

The Threat of Headless Beings: Constructing the Demonic in Christian Egypt

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INTRODUCTION

It was a contention of my 2006 book *Evil Incarnate* that premodern cultures did not hold static, polarized, and systematized beliefs about an organized realm of demons uniformly malicious. Rather, I argued, the supernatural beings responsible for misfortune were not “evil” in a modern Christian dualistic sense. In popular, local culture their natures were fluid and unsystematized: one could propitiate some for favors and avoid others by steering clear of their habitats or avoiding actions that brought them near. Thus the “demonic” is properly understood less as a specific category of supernatural being than a collective reflection on unfortunate occurrences, on the ambivalence of deities, on tensions surrounding

Abbreviations used in the notes: *GMPT* = Betz ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*; *PGM* = Preisendanz ed., *Papyri Graecae Magicae*; *ACM* = Meyer and Smith eds., *Ancient Christian Magic*.

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social and sexual roles, and on the cultural dangers that arise from liminal or incomprehensible people, places, and activities.¹

So who is it who defines and arranges a culture's sense of the demonic—who gives them origins and eschatologies, delimits their habitats and depicts their attributes? Jeanne Favret-Saada's study of sorcery in modern rural France has taught us to consider the agency of a specific social role in a community: the expert in the discernment of evil. This is a person who, through family heritage, profession, or charisma, has developed the authority to identify sorcerers or sorcery, or the work of specific demons, and even to construct comprehensive demonologies for the benefit of locals beset by misfortune. This authority and creative systematization by the local expert in turn has influence on local experiences of the demonic.²

The following excursion into the conceptualization of spirits in a premodern culture concerns Egypt in the fifth and sixth centuries. This was a time when the temples, priests, gods, and devotions of ancient Egyptian religion had largely collapsed, and when a Christianity prevailed in the countryside through such forms as martyr-shrines, churches, monasteries, and their various functionaries. One of the most interesting questions of this period is, what did people actually *believe*? Were there abiding traditions about the old gods, the temple gods, and if so what forms did they take? Did Christianity influence the folklore and quotidian customs of Egyptians, and if so, with what sort of exclusivity? These are extraordinarily difficult questions to answer, given that our sources—mostly literary—emerge at some remove from the world of local religion and its folklore. I will address these questions later; but for now it is important to focus on one phenomenon that is certain for the period I am discussing: that is, the role of *monks* as freelance religious and ritual authorities, giving blessings and amulets, healing and cursing, and sharing with layfolk their acumen with writing and liturgical speech.

¹ See Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, Chap. 2. See in general Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 94–113. As applied in recent historical/anthropological studies see Stewart, *Demons and the Devil*, 15, 98, 107–108, 114–115, 172–173, 189–190, and Flint, *Rise of Magic*, 102, 147–57 (esp. 153–154).

² Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*; see also Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors*. For antiquity see especially Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise” and Gordon, “From Substances to Texts.”

There is abundant documentation for this charismatic function among monks: charms, incantations, prayers, and scripture quotations, inscribed on papyrus, leather, parchment, or potsherd, that bring the world of the liturgy and scripture to bear on the everyday crises of nonliterate people.³ Essentially one comes to view the monk as a mediator between the monastic world of scripture, liturgy, and asceticism on the one hand, and on the other hand the laity: participants in a world of domestic crises, social stresses, and traditions inspired by ancient landscapes.

But this mediation seems often to have taken the peculiar form of a preoccupation with demons—demons as a cause of bodily or social temptation, as the chief denizens of the surrounding environment, and as principal causes of illness in ritual healing. It is in that context that monks often emerged in Egyptian culture of late antiquity as experts in the recognition and expulsion of demons. And those monks who were credited with this authority, with exorcistic powers, were able to construct and define demons as an extension of their authority, their familiarity with the traditions of the landscape, and their overall creative agency.⁴

The artifacts that motivate this chapter fit clearly into this religious context. Two papyrus amulets from the sixth century CE seek to protect their wearers against “clashes” or “conflicts” (Greek *dikasmos*) with particular demons. First published together in 1931,⁵ one resides in the Korneli Kekelidze National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi, Georgia, while the other disappeared from London’s Petrie Museum during the Second World War, making it impossible to compare the two amulets paleographically. Still, given that the two amulets use almost identical invocations to the archangels and the Trinity to oppose a particular kind of demon, I presume—and will proceed from the hypothesis that—both amulets come from the same scribe: a monk versed in the use of liturgical language to create a protective object.

