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# Crafted Things in the Old English *Phoenix*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2023-0017>

**Abstract:** Crafted things abound in *The Phoenix*, from the ornamented trees in the phoenix's paradise, to the gem-like bird itself: in the world of the poem, beauty is synonymous with the skilful design of material things. In spite of this emphasis on construction and creation, the poem also foreshadows the necessary destruction of all the ornaments of this world. This paper reconsiders the crafted things in the poem, including not only the famous description of the phoenix itself, but also the phoenix's nest, and the mysterious ball it fashions out of its own bones and ashes, reading these crafted things alongside analogues from both Old and Middle English literature. This new reading reveals that the crafted things of the poem are central to the poem's message about the certainty of the resurrection and the cessation of all cycles of creation and destruction. Although, in the end, the poem reveals that all the crafted things of this world must eventually be exchanged for the lasting home and gleaming ornaments of heaven, the treasures of *The Phoenix* have an enduring vibrancy which remains even in the face of the destroying Judgement Day fires.

**Key terms:** Old English poetry, *The Phoenix*, materiality, phoenix, craft, resurrection, Lactantius: *Carmen de ave phoenice*, *Patience*

## 1 Creation and Destruction in *The Phoenix*

The world of the Old English poem *The Phoenix* is one in which everything, from vegetation to the sun itself, appears to be crafted out of jewels and precious metals. Fruits are *frætwe* 'ornaments' (l. 73b), with which the trees are *gehroden* 'adorned' (l. 79a), and the sun is *swegles gim* 'the sky's gem' (l. 208b).<sup>1</sup> Everything, it seems, has been designed, constructed and ornamented by God, or *se Wyrhta* 'the Craftsman' (l. 9b).<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the description of the phoenix

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *The Phoenix* are taken from Blake (1964). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> On God as both *artifex* 'craftsman' and *aurifex* 'goldsmith' in *The Phoenix*, see Fox (2012).

itself where, as Calder (1972: 174) observes, the bird is presented as “an object created by art”. This craftsman’s perspective on the natural world is not limited to the account of the phoenix and its paradise,<sup>3</sup> for even in the poet’s allusion to harvest-time in the ordinary world of men, the produce that is gathered is *eadwela* ‘wealth’ (l. 251a), *woruldgestreon* ‘riches of the world’ (l. 255a) and *foldan frætwe* ‘ornaments of the land’ (l. 257a). The *Phoenix* poet’s descriptive technique resembles the decoration on a piece of jewellery such as the Fuller Brooch or Aedwen Brooch (Breay and Story 2018: 188–189 and 225–227), in which foliage, animals and humans are all skillfully worked out of the same bright metal, offering a perfectly-crafted version of the natural world.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the midst of this creation, craft and ornament, it emerges that total destruction is certain. Even in the initial description of the phoenix’s perfect land, the fires of Judgement Day are present as an inevitability: the flowery meadows of paradise will remain unharmed only *oð bæles cyme, / Dryhtnes domes* ‘until the coming of the fire, the judgement of the Lord’ (l. 47b–48a). Temporal markers such as *oð* ‘until’ and *þenden* ‘while’ crop up throughout the poem as reminders of the transience of even this gem-studded, ornamented paradise: the phoenix’s palm tree, for example, will remain intact *þenden woruld stondeð* ‘while the world stands’ (l. 181b); the loaned bodies of men wait in the earth’s embrace *oð fyres cyme foldan bipeahte* ‘until the coming of the fire covers the earth’ (l. 490). In *The Phoenix*, the necessary corollary of craft is destruction, and we see this in the life-cycle of the phoenix itself, not only in the burning of its own body, but also in the demolition of the nest which it so carefully constructs.

The recent application of materialist approaches, such as thing theory, to Old English literature, most notably in the work of Paz (2017; 2020), urges us to reconsider the significance of material things in the literature of the early medieval period. In this light, this paper will demonstrate, firstly, that crafted things play important roles throughout the poem, in both the literal account of the phoenix and the allegorical interpretation of the legend. Secondly, I will argue that the themes of construction, ornament and demolition serve to amplify the poem’s central message

<sup>3</sup> Kabir (2001: 160–166) argues that, although the poet uses some techniques widely associated with the description of heaven, the phoenix’s land seems to correspond most closely to the interim paradise, where good souls await the purging of Judgement Day fires.

<sup>4</sup> Teresi offers a new reading of the iconography of the Fuller Brooch, identifying the ‘tubular structures’ held by the central figure as torches (2022: 313); based on this identification, she draws a parallel between the imagery of illumination on the brooch and the central importance of the light of wisdom in Alfredian literature, specifically the theme of the *oculi mentis* ‘eyes of the mind’. Teresi’s study is a valuable reminder of the points of contact between Old English literature and the material culture of the period.

regarding the confidence that Christians should have in the eventual resurrection of the body, and the cessation of all cycles of creation and destruction. The poet of *The Phoenix* returns again and again to crafted things, from the gem-studded paradise inhabited by the phoenix to the true and lasting adornments of heaven. While the latter undoubtedly represent the ultimate goal for Christians, in the crafted world of *The Phoenix*, transient, decorative ornaments have a vibrancy<sup>5</sup> which resists dismissal, even in the face of the inevitable destruction of Judgement Day fires.

## 2 The Phoenix and its Land as Crafted Things

### 2.1 Authorship and Sources

A single copy of the Old English *Phoenix* survives in the Exeter Book. Although the poem bears some similarity to Cynewulf's style, the attribution is speculative at best, given that it does not feature the poet's trademark runic signature (Blake 1964: 22–23). It has long been agreed that the anonymous Old English poet used the *Carmen de ave phoenice*, attributed to Lactantius, as a source for the first half of the poem, which gives an account of the phoenix, its land and its miraculous life cycle.<sup>6</sup> The Old English poet expands upon the Latin source, amplifying the descriptive passages and introducing explicit references to Christianity; he<sup>7</sup> also deletes the pagan classical references found in the Latin.<sup>8</sup> The second half of the Old English poem constitutes an allegorical interpretation of the phoenix legend, apparently influenced by Ambrose's interpretation of the phoenix in the *Hexameron*, and supported by an allusion to Job 29:18 (Blake 1964: 20–21; Gaebler 1880). According to the allegorical part of the poem, the phoenix, which dies and is born anew from the ashes, represents, variously, the resurrected elect after their purging in Judgement Day fires, as well as Christ's resurrection. The sun, towards which the phoenix flies after its rebirth, plays an important role in the allegory, representing Christ, towards

5 On the 'vibrancy' of inanimate objects, see the seminal study by Bennett (2010).

6 All quotations and translations from the *Carmen* are taken from Duff and Duff (1934: 650–665), unless otherwise stated. On the poet's adaptation of this source, see Emerson (1926). Gorst (2006) argues that, for the description of the phoenix's paradise, the poet also made use of Blossius Aemilius Dracontius' *De laudibus dei*, Alcimus Ecdicius Avitus' *De origine mundi* and Flavius Cresconius Corippus' *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*.

