

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

TACITUS AND THE PHOENIX

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Paulo Fabio L. Vitellio consulibus post longum sacculorum ambitum avis phoenix in Aegyptum venit praeuitque materiem doctissimis indigenarum et Graecorum multa super eo miraculo disserendi. de quibus congruunt et plura ambigua, sed cognitu non absurda promere libet. sacrum Soli id animal et ore ac distinctu pinnarum a ceteris avibus diversum consentiunt qui formam eius effinxere: de numero annorum varia traduntur. 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. 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. (Annales 6.28)

Sesosis, Amasis, Ptolemy Euergetes—the three Egyptian kings in whose reign the Phoenix appeared, according to one of the traditions here cited by Tacitus. Commentators on Tacitus agree that Amasis is the Pharaoh of the 26th dynasty (ca 550) and Sesosis probably Sethos I (ca 1300).¹ These identifications are unlikely. First, they produce drastically different intervals between appearances of the Phoenix. Second, they leave a mere three centuries between the epiphanies in Amasis' and Ptolemy's reigns, too short a time span between Phoenixes. I know no mention of an interval less than 500 years till Bartholomaeus Anglicus' reference (13th century) to a 300-year period (*de propr. rer.* 12.14). Indeed, in this very passage Tacitus informs us that the appearance of the Phoenix in Tiberius' reign was disbelieved precisely because it occurred at too short an interval after Ptolemy's rule—an objection that would scarcely be mentioned if there were only three centuries between Amasis' and Ptolemy's Phoenixes.

Further, and most critically, Tacitus says that the appearance of the Phoenix in the reigns of Sesosis, Amasis, and Ptolemy was held by those who posited a Phoenix-interval of 1461 years (presumably adopted

¹Though some identify Sesosis with Sesostri (not always specifying which Sesostri) and others with Ramses II (ca 1250).

from—or confused with—the Sothic period).² We need not demand mathematical nicety to conclude that it is impossible for either Sethos I or the sixth-century Amasis to be appropriate here.³

Amasis then is probably the Pharaoh Amosis of the 18th dynasty.⁴ His *floruit* was ca 1550 but the ancients dated him ca 1700.⁵ He was identified with the Pharaoh of the Exodus,⁶ an event that was sometimes dated in antiquity to ca 1700.⁷ Aside from the fact that the dating of Amosis well suits the 1461-year interval, we also have two texts that mention an appearance of the Phoenix at the time of the Exodus, the Hellenistic *Exagoge* of the tragedian Ezekiel⁸ and a later Coptic sermon.⁹ Indeed, a portentous appearance of the Phoenix in Amosis' reign would have well marked his role as banisher of the hated Hyksos from Egypt.

Who then is Sesosis? To strive for certainty—or expect precision in the chronology of the ancients—when we are dealing with a Pharaoh thought to be some fourteen centuries before Amosis would be futile. But perhaps Sesosis represents a king of the second dynasty, e.g., Manetho's Sethenes or Sesochris (ca 2800?).¹⁰

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²The Sothic epoch seems to have begun in 2778 B.C. and would have had cyclical renewals in 1318 B.C. and A.D. 139 (see R. Böker, *RE* 9A 2 [1967] 2388). The tradition that the Phoenix appeared in Ptolemy's reign probably reflects his attempt at calendar reform with the Decree of Canopus in 238 B.C. (See Böker, 2417–2418). The 1461-year span was then (irrationally) calculated from that point.

³Unlike most commentators on Tacitus, who ignore this difficulty, Ritter seems to have recognized it, for in his edition of the *Annales* he emended and read *priorisque alii Sesoside*, which is paleographically undesirable and itself raises problems in the Latin and the sense (Rhenanus' *alites* for the Mediceus' *aliter* is easy, sensible, and appropriate). Even should we take *sunt qui . . . interici* as parenthetical, the problem would persist, for 500 years is not the interval between Sethos and Amasis and Amasis and Ptolemy either.

⁴To my knowledge, the only scholar to have noticed this possibility is J. B. Lightfoot in his *St Clement of Rome: Two Epistles to the Corinthians* (London 1869) 96. He was not however aware of the chronological issues involved in the interpretation of the Tacitus-text, both those of the Pharaonic dynasties and that of the length of the Phoenix-period.

⁵E.g., Manetho and Ptolemy of Mendes. See B. Z. Wacholder, "Biblical Chronology in the Hellenistic World Chronicles," *HTR* 61 (1968) 472.

⁶See Ptolemy of Mendes, *FGrHist* 611 F1.

⁷E.g., by Eupolemus. See Wacholder (above, note 5) 473.

⁸See B. Snell, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* 1 (Göttingen 1971) no. 128, lines 254 ff.

⁹See C. Wessely, *Studien zur Palaeographie und Papyruskunde* 18 (1917) 30.

¹⁰It is probably a coincidence—and of no real significance—that ca 2800 would approximate the beginning of the Sothic epoch. See above n. 2.

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