³See in general, Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, vol. 3; Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, *passim*; Siegfried Richter, “Bemerkungen zu magischen Elementen”; and Van der Vliet, “Literature, Liturgy, Magic.”

⁴Frankfurter, “Syncretism,” 351–564; Brakke, *Demons*, 236–239; Aufrière, “L’Égypte traditionnelle.”

⁵PGM (1931 ed.) 2: 204, ##P15a–b.

P15a⁶

Angels, Archangels, who restrain
 the floodgates of the heavens,
 who bring forth the light from the four
 corners of the cosmos:
 Because I am having a conflict with
certain headless beings—
 seize them and release me
 through the power of the Father and the
 Son and the Holy Spirit.
 The Blood of my Christ, poured out in the
 place of the skull,
 Spare me and have mercy
 Amen, Amen, Amen

P15b⁷

Angels, Archangels, who guard
 the floodgates of the heavens,
 who bring forth the light over the whole
 world
 Because I am having a conflict with a
headless dog—
 if it comes, seize it and release me
 through the power of the Father and the
 Son and the Holy Spirit
 Amen ΑΩ Sabaoth
 Theotokos, incorruptible, undefiled,
 unstained Mother of Christ,
 Remember that you have said these things!
 Again, heal her who wears (this) Amen

It is this monk's identification of *headless beings* as the singular problem of his clients that will concern this essay. This demonic entity is quite unique among late antique Egyptian Christian protective amulets. Where would the monk have gotten such an image of a demon? In the pages that follow I will examine this question, making sense of these charms as documents of the Christianization of Egypt, to show the authority and creativity of monastic scribes in defining demonic beings and to situate "headless" demons in relationship to the evolution of gods and spirits in Egypt after the collapse of the major regional cults.

SCRIBALITY AND DEMONOLOGICAL AUTHORITY

Concluding as they do with rich liturgical details—invocations to the Trinity, the Theotokos (P15b) or the Blood of Christ (P15a)—the two charms must come from the pen of a scribe with some ecclesiastical or, more likely, monastic affiliation. The liturgical customs and training of

⁶Tblisi, Museum Dzanasia 24, ed. Zereteli, *Papyri russischer und georgischer*, #24, 164–166; ed. Preisendanz, *PGM* 22 #P15a, 223–224; tr. *ACM* 23 (emended). My gratitude to Tamara Zhghenti for providing me with an image of this papyrus.

⁷London, University College [lost], publ. Quibell, "A Greek Christian Invocation"; ed. Preisendanz, *PGM* 22, #P15b, 224; tr. *ACM* 24 (emended). I am indebted to Alice Stevenson, Nikolaos Gonis, and Stephen Quirke of University College London for their extensive, if fruitless, efforts to track down this papyrus.

monks would not lead to precise replications of orthodox formulae. Rather, their thorough acquaintance with the kinds of formulations that made language and chant efficacious—with a body of performative lore that could be improvised and adjusted—would inspire various improvisations on liturgy. That improvisational capacity extended to demonology: the monastic scribe is no passive recorder of his client's anxieties and magical formulations but an agent in the definition of demonic forces and in the performance of repelling them. The headless demon must be, then, the monastic scribe's construction.

How should we imagine monks' mediation of demonology to folk supplicants and clients? Hagiographical sources suggest that layfolk regarded many monks as experts in the discernment and understanding of a demonic world.⁸ An extensive demonological lore had developed *within* the Egyptian monastic environments to articulate the challenges of asceticism and the temptations that would take a monk off the path, reflected in the writings of Antony, Athanasius, and Evagrius.⁹ It is likely that outsiders imputed to monks special authority over the identification of the demonic. People visited monks not simply to resolve crises they already understood as demonic in nature but to appeal for discernment into the supernatural context of crisis: *why is it* that my wife is cold or my animals die or we can't have children? This is not to say that layfolk had no idea themselves about supernatural threats but that one who is already locally invested with authority in the identification of evil forces will assume the role of defining them according to his particular received notions.¹⁰ It is for this reason that I attribute the identification of this "headless" demon first and foremost to the monk who inscribed these amulets. Whether he knew of the epithet from his own background, or had learned of it in some monastic context, or picked it up in passing, the monk here serves as the ultimate identifier and "inscriber" of the problem demon. He also constructs or implies a resolution to the crisis in casting the demon's assault as a "conflict [*dikasmos*]," a juridical

⁸Frankfurter, "Syncretism," 351–564; Brakke, *Demons*, 236–238.