7 I will use masculine pronouns to refer to the poet of *The Phoenix* for the sake of simplicity; however, it should be noted that it is entirely possible that the poet was female.

8 Emerson (1926) highlights the Old English poet's Christianisation of the source; Blake (1961), in response to Emerson, observes that this poet was not the first to Christianise the *Carmen*, and was in fact following a long tradition of treating the Latin poem in this way.

whom the blessed travel with their resurrected bodies (l. 570–610).<sup>9</sup> This means, rather confusingly, that Christ is symbolised by both the phoenix and the sun at different points in the poem.

Fox has demonstrated that the poet's attention to craftsmanship and precious metals works to support the poem's allegory. She identifies in the poem a "relationship between God as *artifex/aurifex* and the human being as the object he creates and perfects" (Fox 2012: 2). God, according to her reading, is the *artifex* 'craftsman', who has created the soul, but also the *aurifex* 'goldsmith', who will purge, perfect and reform the soul at Doomsday. Fox's interpretation highlights an important connection between the crafted things in the literal parts of the poem, and the allegory of resurrection. Building on Fox's work, consideration of the crafted things of the poem as a coherent group uncovers further connections between the two parts of the poem.

## 2.2 Ornamentation of the Phoenix's Paradise

As we have seen, the Old English poet presents God as *se Wyrhta* 'the Craftsman' (l. 9b), and the phoenix's paradise as his *frod fyrngeweorc* 'old, ancient work' (l. 84a). These details, though absent from Lactantius' classically-inspired *locus amoenus*,<sup>10</sup> are hardly noteworthy in and of themselves, given the widespread praise of God as creator throughout Old English poetry, from *Cædmon's Hymn* to *Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 6, l. 89b–98).<sup>11</sup> In *The Phoenix*, however, God's role as craftsman is extended into the account of the land itself, described in terms of craft and ornament. The word *frætwe*, which can mean 'treasures' or, more specifically, 'ornaments', in both literal and figurative senses, plays a significant role in this part of the poem, and beyond (*DOE* s.v. *frætwe*). For example, fruits are *holtes frætwe* 'ornaments of the wood' (l. 73b); the sun shines *frætsum* 'with adornments' (l. 95b), and when it rises over paradise, the land is *gefrætswad* 'decorated' (l. 116b) with its light. Calder (1972: 170) goes as far as to argue that "its wide distribution makes *frætwe* the leitmotif of the description of paradise and, beyond that, the key image of the poem".<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>9</sup> On the allegory, see further Calder (1972: 168).

<sup>10</sup> On the question of whether Lactantius (if he was indeed the author of the *Carmen*) wrote the poem before or after his conversion to Christianity, see Blake (1964: 17–18).

<sup>11</sup> As Calder (1972: 169) points out, the principle that the beauty of the world is evidence that it was created by God, "the supreme artist", is found throughout early medieval theology, and perhaps comes to Christianity through the influence of Neoplatonism.

<sup>12</sup> Calder (1972: 170, n. 2) notes that *frætwe* and *gefrætswian* are used to describe the phoenix's paradise, the bird itself, the sun, the phoenix's nest, blessed souls and the earth inhabited by humans (although he indicates that this last category is something of a special case).

recurrence of *frætwe* and the verb *gefrætwan* link together the land, the sun and even the sun's light as the fine work of a master craftsman, identified at the very start of the poem as God himself. Elsewhere in the poem the sun is *Godes condelle*, / *glædum gimme* 'God's candle, / the brilliant gem' (l. 91b–92a), *hluttur heofones gim* 'clear gem of heaven' (l. 183a), *swegles gim* 'the sky's gem' (l. 208b), and *gimma gladost* 'the brightest of gems' (l. 289a). Christ is described in similar terms as *wlitig wuldres gim* 'beautiful gem of glory' (l. 516a), amplifying the allegorical link between the two. The poet's language of ornament, then, extends beyond the physical landscape of the phoenix's paradise to include the heavens; his vision of paradise is one dominated by ornamentation, jewels and craftsmanship.

Indeed, even the waters of the phoenix's land are made to seem like works of art:

ne þær wæter fealleþ  
lyfte gebysgad, ac þær lagustreamas,  
wundrum wrætlice wyllan onspringað  
fægum foldwylmum. (*The Phoenix*, l. 61b–64a)

'there the water does not fall, troubled by wind; rather, rivers, wondrously curious, spring up from a well there, in beautiful earth-streams'.

The adjective *wrætlic* 'curious; beautiful', and the adverb *wrætlice* 'curiously; beautifully', occur on several occasions in *The Phoenix*, implying, like *frætwe*, 'crafted ornament'. Patenall (2006: 111) observes that *wrætlic* is associated with *wrætt* 'jewel; ornament', and thus connotes not only the sense 'beautiful', but also 'curious' and 'intricate'. This association with jewels can be seen, for example, in *Riddle 26* ("Bible" or "gospel-book"), in which the outer boards of the holy book are ornamented with the *wrætlic weorc smiþa* 'curious work of smiths' (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 193, l. 14a), perhaps gold, jewels or both. Elsewhere in the poetic corpus, *wrætlic* and *wrætlice* are sometimes related to the craft of architecture. For example, the same alliterative pairing is seen in both *The Ruin* and *Maxims II*: *Wrætlic is þes wealstan* 'curious is this wall-stone' in *The Ruin* (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 227, l. 1a), and *wrætlic weallstana geweorc* 'curious work of wall-stones' in *Maxims II* (Dobbie 1942: 55, l. 3a). In *The Gifts of Men*, moreover, we learn that a certain gifted individual may *wrætlice weorc ahyccgan* / *heahtimbra gehwæs* 'wondrously devise the construction / of some high building' (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 138, l. 44–45a). The rivers of paradise, then, are perhaps imagined as the fine work of a jeweller, or as constructions devised with the same skill needed for the building of a stone Roman building or timbered hall. In any case, they fit very well in this carefully designed and crafted landscape.

## 2.3 The Phoenix as a Work of Art

This ornate, gem-studded paradise is inhabited by the phoenix which is, similarly, presented in terms of a decorated work of art. The implication that the phoenix has been crafted is present in the phrase *fæger fugeltimber* ‘fair bird material’ (l. 236a), employed in the account of the phoenix’s rebirth, when the bird has not quite fully developed. *Timber* can mean the material used for constructing a house or ship, the finished product, and even the act of construction (*BT* s.v. *timber*). These shades of meaning, especially the construction of a house, resonate with later scenes of building in the poem, most notably the phoenix’s building of its own nest, which is imagined as a house. Blake (1964: 73) glosses the striking compound *fugeltimber* as ‘young bird’, and draws attention to the similar compound *magu-timber*, meaning ‘child; progeny’. However, the ‘young bird’ definition for *fugeltimber*, also found in *BT* (s.v. *fugel-timber*), somewhat flattens those shades of meaning brought by the second element, *timber*. The *DOE* offers the richer definition of ‘bird material (which forms the fledgling), the young bird which develops’ (*DOE* s.v. *fugel-timber*), the first half of which is more sensitive to the meaning of *timber*. Even so, the nuances afforded by *timber* can be stressed further: *timber* is not just any sort of matter, but the material used for the building of structures like houses or ships. The image of the new-born bird developing out of these building materials makes the phoenix seem more like an artificial construction than a thing of nature.

