Animals in Coptic Magical Texts

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Résumé

To date approximately 300 Coptic magical texts have been published; a major, though
not comprehensive, resource for these remains Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith's Ancient
Christian Magic, containing English-language translations of approximately 100 of these
manuscripts. These documents serve as fascinating sources for the lives and worldviews of
individuals in late antique and early Islamic Egypt, containing rituals for such everyday
crises as disease, social conflict, and uncertainty about the future, and attest a rich blend of
Pharaonic survivals, orthodox and gnostic Christian discourse, as well as Islamic influence.
Animals appear in many of these texts, from familiar domesticated creatures such as sheep
and pigeons, to more exotic beasts such as vultures and lions, pests such as gnats and
parasitic worms, to mythological beings such as unicorns. They appear in a variety of roles
- as the subjects of protective charms intended to protect cattle, as the objects of spells
designed to counter predators and parasites, the parts of their bodies (their blood, bones,
limbs and organs) used as materia in rituals, their behaviour and physical characteristics
invoked in spells (a man cursed to have a penis like an ant, a woman called upon to love a
man like a bee longing for honey), or as the actors in mythic or cosmic roles (the birds of
the air and beasts of the land hymning God, a serpent symbolising chaos). This paper will
give the first overview of the role of animals in Coptic magical texts, attempting not only
to summarise the types of animals and the roles they play in rituals and spoken formulae,
but also to suggest how their use in these texts can be used to reconstruct the position of
non-human animals in the worldviews of magical practitioners.