⁹For Antony, see Rubenson, *Letters of St. Antony*, 86–88, 139–141, 216–224; and cf. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 15.1; 22, on exorcistic disciples of Antony. For Athanasius, see his *Life of Antony*. In general see Brakke, *Demons*.

¹⁰Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 88; *History of the Monks in Egypt*, 15; Jerome, *Life of Hilarion*, 28. See Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, Chap. 3.

term. The amulet he writes implicitly summons the just intervention of the angels and archangels to settle this *dikasmos*.

This does not mean that the clients had no role in conceptualizing this demon. At the very least “headless being” must have had—or subsequently gained—some local salience as an image of threat. In any case, such an identification is the end result (or temporary result) of a protracted process or dialogue, from the client’s initial experience (a dream?) to fixing on a peculiar demonic character and the ritual process for its expulsion.¹¹ It is a dialectical process: between the initial subject, her family members and neighbors, and ultimately the monk or scribe, as everybody discusses “What is it you saw? I know someone who saw one of those! Maybe it was another demon? Maybe it’s not a demon but a good omen! What did you do when you saw it?” Or: “What has happened to you? Did it happen before? My mother consulted the monk Enoch up by the tombs.” The monk or scribe may be credited with ultimate authority, but such supernatural diagnoses occasion much local discussion, as we know from modern cases of ritual experts.¹²

In this way, folk supplicants to monks are no passive recipients of Christian demonology but, through their own instigation in approaching monks with crises, mobilize a process that requires the creative mediation of a monk, acceptance by the supplicant, and subsequent discussion back home. Through the interplay of liturgical and scriptural tradition, acts of writing, folk retellings, and the sheer journey to and from the monastic dwelling, individuals come to participate in practices and traditions much bigger than themselves.

AKEPHALOS THEOS

So why “headless”? Is this just a nightmare motif, to accentuate the demon’s monstrosity and liminality? When he published his study of *The Headless God* in 1926 Karl Preisendanz gave due attention to the

¹¹Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 1.35, 38 refers to dreams of headless people.

¹²See Stewart, *Demons and the Devil*, Chap. 3. On protracted diagnostic conversations on supernatural possession and affliction see Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, and Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*.

pervasiveness of headless monsters in European folklore and beyond.¹³ For example, the *Testament of Solomon*, a compendium of demon lore from approximately the same time as these amulets (but probably from Asia Minor), describes a demon that had “all his limbs, but no head.”¹⁴ Thus he goes around “devour[ing] heads, wishing to get a head for [himself].”

When infants are ten days old, and if one cries during the night, I become a spirit and I rush in and attack (the infant) through his voice.... I grab hold of heads, cut (them) off and attach (them) to myself; then, by the fire which is continually (burning) in me, I consume (them) through my neck.¹⁵

This is a fairly typical portrait of a folk demon, by which I mean a supernatural being described in such a way as to mitigate dualistic malevolence (“evil”) and to reflect a more intimate relationship to folk culture—as trickster, for example. In this case, the author depicts the demon with subjectivity and “needs” that motivate its maleficence and danger to infants. Of course, we should remember that “folk demons” may be the literary construction of a monastic or ecclesiastical scribe; they do not need to come straight out of folklore. But it does seem to have been the very concept of a headless demon that inspired this author in *Testament of Solomon* to come up with a rationale for the demon’s maleficent acts.

Yet we get none of these narrative details in the two Greek charms: only the demons’ headlessness and the elaboration of one demon as a dog. It is difficult to derive a nature or character for these demons from such minor details. But could the “headless” epithet have meaning within the amulets’ Egyptian provenance? In fact,

¹³Preisendanz, *Akephalos*, 1–11. Americans know best Washington Irving’s “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819), about a ghostly headless horseman in a small town in New York State. Irving’s story incorporates various stories of headless monsters from northern Europe and Ireland.

¹⁴The *Testament of Solomon* is often taken as an early Jewish text, but its manuscripts are considerably late, and there are few indications within the versions of a pre-Christian form. See Klutz, *Rewriting*, and Schwarz, “Reconsidering.”

¹⁵*T. Sol.* 9.1–2, 5–6, tr. Duling, “Testament of Solomon,” 971. Delatte, “Akephalos Theos,” brings together two Greek texts from the *Testament of Solomon* and an early modern exorcism, 234–238.