However, it is in the poet’s lengthy description of the appearance of the phoenix that it emerges most clearly as a crafted thing. Fox (2012: 2) observes that the poet treats the bird “as a sacred hand-crafted object”, and Calder (1972: 174) suggests that “the bird is akin to a work of man’s creative imagination made tangible in the jewels and gold of the artist”. Although the description of the phoenix in the Latin *Carmen* does employ the language of craftsmanship in its allusion to the precious stones which the beak and eyes resemble (Duff and Duff 1934: 660–663), the Old English version amplifies this motif considerably, to the extent that it dominates the poet’s portrait of the bird.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Carmen*, l. 125–144 (Duff and Duff 1934: 660–663); Calder (1972: 174) lists the relatively small number of details which the Old English borrows from the Latin; see also Emerson (1926: 23).

Is se fugel fæger forweard hiwe,  
 bleobrygdum fag ymb þa breost foran.  
 Is him þæt heafod hindan grene  
 wrætlice wrixleð wurman geblonden.  
 Þonne is se finta fægre gedæled, 295  
 sum brun sum basu sum blacum splottum  
 searlice beseted. Sindon þa fiþru  
 hwit hindanweard ond se hals grene  
 niþoweard ond ufeweard ond þæt nebb lixeð  
 swa glæs oþþe gim, geaflas scyne 300  
 innan ond utan. Is seo eaggebyrd  
 stearc ond hiwe stane gelicast,  
 gladum gimme, þonne in goldfate  
 smiþa orþoncum biseted weorþeð.  
 Is ymb þone sweoran, swylce sunnan hring, 305  
 beaga beorhtast brogden feðrum.  
 Wrætlic is seo womb neoþan wundrum fæger  
 scir ond scyne. Is se scyld ufan  
 frætwum gefeged ofer þæs fugles bæc.  
 Sindon þa scanca scyllum biweaxen, 310  
 fealwe fotas. Se fugel is on hiwe  
 æghwæs ænlic, onlicost pean,  
 wynnun geweaxen þæs gewritu secgað. (*The Phoenix*, l. 291–313)

‘The bird is fair of appearance at the front, adorned with a variety of colours around the front of the breast. Its head is green behind, curiously variegated, mingled with purple. Then the tail is beautifully separated, brown in parts, in others crimson, elsewhere spotted ingeniously with white. The feathers are white at the back, and the neck green below and above, and the beak shines like glass or a jewel, the jaws resplendent inside and without. The eye is by nature piercing, and in appearance most like a stone, a bright gem, when it is placed by the skills of smiths in a gold-setting. Around the neck, like the sun’s ring, is the brightest of rings, furnished with feathers. The belly is curious below, wondrously beautiful, bright and shining. The crest is fitted together with ornaments above, over the bird’s back. The legs are covered in scales, the feet yellow. The bird is in appearance entirely unique, most like a peacock, grown up with joys, according to what the writings say’.

Like a work of art, the phoenix is *fag* ‘adorned’ (l. 292a) with colours, designed *wrætlice* ‘curiously’ (l. 294a), just like the miraculous rivers in its home. As Patenall (2006: 111) observes, both *wrixleð*<sup>14</sup> ‘variegated’ and *geblonden* ‘mingled’ (l. 294) “heighten the artificiality of the bird”. The adverb *searlice* ‘ingeniously’ (l. 297a) similarly implies artifice and skilful craftsmanship and is particularly associated with the sort of complex interlace found in the metalwork of the period (Taylor

14 *Wrixleð* is here a misspelling for the past participle (Blake 1964: 77 and 120).

1983: 114–117). A similar collocation, between the verb *besettan* ‘set’ and the element *searo-* ‘skill; craft’, occurs in the context of the ornamentation of the True Cross in *Elene*:

Heo þa rode heht  
 golde beweorcean ond gimcynnun,  
 mid þam æðelestum eorcnanstanum  
 besettan searocræftum ond þa in seolfren fæt  
 locum belucan. (*Elene*, l. 1022b–1026a; Krapp 1932: 94)

‘She ordered the Cross to be adorned with gold and gems, set using ingenious skill with the most noble precious stones and then enclosed with locks in silver plate’.

For both poets, beauty is synonymous with the skilful, intricate designs which originate from an ingenious intellect.

Arguably, the phoenix in the description above is hardly less material than the reliquary-style casing which Helena orders for the True Cross. Its beak is directly compared to *glæs oþþe gim* ‘glass or a jewel’ (l. 300a), a likeness which connects the phoenix to the sun, frequently described as a *gim* (l. 92a, 183a, 208b, and 289a); likewise, the verb *lixan* ‘shine’ is used for both the sun (l. 94b and 290b) and the phoenix’s beak (l. 299b). The association with the sun is strengthened by the collocation *gladum gimme* ‘bright gem’ (l. 303a), used earlier for the sun (l. 92a and 289a). As the description goes on, the reader is again reminded of the knowledge required for the sort of craftsmanship which works with precious stones and gold, the *smiþa orþoncun* ‘the skills of smiths’ (l. 304a).<sup>15</sup> The ring around the phoenix’s neck not only links it, once again, to the sun, but also to the blessed who, in the poem’s allegorical section, are crowned with gleaming haloes:

Þær se beorhta beag brogden wundrum  
 eorcnanstanum eadigra gehwam  
 hlifað ofer heafde. Heafelan lixað  
 þrymme biþeahte. (*The Phoenix*, l. 602–605a)

‘There the bright ring, furnished with wondrously precious stones, rises over the head of each of the blessed. Heads gleam, covered with glory’.

There is a clear parallel here with the description of the phoenix, whose own bright ring is *brogden feðrum* ‘furnished with feathers’ (l. 306b) rather than gemstones. Finally, the poet shows that even the bird’s underside is *wrætlic* ‘curious’ (l. 307a)

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<sup>15</sup> Paz (2020) highlights the centrality of skilful smiths – or “crafty craftsmen” (2020: 87) – in heroic culture, showing that their craftsmanship was central to the functioning of the aristocratic warrior class; although their work was a source of wonder, he argues, its ingenuity also had the potential to arouse suspicion.



and wondrous, and its crest is ornamented with *frætwum* ‘treasures’ (l. 309a) in much the same way as the fruit-filled trees in its paradise. The portrait of the phoenix looks back towards the poet’s description of paradise and forward to the resurrection imagined at the end of the poem.

