stags old,
while the phoenix outlives nine ravens..."

In the 6th century B.C., the story was picked up by a Greek geographer named Hecataeus of Miletus, who, according to Herodotus, visited Heliopolis sometime after the conquest by Persian king Cambyses in 525 B.C. Hecataeus' version has since been lost, but some 50 years after his death, Herodotus penned his famous take on the phoenix fable. Accusations that Herodotus "borrowed" much of his phoenix account from Hecataeus have been flying around for well over two and a half millennia, so perhaps Hecataeus' work has largely survived after all. By the time of Roman historian Tacitus (ca. A.D. 100) the phoenix was a hot topic among "the most learned men of [Egypt] and of Greece", and Tacitus wanted to sort fact from fiction: "It is my wish to make known all on which they agree."

So here we have a story of a one-of-a-kind, eagle-like bird. He (and it's usually a "he") had plumage the colour of the setting sun, and lived for 500 years (in most accounts). When his time had come, the phoenix built a pyre and spread its wings to the rays of the sun, whereupon in flame and fire the bird rendered itself into ash. From the ashes a new phoenix arose. The bird then collected myrrh which he spread over the remains of his father, and carried him to Heliopolis to be consumed on the altar of the sun.

While Tacitus seemed very aware of the ability of a story to grow in the telling ("All this is full of doubt and legendary exaggeration"), he was, at heart, a believer: "Still, there is no question that the bird is occasionally seen in Egypt."

But grow the tale did. Roman author, Pliny the Elder, removed the fiery pyre and added the worm which Clement included in his telling of the story. And although Pliny helped ensure that the phoenix myth continued to go

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The first phoenix depicted on an imperial Roman coin was minted by the emperor Hadrian in A.D. 118. These appeared soon after his accession following the death of his deified predecessor, Trajan, whose portrait is depicted.

Hadrian had become emperor while campaigning in the

East, and returned to celebrate the granting of divine honours to Trajan, and the above coin was struck to mark the occasion.

The phoenix bears an aureole around its head, a device used from Roman times to connect an image with the sun.

“viral”, he wasn’t 100% convinced: “I am not quite sure that its existence is not all a fable.”

True or not, the phoenix was embraced by the early Christian church, who saw it as a powerful symbol of the resurrection. Some even drew parallels between the bird’s virginal method of regenerating and Mary’s immaculate conception. Today, the phoenix is a catch-all concept for new beginnings, which marries well with the myth of Benu resetting every sunrise. But are the legends of the phoenix and the ancient stories of Benu related? Let’s look at the similarities:

- Both birds are connected with Heliopolis.
- Both birds are the only ones of their kind, and are self-starters, i.e. born from spontaneous generation.
- Both birds are symbols of regeneration.
- The phoenix died and lived according to a cyclical period—usually described as every 500 years. The Egyptian benu was connected to the daily path of the sun, with renewal at dawn. Both birds thus represent an ongoing cycle.

There’s a few, for sure. The differences between the two stories, however, seem to outweigh the similarities:

- The core of the phoenix myth—the bird rising from its own ashes (or decay)—is completely missing from the Egyptian story.
- The birds do not resemble each other at all. It is only later in Roman times that the phoenix takes on the appearance of a heron.
- There doesn’t appear to be a connection between the words “benu” and “phoenix”.
- The death of the phoenix was critical to its resurrection. The death of Benu is merely alluded to.

While there are certain parallels between the Classical and Egyptian birds, it appears to be more of a case of archetypes: two stories developing independently before intersecting. A Jewish text written sometime between A.D. 70 (after the Roman conquest of Jerusalem) and ca. 250,

the *Apocalypse of Baruch*, gives us our closest early match to the Egyptian myth. It describes the phoenix as the daily companion of the sun: “as soon as the sun shone, the Phoenix also stretched out his wings” and “receives its fiery rays” to protect the earth from scorching. At dusk, the crown of the weary sun is lifted off and renewed by angels, and the exhausted phoenix rests in order to do it all again the next day. Dawn arrives in great commotion, with the phoenix awakening “the cocks on earth, who then give the signal of dawn”—not all that far removed from Benu’s cry announcing creation and setting time in motion. This story, however, is also possibly of Indian origin, where the sun-god Vishnu rides across the sky on the Garuda bird.

As fans of ancient Egypt, we become accustomed to the idea that Egypt is the source of *everything*, but perhaps not this time.

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This photo was taken by the Mastaba of Nefermaat and Itet (M16) at Meidum.