“headless”—*Akephalos*—was an archaic epithet of the god Osiris, which not only derived from the myth of this god’s dismemberment but also implied that his missing head is the sun itself.¹⁶ Among the extensive Greco-Egyptian ritual formularies from the early Roman period (second-fourth centuries CE) that are grouped by convenience as the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM), a number invoke a “headless god” in ways that maintain the mythology of Osiris. These ritual formularies and invocations are now known to be the compositions of Egyptian priests and so bear a historical and cultural continuity with Egyptian temple literature of much earlier times.¹⁷ Thus one begins,

I summon you, Headless One, who created earth and heaven, who created night and day, you who created light and darkness; you are Osoronophris whom none has ever seen; you are Iabas; you are Iapos; you have distinguished the just and the unjust; you have made female and male; you have revealed seed and fruits; you have made people love each other and hate each other.

...

I call upon you, awesome and invisible god with an empty spirit, ... Holy Headless One, deliver [my client] from the spirit which restrains him¹⁸

Another group of texts from the PGM corpus uses the epithet *Akephalos* for the god Bes, a giver of oracles, here invoked for his association with Osiris’s corpse:

I call upon you, the headless god, the one who has his face upon his feet; you are the one who hurls lightning, who thunders, ... you are the one who is over Necessity ... You are the one lying on a coffin and having at the side of the head an elbow cushion of resin and asphalt. You are not a spirit but the [blood] of the two falcons who chatter and watch before the head of Heaven. Rouse your nighttime form, in which you proclaim all

¹⁶Darnell, *Enigmatic Netherworld Books*, 115–16. Cf. Delatte, “Akephalos Theos,” 232–234; Preisendanz, *Akephalos*, 12–13, 49.

¹⁷On the social context of the Greek Magical Papyri see Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice”; Frankfurter, “Consequences of Hellenism”; and Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*.

¹⁸PGM V.98–139, tr. Aune, *GMPT* 103 (emended).

things publicly. ... You are the headless god, the one who has a head and his face on his feet, dim-sighted Besas.¹⁹

These incantations, composed and collected several centuries before our Christian “headless being” charms, clearly invoke a form or extension of Osiris, although in an ambiguous form—as a spirit, not as the august temple god we imagine Osiris to have been in places like Abydos. The epithet “headless [*akephalos*]” seems to have been an esoteric priestly epithet for acclaiming a god’s solar nature at a time when identification with the sun was a form of ultimate glorification for gods all around the Roman empire.²⁰

Clearly our two Christian charms do not use *Akephalos* in any such positive or mysteriously potent sense. One might say that the Christian headless demons had lost most or all sense of filiation with Osiris traditions. And yet the category is unique in Egyptian Christian demonology, which tended to improvise on biblical demons—a topic to which I now turn.

THE DEMONS IN EGYPTIAN CHRISTIAN APOTROPAIC AND AGGRESSIVE CHARMS

I am concerned here with the imagination of demons in Egyptian Christian culture as it emerges in charms and amulets, rather than the more entertainingly fictionalized demons of hagiography. These material, even embodied, textual responses to demonic threats put us closer to the lived religion of people “on the ground” than hagiographical images. As one might expect, a Christian concept of Satan and his demons of impurity informs a number of protective charms from late antique Egypt.²¹ This is a demonology borne of monastic and apocalyptic culture, in which demonology was systematized by reference to scriptural tradition. Here, in fact, we see the impact of monastic culture and scriptural tradition on “lived” demonology. We also, notably, see the

¹⁹PGM VII.233–245, tr. Grese, *GMPT* 123. Compare PGM VIII.64–110; CII.1–17; and Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, #134 (=P. Harris 8.5–9.5), with Kákosy, “Der Gott Bes,” and Frankfurter, “Ritual Expertise,” 122–125.

²⁰E.g., Nock, “A Vision of Mandulis Aion,” esp. 374–377.

²¹E.g., ACM 62.35ff; 22.