## 2.4 Crafted Things and the Poem’s Allegory

Crafted things, then, lie at the centre of *The Phoenix*, with the artificial materiality of the bird a hinge for the two sides of the diptych: the literal legend of the phoenix in its ornamented paradise on one side and, on the other, the hope of a similarly gem-studded resurrection for mankind. However, for some readers, this materiality is meaningless beside the poem’s allegory. Blake (1962: 56) argues: “For the poet the phoenix was merely a means to an end, and to praise the poetic descriptions of the phoenix in their own right is likely to lead to a distorted view of the poem.” It is hard to see how the richly material description of the phoenix could be a “means” only, when craft and ornament are so central to the poem’s mood and meaning. In the introduction to his edition, Blake (1964: 31) argues, more strongly still, that “in order to appreciate the poem we must look through the actual material objects to what they represent”. Blake’s instruction to “look through” the material things of *The Phoenix* stands in direct opposition to the principles of thing theory and other materialist approaches. Meyer and Houtman, the editors of *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, state that “the ultimate concern of this volume is to critique the limitations of symbolist and meaning-centred approaches that look through and sideline ‘things’” (2012: 13). Similarly, in distinguishing between objects and things, Brown (2001: 4) argues that we can “look through” an object, but a thing “can hardly function as a window”: according to thing theory, things, unlike objects, have a liveliness which resists this reductive act.

I would argue that to “look through” the material things of *The Phoenix* is to compromise the meaning of the poem, which depends upon the exchange of the glittering possessions of the earth for the even brighter ornaments of heaven. Moreover, although the transient treasures are superseded by heavenly adornments, those fleeting works of art have an essential role to play, not just in the allegorical message of the poem, but in its very fabric. We have already seen that material objects, specifically crafted and ornamented things, are central to the poet’s description of the phoenix and its home. In the next part of this paper, I will show that the poet’s attention to craft elsewhere in the poem serves to link together aspects of the literal legend with the poem’s allegorical meaning. Moreover, while these crafted things ultimately work to support the poem’s allegory, they cannot simply be reduced to what they represent.

## 3 The Phoenix as Architect

### 3.1 The Phoenix's Nest

A fundamental part of the literal legend of the phoenix, as well as the poem's allegory, is the nest in which the bird will sit and, as the nest is set alight by the heat of the sun, burn to ashes. Both the Latin and the Old English poems highlight the phoenix's role as the builder of this nest which will also be its funeral pyre. The fair and sweet-smelling vegetation out of which the nest is constructed is interpreted in the allegorical section of the poem as the good works, such as almsgiving and prayers, out of which Christians build their own heavenly home while in this life.

In a departure from the Latin *Carmen* (Duff and Duff 1934: 650–665), the Old English poet repeatedly presents the nest the phoenix builds as a human dwelling place, implicitly portraying the phoenix as a skilled builder, comparable to the cunning smiths alluded to in the portrait of the phoenix itself. The nest, for example, is a *hus* 'house' (l. 202b, 212a and 217a), a *willsele* 'pleasant hall' (l. 213b), and a *hof* 'hall' (l. 228a). Blake (1962: 53) argues that the designation of the nest as a human house or hall is simply part of the poem's allegory, anthropomorphising the bird in order to prepare the reader for seeing the bird as a symbol for saved humans later in the poem. However, I would argue that the reader is elsewhere required to understand more complex allegorical parallels than a simple correspondence between the phoenix and the resurrected elect: anthropomorphisation of the phoenix hardly seems necessary for accepting this part of the allegory. Moreover, if the poet truly did believe it necessary to anthropomorphise the bird, I would question whether making its nest a house would be the most effective way of achieving this aim. Rather, I would argue that the phoenix's *hus* has an important role to play as a tangible crafted thing, not simply as a transparent cipher in the service of the poem's allegory.

### 3.2 The Nest as a Sun-Room

Perhaps most surprisingly, the nest is described as a *solere* 'sunny room; sun-room' (l. 204a), an oddly specific choice of word.<sup>16</sup> *Solere*, or *solor*, is not a very common word in Old English, and, according to the *DOEC*, appears nowhere else in poetry. It occurs in the Old English translations of Gregory's *Regula pastoralis* and *Dialogi*, but it is found most commonly in glosses. In the Regius, Salisbury, Tiberius, and Vitellius

<sup>16</sup> Too (1990: 237–238) notes that both the word *solere* and the phrase *beorhtast nesta* 'brightest of nests' (l. 227a) associate the nest with light, and therefore the sun, which is in turn associated with Christ.

Psalters, *solere* is used to gloss Latin *domicilio* in Psalm 101:7: *Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis; factus sum sicut nycticorax in domicilio* ‘I am become like to a pelican of the wilderness: I am like a night raven in the house’.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps worth noting the avian theme of this psalm verse, and the similarities to the phoenix legend with the pelican in the wilderness and the “night raven” in its house. The phoenix’s house, it should be remembered, is said to be in a *weste stowe* ‘deserted place’ (l. 169b), and later in *þam westenne* ‘in the desert’ (l. 201b). As the numerous words for house and hall listed above demonstrate, the poet of *The Phoenix* was evidently determined to present the bird’s nest as a human dwelling place. It is possible that, while describing a bird in a house in the desert, he was put in mind of the psalm verse and the common Old English gloss for *domicilio*, and thus introduced *solere* into his poem. ‘Sunny room’ is a fitting, if somewhat ironic, description of the phoenix’s home, given that it is the sun’s heat which will cause the nest to set alight and burn to ashes.

### 3.3 The Gathering of Materials

The poet goes to some length to describe the phoenix’s careful, even skilful, construction of its temporary dwelling place: *ðonne on þam telgum timbran onginneð, / nest gearwian* ‘then in the branches it begins to build, to prepare the nest’ (l. 188–189a). It is at this point that the poet informs the reader that the whole process of the phoenix’s rebirth, swapping old life for new, is achieved through *gewittes wylm* ‘the surging of the intellect’ (l. 191a);<sup>18</sup> coming at this point in the narrative of the phoenix’s life cycle, this comment is perhaps a gesture towards the skill required for the construction of the phoenix’s house. A major part of this construction, as in the Latin *Carmen* (Duff and Duff 1934: 656–657), is the gathering of appropriate materials:

Ðonne feor ond neah  
þa swetestan somnað and gædrað  
wyrta wynsume ond wudubleda  
to þam eardstede, æþelstenca gehwone,  
wyrta wynsumra (*The Phoenix*, l. 192b–196a)

‘Then, from far and near, it collects and gathers the sweetest of pleasant herbs and forest fruits to the dwelling place, every sweet odour and delightful plant’.

<sup>17</sup> All quotations from the Bible are from the Vulgate; all translations are from the Douay-Rheims translation.

<sup>18</sup> Lockett (2011: 62) refers to *The Phoenix* in her discussion of the hydraulic model of the mind, citing this part of the poem as evidence that mental swelling or boiling is not limited to anger and other negative mental states; as she argues, “intensely positive mental states can swell up and even seethe in the breast”.

In the allegorical section of the poem, the poet goes on to reveal that the materials that the phoenix gathers for its nest represent the good deeds that the good Christian accumulates in order to build their heavenly home (l. 465b–469). Holding God’s law or teaching to one’s breast or heart (l. 457b–458a and 476–477a) is equivalent to gathering sweet-smelling plants, and will be rewarded with a dwelling-place in heaven.

