

Demonology in Ancient Egypt

History and Developments during the Later Phases of Pharaonic History and the Greco-Roman Period.

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In this paper the meaning and function of demons in ancient Egypt have been outlined and a few central issues concerning demonology of Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Egypt have been reviewed; this is a topic which has been more widely outlined in a previous paper (Italian Academy, Fall Seminar, October 8, 2008). Names, epithets and iconography of demonic beings have been discussed in connection to their ambiguous behavior towards humankind, focusing on the sources of the Late and Greco-Roman periods, when some of these demons came to be regarded as deities in their own right and received a cult.

The second section of the essay has focused on the iconography of the demons inhabiting the netherworld, which is especially developed in the papyri of the so-called “Book of the Dead” genre produced from the era of the New Kingdom (dynasties 18-20, ca. 1540 – 1075) and through the Greco-Roman period (332 BCE – 395 CE). In these illustrated papyri the magical function of images is as important as that of the texts and therefore it deserves special attention when dealing with demonic apotropaic symbols. In particular, it is clear that the theologians of the Late and Ptolemaic periods knew and edited the earlier sources and could adapt the images to a new textual variant as well. The increasing demonization of daily and supernatural happenings during the later times must have been an additional stimulus to the inventive minds of the religious experts who were accustomed to composing demonic hybrids in order to give shape to the hostile forces and calamitous beings populating the ancient Egyptian netherworld and also appearing on earth.

In my study of the demonic imagery present in tombs, temples, papyri and magical objects produced in the Late and Greco-Roman periods, I have not yet come across an iconographic or textual motive which I could not relate to an earlier model. And such a long and dynamic tradition of beliefs seems to survive in Egypt during Late Antiquity as well. The early Jewish and Christian religious beliefs, although characterized by the dichotomy of the good angels versus the evil demons, incorporate and reframe certain Pharaonic and Greco-Roman textual and iconographical sources on demons.

In conclusion, the work carried out in the previous months and concerning demonology during the Late and Greco-Roman Periods of ancient Egyptian history has been particularly appealing. This is partly because, as Fritz Graf noted in his pivotal study *Magic in the Ancient World*, the ancient Egyptian religion of the later periods is not just an expression of local beliefs and rituals, but is part of the “vaster fabric of Greco-Roman paganism”, as one can see in the corpus of spells of the *Greek Magical Papyri*, which report rituals also practiced outside Egypt. Demonology in later Pharaonic Egypt and Greco-Roman Egypt contributes as well, therefore, to the understanding of demonology in the ancient Mediterranean world at large.