Devil occasionally invoked as a potent trickster figure to help bind a love object. It is not surprising to see Christian arch-demons—images of utter evil in Christian apocalyptic literature—thus “reduced” to trickster figures that might themselves be coerced into service or to master-demons who might be invoked for protection against chaotic subsidiaries. Cross-culturally there is a perpetual cycling of monstrous arch-demons into tricksters or protectors—in Himalayan Buddhism, for example, but also in cultures in which a polarized, scripturally conceived Satan figure dominates demonology, such as early modern Latin America.²²

Quite often the demonology of misfortune can be a function of the scribal technique of *listing*: “Cast forth from [this pregnant woman] every evil force. ... Cast forth from her every doom and every devil and every Apalaf and every Aberselia and every power of darkness and every evil eye and every eye-shutter and every chill and every fever and every trembling. Restrain them all.”²³ This scribal technique aims to present the impression of comprehensiveness, of completeness, and it finds fascinating parallels in (for example) ancient Egyptian “amuletic decrees,” in which a temple god promised protection against a long list of ghosts, demons, and supernatural dangers.²⁴ The list often reflects popular notions and locations of demonic threat in the everyday world, as for example in this protective charm from the same period as those against headless beings:

I adjure [you], unclean spirits, who do wrong to the Lord. Do not injure the one who wears these adjurations. Depart from him. Do not hide down here in the ground; do not lurk under a bed, nor under a window, nor under a door, nor under beams, nor under utensils, nor below a pit. ... I adjure all you spirits who weep, or laugh frightfully, [or] make a person have bad dreams or terror, or make eyesight dim, or teach confusion or guile of mind, in sleep or out of sleep.²⁵

²²See Frankfurter, “Demon Invocations,” and “Master-Demons, Local Spirits”; Lucarelli, “Demonology.” On Latin America see Cervantes, *Devil in the New World*.

²³ACM 64 = Lond. Or. Ms. 5525, tr. Smith, ACM 121.

²⁴See Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*.

²⁵PGM P10 = ACM 20, tr. Meyer, ACM 44–45.

In their conjuring of more and more *categories* of demons these lists are really a function of the scribal impulse to arrange and systematize.²⁶ In this last case, what is listed are the various domestic sites popularly regarded as susceptible to demonic presence as well as the effects wrought by demonic beings in proximity.

Apart from demons that have some relationship to scripture and those that are a function of listing, there are very occasionally unique categories that seem to reflect the interests of individual scribes. Two charms in the corpus of Egyptian Christian apotropaic spells adjure the mysterious “Artemisian scorpion”: “I bind you, Artemisian scorpion, 315 times. Preserve this house with its occupants from all evil, from all bewitchment of spirits of the air and human (evil) eye and terrible pain [and] sting of scorpion and snake. ...”²⁷ The Artemisian scorpion is not linked to any text or mythology. If anything, since it is “bound [*denō* = *deō*]” rather than warded off, this figure seems to be a demonic “chief” over venomous fauna and other demons, the invocation of which might bring protection against a range of dangers.²⁸ Like the headless beings, the Artemisian scorpion may be the idiosyncratic category of a scribe or local scribal tradition, or it may be a folk category.²⁹

Overall, the demonology of the Christian charms and invocations of late antique Egypt derives from Christian literary and monastic traditions of Satan and his demons, scribal techniques of listing, the predilections of individual scribes, and—although more difficult to discern—local or folk traditions of demonic authorities. The imagination of demonic presence in late antique Egypt (as in many cultures) often took animal forms, and it is likely that the “headless dog” in P15b draws on this widespread folk notion of demons’ assuming canine or wolf-like appearances.³⁰

Against this range of demonological types and sources the “headless being” charms are unique. It may be merely a local folk category—but

²⁶Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, Chap. 2; Gordon, “What’s in a List?”

²⁷PGM P3 = ACM 26, tr. Meyer, *ACM* 49–50; compare ACM 25 = PGM P2.

²⁸Compare Mark 3: 22, where the author imagines people in Jesus’s time accusing him of expelling demons by appeal to a chief demon.

²⁹PGM P2 = ACM 25 concludes with “St. Phocas is here!” suggesting some connection between the scribe and the Christian shrine of St. Phocas in Oxyrynchus.

³⁰See Stewart, *Demons and the Devil*, 180–191; Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 14–15, and “Scorpion/Demon,” esp. 14.

embedded as it is in liturgical language by a monk, how would we know? Should we presume some lineage with the ancient great god Osiris, his mysterious “headless” epithet inverted according to Christian ideology? Yet how would we make sense of the reuse of an Osirian epithet several centuries after Osiris cults had collapsed? Had the god Osiris become somehow diminished and inverted as a mere headless dog, or is it really the *epithet* that has come loose through the agency of scribal tradition? And more generally, what does the appearance of headless beings in these two exorcistic amulets say about the transformation of major cult gods in a culture undergoing Christianization—that is, the spread of a religion (Christianity) that could, at least officially, be uninviting to local veneration of these gods?