An analogue for this portrait of the phoenix collecting the vegetation for its house can be found in the preface to the Old English translation of Augustine’s *Soliloquia*. It should be stressed here that I do not suggest that the author of the *Soliloquies* preface made use of *The Phoenix* as a source, or *vice versa*. Rather, I would say that this parallel is worth consideration, as a means of drawing out a deeper meaning from the *Phoenix* passage. In the preface to the Old English *Soliloquies* an unnamed speaker describes how they went to a forest and collected the materials required for the construction of a dwelling place on land leased from their lord. Like the phoenix, this speaker gathers *þa witegostan treowo* ‘the most beautiful trees’ (47.3); as in the poem, the verb used to describe the construction is (*ge-*)*timbrian* ‘build’ (47.10 and 48.6) (cf. *The Phoenix*, l. 188b, 202b and 430a).<sup>19</sup> In both texts, the house that is built does not last. In *The Phoenix*, of course, the bird’s *hus* combusts; in the preface to the *Soliloquies*, the *cotlyf* ‘small holding’ (48.5) that the speaker builds is shown to be only a temporary stage along the way to the eternal heavenly home: a very pleasant stopping place, but by no means the final destination. As the speaker has been able to build a temporary home on the leased land, so they hope one day to come to an eternal home built on *bocland* ‘book-land; land “booked” in a charter’ (48.9). The speaker remarks: *se þe me lærde, þam se wudu licode, se mæg gedon þæt ic softor eardian mæge ægðer ge on þisum lænan stoclife be þis wæge ða while þe ic on þisse weorulde beo, ge eac on þam ecan hame* ‘he who taught me, to whom the wood was pleasing, he may bring it about that I dwell more comfortably both in this temporary dwelling place by this way while I am in this world, and also in the eternal home’ (47.12–14). This contrast between temporary and eternal homes underpins the allegory in *The Phoenix*: the temporary haven of the phoenix’s nest burns away, but the elect find a permanent dwelling *in þam gladan ham* ‘in the bright home’ (l. 593a) of heaven. As in the preface to the *Soliloquies*, the phoenix’s home is a stage on the way: the poet notes that it *Siteð siþes fus* ‘sits eager for the journey’ (l. 208a), awaiting the fire which will lead it into the next life. In each case, the house which is so carefully constructed is only a temporary stopping point, to be replaced by a permanent home. However, both transient

<sup>19</sup> Quotations from and references to the Old English *Soliloquies* and its preface are from Carnicelli (1969), with parenthetical references to page and line number(s).

houses are praised and celebrated nonetheless, and both passages linger on the labour of building this temporary dwelling place. This emphasis on the skill and effort required for building a house which will not last contributes to the message, in both the preface and the poem, that by striving to construct a temporary structure in this life, one in fact lays the foundations for the lasting home of heaven. The beauty and pleasures of each temporary house, though, make it clear that these dwellings are enjoyable in their own right, if only for a short time.

### 3.4 The Construction and Destruction of the Nest

The Old English poet does not translate the list of the different types of plants and spices that the phoenix gathers, provided by Lactantius in the *Carmen* (Duff and Duff 1934: 656–657, l. 79–88), but makes up for this omission with a detailed account of the construction of the nest:<sup>20</sup>

Pær he sylf biereð

|                     |                   |     |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----|
| in þæt treow innan  | torhte frætwe;    | 200 |
| þær se wilda fugel  | in þam westenne   |     |
| ofer heanne beam    | hus getimbreð     |     |
| wlitig ond wynsum,  | ond gewicað þær   |     |
| sylf in þam solere, | ond ymbseteð utan |     |
| in þam leafsceade   | lic ond feþre     | 205 |
| on healfa gehware   | halgum stencum    |     |
| ond þam æpelestum   | eorþan bledum.    |     |

*(The Phoenix, l. 199b–207)*

‘There it carries bright ornaments into the tree; there the wild bird builds a house above the high tree in the desert, beautiful and pleasant, and dwells there in the sun-room, and, on the outside, in the leaf-shade, surrounds body and feathers, on every side, with holy smells and the most excellent fruits of the earth’.

Again, the natural components of the nest are imagined as precious treasures, the same *frætwe* ‘ornaments’ that adorn the trees in the phoenix’s paradise. In l. 201, the poet marvels, stressing the point through alliteration, at the incongruity of a *wilda* ‘wild’ bird building a house *in þam westenne* ‘in the desert’. This is not just a make-shift nest, but a *wlitig ond wynsum* ‘beautiful and pleasant’ house (l. 203a), even a *solere* ‘sun-room’ (l. 204a), a construction for which the finest materials have been gathered and arranged as ornaments. The superlative beauty and decoration

<sup>20</sup> Emerson (1926: 31) notes that the Old English poet omits the details of the materials gathered for the nest, and the places they come from, perhaps because these names would be unknown to English readers, or because they do not have any English equivalents.

of the phoenix's house only serves to make its destruction by fire all the more dramatic:

ðonne weorðeð his  
 hus onhæted þurh hador swegl.  
 Wyrta wearmiað, willsele stymeð  
 swetum swæccum, þonne on swole byrneð  
 þurh fyres feng fugel mid neste. (*The Phoenix*, l. 211b–215)

'Then its house heats up through the radiant sun. The plants warm up, the pleasant hall steams with sweet odours, when in the heat, through the fire's grip, the bird burns with the nest'.

It is at this point of destruction that the poet calls the nest a *willsele* 'pleasant hall', a *hapax legomenon* and arguably the most elevated term for the phoenix's nest in the whole poem. At the moment of burning, we see the nest at its most wonderful, the peak of craftsmanship and construction. By postponing the subject of the final clause, moreover, the burning of both bird and nest is revealed dramatically at the very end of the sentence, giving heightened emphasis to this moment of destruction.

### 3.5 Jonah's 'Leaf-Hall'

The construction of a leafy house in a desert, and the subsequent destruction of that house, has a biblical parallel in the story of Jonah. Frustrated that the city of Nineveh and its inhabitants have escaped the wrath of God, Jonah goes into the desert and builds a make-shift shelter, to protect himself from the heat of the sun. God causes a vine to grow, offering him greater shade, but on the following day He sends a worm which causes the withering of the vine. God then rebukes Jonah for his anger at the loss of something as transient as a vine (Jonah 4:5–11). The story of Jonah is, famously, a lesson in patience, a theme which is drawn to the fore in the Middle English poetic adaptation known as *Patience*. The account of the construction of Jonah's *leafsel* 'leaf-hall' (Andrew and Waldron 2007: 203; l. 448) in *Patience* is worth considering alongside the description of the phoenix's nest, not in an attempt to prove that the poet of *Patience* knew *The Phoenix*, but as an intriguing vernacular parallel of a leafy house built in the desert:

He bowed vnder his lyttel boþe, his bak to þe sunne,  
 And þer he swowed and slept sadly al nyȝt,  
 Þe whyle God of his grace ded growe of þat soyle  
 Þe fayrest bynde hym abof þat euer burne wyste.  
 When þe dawande day Dryȝtyn con sende, 445  
 Þenne wakened þe wyȝ vnder wodbynde,  
 Loked alofte on þe lef þat lylled grene;

Such a lefsel of lof neuer lede hade,  
 For hit watz brod at þe boþem, boꝝted on lofte,  
 Happed vpon ayþer half, a hous as hit were, 450  
 A nos on þe norþ syde and nowhere non ellez,  
 Bot al schet in a schaze þat schaded ful cole.

