Animals in Coptic Magical Texts

Korshi Dosoo

1Laboratoire d’excellence Religions et Sociétés dans le Monde Méditerranéen (Labex RESMED) – France

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.