RECALLING OLD GODS IN CHRISTIAN CULTURE

How can old gods continue to be remembered in a Christianizing culture? If we take the epithet seriously as Osirian—that the “headless beings” and “headless dog” in these charms derive in some way from the god Osiris in popular belief—then the god’s demonization and fracturing into multiple beings may follow the historical collapse of cult locations: *outside* the space of his temple or of proper ritual presentations the god can gain an ambivalent, even malevolent, nature. There is evidence for this model in a Coptic saint’s life from about the sixth century CE, which tells the story of an exorcism by Apa Moses of one of the Abydos temples haunted by a demon it names Bes. The temple appears to be the one in which a major oracle cult of the *god* Bes actually persisted into the mid-fourth century, according to the witness of the fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus and to graffiti at the site: prayers to the god Bes appear on outer walls of a temple there.³¹ The saint’s life, however, renders him a “demon”: “The citizens of ... two villages came and prostrated themselves before our father Apa Moses and pleaded with him, for an evil demon, named Bes, had entered the temple north of the monastery. He would come out and afflict those passing by. ... Indeed, many saw him leaping down from the temple and transforming his appearance

³¹See Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 19.12; Dunand, “La consultation oraculaire en Égypte tardive”; Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 129–130, 169–174.

[*efšibe mmof*] many times. Thus that demon did much harm ...”³² The text gives the name of a real locative deity of a century or so earlier, but in the form of a demon.

The use of an actual Egyptian god’s name is unusual here, since the Christian polemic against old gods tended to use names like Apollo or Aphrodite or Dionysus, Hellenic names that signified a high-minded resistance to Christianity.³³ But beyond Egypt too we find monks battling traditional gods with ancient names. The holy man Theodore of Sykeon, who performed many exorcisms in Galatia, Asia Minor, went to “a certain place called Arkea” that no one could approach, “especially at the midday hour, because it was rumored that Artemis, as men called her, dwelt there with many demons and did people harm.” Theodore went and spent “the whole afternoon there in the places supposed to belong to Artemis. And as no evil manifestation showed itself to him,” he returned.³⁴ Like Bes, Artemis is a locative (and temporal) *presence*, neither the object of illegitimate heathen worship nor a transregional figure like Satan.

It is important to note, even in the dramatically literary character of these stories, that the real crime of the demons lies in *haunting* liminal zones (including decrepit cultic zones), not in physical harm—that is, not in threatening harvest or children, like the demons in the *Testament of Solomon* (above). And in fact, this phenomenon of gods (or forms of gods) haunting or afflicting outside of their cult environments is well known in the history of religions. The goddess Artemis, for example, is repelled along with “all evil” in a bronze amulet solicited by one Judah, a Jewish resident of third- or fourth-century CE Sicily.³⁵ Here it may well be the man’s local Jewish culture that encouraged the perception of this traditional Greek goddess as demonic. More likely, however, Artemis was locally regarded as a goddess occasionally capable of great malevolence,

³² *Life of Moses of Abydos*, ed. Till, *Koptische Heiligen-*, 53, tr. Moussa, “Coptic Literary Dossier,” 83. See also Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 128–131.

³³ Although compare Emmel, “Ithyphallic Gods,” and Frankfurter, “Illuminating the Cult of Kothos,” 178–180, for examples of the gods (respectively) Min and Agathos Daimon/Shai preserved in Coptic texts.

³⁴ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*. 16, tr. Dawes and Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints*, 97–98.

³⁵ Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* (P. Col. 22), #33.

regardless of religious affiliation or point of view. Either way, Judah (or the crafter of his amulet) regarded the goddess by her name as a demonic force; others might have regarded the goddess more positively.

The danger of Artemis outside of cultic context is akin to the danger that some Egyptian gods presented outside of their temple appearances. The oracular amuletic decrees from the Third Intermediate Period, each inscribed in the name of a god, promise their bearers protection from such dangers as “the *manifestations* [*b3.w*] of Amun, Mut, Khons,.... Mont, and Maet.... We shall keep her safe from every god and every goddess who assume manifestations when they are not appeased.”³⁶ These decrees offer good evidence that cult gods were never considered “all good” and could indeed shift into nefarious forms, with or without the institutional opposition of a religion like Christianity. Here, then, might be reason to view the diminished “headless beings” that the two charms were meant to repel as the last stage of the god Osiris in his solar form, as popularly imagined beyond his ancient cult sites.