(*Patience*, l. 441–452; Andrew and Waldron 2007: 203)

‘He bowed under his little booth, his back to the sun, and there he fell asleep and slept soundly all night, while God, for his grace, caused to grow from the soil the fairest woodbine above him that ever man knew. When the Lord sent the dawning day, then the man wakened under the woodbine, looked aloft on the leaves that quivered green; no person had ever had such a praiseworthy leaf-hall, for it was broad at the bottom, vaulted above, enclosed on each side, as though it were a house, an opening on the north side and nowhere else, but all shut in a thicket that cast entirely cool shade.’

Like the phoenix’s nest, Jonah’s shelter is described as a house and a hall. Both poets linger on the superlative beauty of the house and describe the materials from which it is built. Moreover, the cool shade offered by the structure is stressed by both poets: in *The Phoenix* this shade is evocatively described as *leafsceade* ‘leaf-shade’ (l. 205a), whereas in *Patience* it is the alliteration on <sch> (*ʃʃ*) in the final line of the quotation above which emphasises the shadiness of Jonah’s *lefsel* ‘leaf-hall’. Both houses, though, only offer temporary shelter, just like the *cotlyf* ‘small holding’ of the preface to the Old English *Soliloquies*. The destruction of Jonah’s shelter forms part of his ongoing lesson in patience. The Middle English poem, building on the rather sparse biblical account, suggests that God’s destruction of the woodbine is meant to show Jonah how much more devastating the destruction of Nineveh would be, involving the deaths of so many of God’s creations: *Þenne byþenk þe, mon, if þe forþynk sore, / If I wolde help My hondewerk, haf þou no wonder* ‘consider this, then, man: if you are sorely displeased, have no wonder that I would help My handiwork’ (l. 495–496). Jonah learns that he should endure the demolition of his woodbine patiently, without complaint.

### 3.6 Patience in *The Phoenix*

While the poet of *The Phoenix* does not explicitly allude to the importance of patience, it is arguably a latent theme in the poem, hinted at in the poet’s reference to Job, another Old Testament figure who, famously, proves the virtue of patience. Defending himself against accusations that he might be lying, the poet invokes Job as a model of exemplary faith in the certainty of the resurrection. He expands upon Job 29:18: *Dicebamque: In nidulo meo moriar, et sicut palma multiplicabo dies* ‘And I said: I shall die in my nest, and as a palm tree shall multiply my days’. There is no

mention of the phoenix in the Vulgate here, but the word for *palma* in the Septuagint is *phoenix*, which can mean both ‘palm’ and ‘phoenix’, and the verse is thus associated with the miraculously reborn phoenix (Blake 1964: 21). For the Old English poet, the figure of Job represents unshakeable certainty in the resurrection:

Ic þæs lifes ne mæg,  
 æfre to ealdre ende gebidan  
 leohtes ond lissa. Ðeah min lic scyle  
 on moldærne molsnad weorþan  
 wyrmmum to willan, swa þeah weoruda God 565  
 æfter swylthwile sawle alyseð  
 ond in wuldor aweceð. Me þæs wen næfre  
 forbirsteð in breostum, ðe ic in Brego engla  
 forðwardne gefean fæste hæbbe. (*The Phoenix*, l. 561b–569)

‘I cannot ever expect an end to life, to light and joy. Although my body must become decayed in an earth-house, a delight for worms, nevertheless the God of hosts will release my soul after the period of death, and awake it in glory. For me the expectation will never fail in my breast, that I will have secure, lasting joy in the Prince of angels.’

Although the Old English poet invokes Job here as an example of faithful belief in the resurrection, patience, his most famous virtue, is also relevant in this context. Both Job and the phoenix will patiently endure the destruction of the body, whether through fire or decay; both are confident in their rebirth.

Jonah, by contrast, has to learn about patience. He resists carrying out God’s command to preach in Nineveh, leading to his famous sojourn in the whale’s belly; he resents God’s decision to treat the people of Nineveh with mercy; and he is angered by God’s destruction of his woodbine. Job and the phoenix accept the cycles of destruction that all living things face, while Jonah is enraged by the loss of his temporary shelter. The speech of Job in *The Phoenix* demonstrates his faith in the resurrection, when the saved will experience life without end: all creation and destruction will be supplanted by the *forðwardne gefean* ‘lasting joy’ (l. 569a) of heaven. The detailed account of the creation and destruction of the phoenix’s home in the Old English poem represents the cycles of earthly fortune and misfortune which must be endured with patience; the heavenly scene at the end of the poem gestures towards a time in which those cycles will have come to an end. By focussing on that promised *leohte lif* ‘bright life’ (l. 661a), one sees that the destruction of the phoenix’s *willsele* ‘pleasant hall’, however carefully it was designed, constructed, and ornamented, is not worth grieving over, as Jonah grieves over his woodbine. The temporary *hus* ‘house’ that the phoenix has crafted is replaced by the *blīþam ham* ‘happy home’ (l. 599b) of heaven. According to the poet of *The Phoenix*, it is only through patiently building up good works in this fleeting life that one is able to build a lasting heavenly dwelling place.



Described as a human house or hall, carefully built and ornamented, the phoenix's nest is just as much a work of art as the bird itself and the paradise in which it lives. As in the Middle English *Patience*, the beauty of the nest only makes its destruction all the more devastating. However, the poem suggests that the cycles of creation and destruction in this world are to be endured patiently, for all human constructions are worthless when one anticipates the lasting joy of heaven. Indeed, the poet dwells on the destruction of worldly ornaments when describing the Day of Judgement:<sup>21</sup>

Weorþeð anra gehwylc  
forht on ferþþe þonne fyr briceð  
læne londwelan, lig eal þigeð  
eorðan æhtgestreon, æpplede gold  
gifre forgripeð, grædig swelgeð  
londes frætwe. (*The Phoenix*, l. 503b–508a)

'Each one will become fearful in spirit when fire destroys the loaned wealth of the land, when flame consumes all the precious possessions of the earth, eagerly grasps the balls of gold, greedily swallows the treasures of the land'.

The fires of the Apocalypse destroy the ornaments of this world, but, in the world of the poem, none of this demolition matters if one has faith in the ultimate act of skilled craftsmanship: the resurrection of the body (Fox 2012: 10–18). The blessed swap the *æhtgestreon* 'precious possessions' (l. 506a) of this world for the *cynegold* 'crown' (l. 605b) of heaven, and their temporary nests for the lasting happy home. Calder (1972: 179) maintains that in *The Phoenix*: "Heaven is the apotheosis of the art of paradise". The spectacular ornament of the phoenix's paradise is a step on the way towards the incomparable art of heaven.

