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Forbidden Fruits: Christian Amulets as Sources of Resilience

The aim of my paper is to give a first impulse to the discussion about the identity of the writers of Christian textual amulets and to discover who were responsible for the provision of this forbidden source of resilience in times of crisis.

The last few decades have seen a renewed interest in early Egyptian Christianity. There is now a greater sensitivity to and knowledge of the diversity of Christian culture in Egypt. However, the often-overlooked documentary papyri could give us surprising insights into the everyday lives of Christians in the fourth century. Among documentary papyri are sale and labour contracts, private letters, wills and arbitrations, and all other documents that gives us glimpses of daily life in Egypt. In my paper, I will focus on magical amulets.

Magical amulets were both widely spread among Christians and officially condemned by church fathers and church councils. Whereas many scholars have noticed this contrast, the question who actually wrote these amulets and who thus provided the Christians with this forbidden source of resilience has not yet been answered. However, there are indications that the Christian clergy was behind the provision. Researching the amulets and their producers could give us a different and much fuller picture of Christianity as it was lived in fourth-century Egypt.

Amulets are “all objects that give their supernatural power and their power to ward off evil to whatever place they are connected to” (Eckstein and Waszink 1950). Within this paper, I will only look at the specific group of Egyptian textual amulets made of papyrus. Usually, scholars agree that the writers were on the margins of literacy. Some amulets contain spelling mistakes and are indeed written in an inexperienced hand. Other amulets, however, are faultless and contain references that reveal a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. According to Horsley, the clergy were probably involved in the writing of these amulets because they had readier access to biblical or liturgical texts to copy from, or because they were more likely to be literate. Additionally, Frankfurter argues that these amulets were written by literate monks and clerics when, in fourth-century Egypt, they took over the role of ritual expert from the temple priests. Because church councils forbade not only their Christian flock to wear amulets, but also prohibited their own clergy from following the practice, it seems that some writers did indeed belong to the Christian institution.

In my paper, I will make a comparative study of the hands in which the textual amulets are written. Spelling mistakes, choice of words, and handwritings may yield a greater understanding of the scribes who were responsible for the provision of this forbidding source of resilience in times of crisis.