A far simpler context for the perpetuation of individual gods in an evolving religious world is that a name or character is simply “remembered” in everyday life through its embeddedness in spatial and social activities.³⁷ I am referring to the diverse performative worlds of folklore, in which a particular activity can give rise to songs, charms, or epithets as kinds of verbal gesture. For example, it seems that the context of *lullaby* maintained a particular kind of song describing a dialogue between the goddess Isis and her son Horus, both by name, where Horus is imagined as bereft and lonely. These songs are preserved in at least four Coptic texts of the seventh and later centuries, whose scribes refitted the form of Isis/Horus lament song to serve as charms for stomachache, sleep, and sexual conquest.³⁸ Another song, invoking Amun and Thoth by name, is preserved in a sixth-century Coptic codex in the Michigan collection and is meant to bless cattle, much as Dinka and Nuer boys in modern times

³⁶B. M. 10083r, tr. Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*, 1: 4–5.

³⁷See in general Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.

³⁸See Frankfurter, “The Laments of Horus,” referring to ACM #47–49, 72, 82.

would sing to their cattle.³⁹ It is preceded by verses invoking Amun, Thoth, and the “three of Isis” that seem to be oriented towards successful lactation.

These texts derive from oral traditions once embedded in their life-worlds that monastic scribes collected and edited, often adding Christian names and liturgical formulas. They reflect neither temple cults—institutional anchors to folk narrative—nor “pagan survivals,” but the richness of the folklore of particular life-worlds and particular performative contexts, whether healing, herding, or soothing fussy babies. In these life-worlds and performative contexts the names bespeak stories, traditions, characters, even holidays, but not the august priestly and processional world of temple cults. The notion that this development implies a god’s diminishment is our own bias and does not reflect the ways that local communities maintain and even modernize the performative traditions and folklore in which divine names maintain cultural salience.

While a rich context for the memory of older gods, does this model allow us to make sense of the “headless being” as a persisting form of Osiris? The examples of Christian charms that referred to or invoked Egyptian gods like Isis and Horus imagined them not as dangers but as paradigmatic, mythic characters with which a singer might identify. The headless beings, in contrast, are demonic, as befits a Christian exorcistic charm with liturgical features; but then how can we be sure, beyond the epithet “headless,” that Osiris is in any way recalled?

ON EPITHETS AND SCRIBAL EXPERTS

What does it mean to speak of a divine epithet? Do such terms always maintain the heritages of ancient gods or only the most distant associations with potency or mystery? What differentiates the *agency* in the folk perpetuation of an epithet from its scribal perpetuation: Are there different traditions and permutations for creativity in scribal worlds?

It is important not to overstate the connection between the “headless beings” and the god Osiris. Even in the Greek Magical Papyri *Akephalos* was an epithet that circulated among other gods and may even have spawned its own distinct innovation, the *Akephalos Theos*, with little relevance outside the priestly world of these ritual manuals.

³⁹ ACM #43 = Michigan Coptic ms. 136, 5–7.

It points not to cult tradition or iconography, nor to popular belief, but to the specific esoteric constructions of Egyptian priests in the Roman period. The best model for conceptualizing a relationship between the god and the demon, then, is one that addresses not a god or myth in some general sense, but the epithet itself as a practical memory. And this model would be ritual expertise itself. Those people in culture who claimed expertise in demonology—say, a Christian monk or, at one time, Egyptian priests—would be in the professional position to transmit certain categories of evil spirit over time: categories like “headless being” or “Artemisian scorpion.”

This context seems to fit the history of “headless” gods and demons. We know from the invocations quoted earlier that this esoteric epithet for Osiris had mutated into a god of dream divination in some instances (PGM VII.222–49), and of the control of cosmic spirits in another (PGM V.96–172). It even inspired a rudimentary iconography of headless anthropoids (PGM II.11–12, 166–175) notable for its lack of consistency and dubious relationship to Osiris: in a Berlin papyrus it is a framework for potent vowels and *voces magicae*;⁴⁰ in an Oslo papyrus a crouching, headless torso has divine attributes sticking out from every side, recalling the *pantheos* iconography especially popular in the Greco-Roman period.⁴¹ *Akephalos* had become an ambiguous epithet by Christian times but also a potent epithet, something strange and archaic, that a monastic scribe could recall as a category or feature of supernatural being: in the plural or even as a dog. In the *Testament of Solomon* the epithet seems to have become a demon’s odd attribute, which proved a problem for some author, inspiring him to compose a narrative about its craving for infants’ heads. The memory of the epithet, such that it could be recalled for a type of demon, can thus be linked to the role and status of the scribal expert—indeed, with these two unique charms, a *particular* scribal expert—whose social role involved the discernment of evil and the organization of the experience of misfortune.