## 4 The Phoenix as Smith

### 4.1 The Phoenix Gathers the Ashes

We have seen that the phoenix and its paradise are described in terms of human craft and ornament, and that the phoenix itself is the architect and decorator of a fine hall. In his discussion of the phoenix's nest, Calder (1972: 176) remarks that this

<sup>21</sup> Although the *Phoenix* poet uses the phrase *londes frætwe* 'treasures of the land' earlier in the poem to refer to the vegetation of the phoenix's country (l. 150b), the reference to *æhtgestreon* 'precious possessions' and *gold* in this passage (l. 506) suggests that here he uses the phrase to refer to literal treasure.

is “the only act of creation that occurs within the poem”. However, there is one other act of creation in the narrative of the poem itself, also carried out by the phoenix. After the new phoenix has emerged, it turns back to the ashes, and gathers up the remnants of its body:

þonne he of greote his  
 lic leopucræftig, þæt ær lig fornom,  
 somnað swoles lafe, searwum gegædrað  
 ban gebrosnad æfter bælpæce, 270  
 ond þonne gebringeð ban ond yslan,  
 ades lafe eft ætsomne,  
 ond þonne þæt wælreaf wyrstum biteldeð  
 fægrefe gefrætwed. (*The Phoenix*, l. 267b–274a)

‘Then, limb-crafty, it collects its body from the dust, which the fire had previously destroyed, the remnants of the flame, skilfully gathers bones damaged after the fire’s violence, and then it brings bones and ashes, the remnants of the pyre, together again, and then it adorns the corpse-spoil with plants, fairly decorated’.

This act of reconstruction resembles depictions of craft and craftsmanship earlier in the poem. The phoenix gathers the bones and ashes, in much the same way that it had previously gathered the materials needed to build its nest; indeed, the poet invites a comparison between these two scenes of construction through the repetition of the verbs *somnian* ‘collect’ and (*ge-*)*gædrian* ‘gather’ (l. 193b). This act of gathering requires *searu* ‘skill; ingenuity’, anticipating the adverb *searlice* ‘skilfully; ingeniously’ which occurs in the description of the artfully designed phoenix. The adjective *leopucræftig* ‘limb-crafty’ could, likewise, refer to the phoenix’s skilfulness and craftsmanship. Blake (1964) glosses *leopucræftig* as ‘nimble, with active limbs’; *BT* (s.v. *leopu-cræftig*) offers the definition ‘skilful with the limbs’.<sup>22</sup> One of the few occurrences of the noun *leopucræft* in the extant Old English corpus suggests that it can be associated with, specifically, the skilful limbs of the craftsman: among the treasures of the dragon’s hoard in *Beowulf* Wiglaf discovers a golden standard, *hondwundra mæst, | gelocen leoðocræftum* ‘the greatest of wonders made by hand, woven by skill of the limbs’ (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 94, l. 2768b–2769a). The phoenix assembles the bones and ashes with *searu* ‘ingenuity’ and *cræft* ‘skill’, and then decorates this *wælreaf* ‘corpse-spoil’ with vegetation. The crafting of the bones and ashes is as much an act of creation as the building of the nest, requiring the same sort of skill and involving a similar sort of ornamentation.

<sup>22</sup> This adjective, and the related noun, is not to be confused with *leopucræft* (with a long *o*), meaning ‘poetic skill’.

## 4.2 *Laf*: Remnants of the Fire

Twice in the passage above the poet refers to the bones and ashes as *lafe* 'leavings; remnants' (l. 269a and 272a) and also as *wæltreaf* 'corpse spoil' (l. 273a). *Laf* has a wide range of meanings, referring generally to anything that has been left behind and, more specifically, to things left as heirlooms; it can also refer to a sword or sword-blade.<sup>23</sup> In the present context 'the remnants of the flame' are, in a simple sense, the bones and ashes which are left after burning. The word *wæltreaf* seems to function in a similar way here, referring to the 'spoil' of the fire, or that which can be salvaged from the burning; the element *wælf* 'corpse' presumably gestures towards the dead body of the old phoenix, burned up by the fire.<sup>24</sup> The Latin word *exuviis* which appears in the corresponding section of the *Carmen* (Duff and Duff 1934: 658, l. 106) may well have influenced the compound *wæltreaf*, as, like *wæltreaf*, it means 'spoils', although in this context *exuviis* refers to the remnants of shell left behind after the new phoenix has hatched, rather than the remnant of the fire, gathered up by the phoenix, as in the Old English poem.<sup>25</sup> In any case, the use of *wæltreaf* frames the remnants of the fire in the terms of vernacular heroic poetry.

The word *laf* occurs again when the phoenix picks up the coalesced bones and ashes and takes this *fægre gefrætweð* 'fairly decorated' artifact back to its homeland:

þonne fotum ymbfehð, fyres lafe  
clam biclyppeð ond his cyþþu eft,  
sunbeorht gesetu, seceð on wynnum  
eadig eþellond. (*The Phoenix*, l. 276–279a)

'Then it grasps it in its feet, the remnants of the fire, seizes it in its claws, and seeks in joy its home again, the sun-bright abode, the blessed native land'.

Again, the *laf* here is what has been left by the fire, after the burning has finished. The collocation of *fyres* 'fire' with *laf* also occurs in *Riddle 71*, where the subject of the riddle is the remnant not only of the flame, but also the file: *nu eom wraþra laf, / fyres ond feole* 'now I am the remnant of the hostile ones, of fire and file' (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 232, l. 3b–4a). Portnoy (2005: 9) holds that the subject of the riddle "has survived the 'hostile forces' – not of weapons typical of human warfare, however,

<sup>23</sup> On the relation of the meaning 'sword' to the sense of something which has remained or survived, see Portnoy (2005: 25–33).

<sup>24</sup> Blake (1962: 56) observes that although *wæltreaf* normally refers to the spoils of battle, Cynewulf uses the word to refer to a corpse in *Fates of the Apostles* (Krapp 1932: 53, l. 95a); Blake maintains that it is with this latter sense that the word should be read in *The Phoenix*.

<sup>25</sup> 'Spoils' is my own translation; Duff and Duff (1934: 659) translate *exuviis* as 'shell'.

but rather those of the forge". The remnant of the fire, in the case of *Riddle 71*, is a forged sword, the survivor of the furnace and the blacksmith's file.

Throughout Old English poetry, *laf* refers to weapons – the remnants of the forge – and, in a twist of irony which clearly appealed to poets, the survivors of violence carried out by those same weapons.<sup>26</sup> For example, in *Beowulf*, *homera lafe* 'leavings of hammers' (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 96, l. 2829b) refers to the swords, hammered by the blacksmith, which have wounded the dragon; elsewhere in the same poem *sweorda lafe* 'remnant of swords' (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 100, l. 2936b) describes those left behind by swords: the survivors of battle.<sup>27</sup> Considering the occurrences of *laf* in *The Phoenix* in this light, it is evident that the poet is exploiting the layers of meaning afforded by this mercurial word. The *laf* which the phoenix rescues from the fire is a remnant in the simple sense that it has survived the burning of the fire. However, the phrases *swoles lafe* 'remnants of the flame', *ades lafe* 'remnants of the pyre' and *fyres lafe* 'remnants of the fire' all point towards the survivors of the blacksmith's furnace, typically finely-crafted weapons. The crafted mass of bone and ashes, then, takes on the hue of a forged artifact, as precious and skilfully constructed as a sword or piece of armour, worked and decorated by a blacksmith.