⁴⁰PGM II.11–12, 166–175.

⁴¹*Akephalos* iconography: PGM XXXVI.49–65 = P. Oslo I.1, on which see Eitrem, *Magical Papyri*, 46–48.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has revolved around a particularly bizarre type of demon distinctive for being “headless.” The image brings to mind a monster especially frightening for not having the will or control or even sight with which heads endow us (and other animals). We need to understand a being, whether anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, whether monstrous or simply strange, through its expressive features; without access to those features we are terrified. As philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it.”⁴² Hence the common terror of people in masks. What does a headless being want, and how do we discern it? How would a headless body know to stop whatever it starts to do? Folklores from Europe to Asia Minor and beyond have tales of such monsters because there is something perennial about them: from the headless demon in the *Testament of Solomon* who seeks the heads of babies to the headless horseman in Washington Irving’s story who throws his “head” at poor Ichabod Crane—a pumpkin, it turns out.

But the perennial or archetypal nature of these headless monsters should itself caution us against assuming a simple and direct ancient Egyptian origin for the headless demons that some Christian scribe, some monk, helped some clients identify as their supernatural afflictors in the sixth century CE. This pair of charms should steer us toward the agency and creativity of the monastic scribe, functioning as ritual expert in the discernment and exorcism of evil *and* as craftsman in the ritual process. That is, I have suggested, people in sixth-century Egypt were *not* uniformly aware or frightened of headless demons but, rather, open to (even desperate for) the discernment and authority of the monastic scribe in identifying these headless demons. The agency of this scribe extends to the word he uses for the headless demon’s aggressive haunting of an individual: *dikasmos*, dispute or conflict, as well as in the liturgically inflected invocations to the *Theotokos* and the Trinity to resolve this “dispute.”

⁴²Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 257, as quoted in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.

How would the scenarios that produced these charms unfold? The charm protecting against the headless dog (P15b) is meant to function in a healing capacity, as indicated in the last line, for an affliction that was capricious (“If it comes,...”): a fever? A headache? Convulsions? We imagine the female client proceeding out to the monastery where she knows there are ritual experts with authority over such capricious afflictions, and who can discern their sources. Perhaps she already has an acquaintance with canine demons. But in consultation with the monastic scribe she lays out the problem; he probes her dreams and her experience of ailments; and through dialogue a demonic agent materializes (as it were): a headless dog—a combination of folk demonology and an archaic epithet for a mysterious and potent being the scribe recalls from the internal demonological traditions of his monastic world. He does not think of it as “Osirian,” only as the very image of the demonic: something one might encounter, perhaps, in an apocalyptic vision of hell. Thus an ancient priestly epithet has been reassigned securely to a new, monastic Christian category of supernatural being, the demon.

The monastic scribe knows well that the agents of exorcism, protection, and healing are the high archangels, the Mother of God, and the power of the written word; and thus he prepares an amulet that recasts affliction as a “conflict (*dikasmos*)” that implies resolution, and he directs formulas he (and probably his client) know from Christian liturgy against this headless dog. But the composition is spontaneous; so when the next client arrives, believing she also may be afflicted by similar demons that he cannot define any more specifically, the monk must compose *ad hoc* (rather than from a template) a more generic spell (P15a) against “certain headless beings (*meta tinōn akephalōn*),” against which demons he deploys not the Mother of God but the Blood of Christ. That is, I propose that the construction of the demonic headless dog (P15b) came first, as the dialectical product of folk and monastic demonology through their individual agents; and subsequently the notion or category of the headless demon *either* led someone else in the same village to claim this type of demonic affliction *or* inspired the same monastic scribal expert to maintain this category for writing additional exorcistic spells. Yet the threat of headless beings did not, as far as the data shows, spread much further than this scribe and these clients.

In general, the monastic scribe’s role for the local community is to shape the nature of crisis through his knowledge of traditions, through verbal expertise, and ultimately through the *material* mediation of the

written amulet. In fact, the “headless dog” charm was folded around a sprig of some three-lobed plant, affirming the concrete over the semantic value of the inscribed papyrus.⁴³ In the end, what mattered to the client was not the peculiar identification of a headless dog but the wonderful assemblage that some monk presented to her that would keep her afflictions at bay.

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⁴³Quibell, “A Greek Christian Invocation.”

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