### 4.3 *Laf*: Heir and Heirloom

*Laf*, with its broad sense of 'that which remains', can refer not only to material heirlooms but also the son who inherits them, the one who remains after the father's death. The poet of the Old English *Exodus* uses this semantic fluidity as a source of wordplay in his account of Abraham and Isaac during one of the poem's digressions. Isaac is Abraham's *yrfelafe* 'heir' (Krapp 1931: 102, l. 403b), and *leodum to lafe* 'a remnant for the people' (l. 405a); in addition, the sword with which Abraham is prepared to sacrifice Isaac is, a few lines later, called an *ealde lafe* 'old heirloom' (l. 408a).<sup>28</sup> The poet of *The Phoenix* similarly plays with the polysemy of *laf*

<sup>26</sup> Portnoy (2005: 9–10) argues that the poet of *Riddle 71* was "well aware of the puzzlement / pleasure" entailed in the *laf* clues of the riddle.

<sup>27</sup> Other examples of *laf* as the survivor of the smithy include *fe[o]lla laf* 'remnant of files' in *Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 36, l. 1032a) – Fulk, Bjork and Niles (2008: 179) note that this reading relies on an emendation of the manuscript's *fela* – and an occurrence of *hamora lafan* 'leavings of hammers' in *The Battle of Brunanburh* (Dobbie 1942: 16, l. 6b); other examples of *laf* as the survivors of battle include *wealafe* 'survivors of calamity' in *Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 38, l. 1084a and 1098a) and *darada laf* 'remnant of spears' in *The Battle of Brunanburh* (Dobbie 1942: 19, l. 54a).

<sup>28</sup> Portnoy (2005: 152) notes that only other place that *yrfelaf* occurs in poetry is *Beowulf*, where it refers not to a living heir, but an heirloom (Fulk, Bjork and Niles 2008: 37 and 64, l. 1053 and 1903).

in his adaptation of a miniature riddle in the Latin *Carmen: ipsa sibi proles, suus est pater et suus heres, / nutrix ipsa sui, semper alumna sibi* ‘Herself she is her own offspring, her own sire and her own heir, herself her own nurse, her own nursing evermore’ (Duff and Duff 1934: 664–665, l. 167–168). The Old English adaptation focuses on the triad of father, son and heir:

Bið him self gehwæðer  
 sunu ond swæs fæder ond symle eac  
 eft yrfeweard ealdre lafe. (*The Phoenix*, l. 374b–376)

‘It is to itself both son and own dear father, and also ever afterward the heir of the old heirloom’.

The phoenix is its own *yrfeweard* ‘heir’ and the guardian of the *ealdre lafe* ‘old heirloom’, which could be either the remains of the dead phoenix, or, paradoxically, the new phoenix itself, a survivor of the fire. *Laf* has a wide range of meanings in Old English poetry, and the poet of *The Phoenix* exploits that semantic richness to draw together the motifs of inheritance, family relationships and the work of the smith. The inheritance of family heirlooms – typically pieces of skilled craftsmanship – is an integral part of a good death in Old English heroic poetry: the dead man departs this life, but his son continues his bloodline, with the inherited material treasure visibly and tangibly manifesting that continuation (Faulkner 2022). In *The Phoenix*, the crafted bone and ash salvaged from the fire is both the dead body of the father and the heirloom guarded by the son.

In the allegorical section of the poem, the poet draws an explicit parallel between the phoenix’s gathering of the *Bana lafe, / ascan ond yslan* ‘remnants of bones, ashes and cinders’ (l. 575b–576a) and the resurrection:

Swa nu æfter deaðe þurh Dryhtnes miht  
 somod siþiaþ sawla mid lice  
 fægere gefrætweð fugle gelicast (*The Phoenix*, l. 583–585)

‘So now after death, through the Lord’s might, souls will travel together with the body, beautifully adorned, most like a bird’.<sup>29</sup>

The resurrection, like the phoenix’s crafting of the fire’s remnants, emerges as an act of craftsmanship. God, *se Wyrhta* ‘the Craftsman’, works with the remnants of

<sup>29</sup> Fox (2012: 15) suggests that “*fugle gelicast* may be understood in two ways: as a reference to the flight of the soul and body being like the flight of a bird, and to the decoration of the soul and body being most like the phoenix’s gem-like plumage”.

earthly bodies (Fox 2012), adorning them just as the phoenix decorates its gathered bones and ashes. By directly comparing the *bana lafe* ‘remnants of bones’ of the phoenix with the remains of humans, the poet invites us to see the resurrection as a parallel act of craftsmanship, through which God shapes and decorates the material body we have inhabited in this world, to be carried by the soul to heaven. Resurrected humans, like the phoenix, become the heirs of their own *lafe* ‘heirlooms’.

## 5 Conclusions: Construction, Destruction, and Reconstruction

The themes of construction and ornament, making and adorning, run throughout the Old English *Phoenix*, a poem strewn with crafted things. The corollary of this theme of construction is the equally important, though perhaps less immediately evident, theme of demolition. The threat of destruction lurks behind the poet’s account of the phoenix’s ornamented paradise and comes to the fore in the burning of worldly treasures at Judgement Day. In the figures of the phoenix and Job the poet offers models of patience, reminding the reader that they should accept both the wonder of creation and the necessity of destruction. Both are rendered trivial for the good Christian by the certainty of resurrection, the ultimate act of divine re-fashioning.

This paper has drawn attention to two under-studied examples of construction in *The Phoenix*: the phoenix’s building of its nest, and the crafting of the *laf* from the bones and ashes. Both of these constructions play into the poem’s wider allegorical scheme: the phoenix’s house serves as an example of the temporary house which will be replaced by the permanent home in heaven, and the gathering together of the *laf* represents the resurrection and adornment of the body at Judgement Day. Nonetheless, neither the nest nor the *laf* can be reduced to components of the allegory. Rather, the glittering materiality of the phoenix’s paradise emerges as one of the defining and enduring features of the poem, even as it is replaced, ultimately, by the greater resplendence of heaven. This enduring quality, in the face of the destruction, loss or replacement of material artifacts described in the text, is arguably characteristic of crafted things not only in *The Phoenix*, but in the Old English poetic corpus more broadly.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A version of this paper was delivered in September 2022 for the London Early Medieval England Symposium, held at Birkbeck, University of London. I would like to thank the organisers of the symposium, Michael Bintley and Carl Kears, for inviting me, and all the attendees of the symposium for the fruitful discussion that followed. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers and the journal’s editors for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

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