

Beings of the Air: Concepts of Daemons in Roman Thought

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Daemons were absolutely real entities in Rome—at least in the minds of the people. This is a fact that is hard to dispute. Daemons were acknowledged to perform tasks, to curse and coerce love, to carry messages from humans to gods, to possess and harm, as well as to foretell the future. As time went on, especially during the third and fourth centuries, the neutral concept of daemons was usurped by a predominantly Christian one – mainly that daemons were imposters, tricking the pagans into believing in multiple gods, while causing chaos and disorder.¹

Suffice it to say, daemons were universal and ubiquitous in classical antiquity. In fact, to the ancient mind, “the world did contain a multitude of gods and *daimones* who affected human life.”² Most ancient cultures and societies had some sort of conception of spirits, both evil and good, but the growth of demonology in Roman antiquity is marked by the attempt to classify and understand the supernatural world in which they lived. In his introduction to the *Greek Magical Papyri* Hans Dieter Betz states that “religion is regarded as nothing but the awareness of and reaction against our dependency on the unfathomable scramble of energies coming out of the universe.”³ To that end, as an attempt to understand supernatural activities, ancient people created an elaborate system of fantastic explanations and entities. For some, these energies took the form of daemons, angels, and other supernatural beings. Although the modern mind tends to define daemons, in some sense, as a metaphor for one’s inner struggles, to the ancient Roman they were not only real, but widespread.

¹ In fact, most scholars place this evolution to ‘evil’ demons somewhere in the third century. For more, see Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, “Demons and Prayers: Spiritual Exercises in the Monastic Community of Gaza in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57, no. 2 (May 1, 2003): 205.

² W. D. Smith, “So-called Possession in pre-Christian Greece,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. *American Philological Association* (1965): 404.

³ Hans Dieter Betz, “Introduction to the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, trans. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xlvii.

Daemons were thought to be involved in many aspects of ancient life. While reviewing a variety of ancient texts, I discovered the interplay between the element of air and daemons. This is a point known to many scholars, but seems to be passed over or subjugated to only fleeting investigation. For a fuller and more nuanced understanding of daemons in ancient life, the undeniable link between daemons and the air can no longer be ignored. Based on the secondary scholarship, or really the lack thereof, it is clear that a fair amount of research still needs to be performed. Specifically, traditional scholarship has rarely researched the pervasive link between daemons and the element of air, both in their physical composition, the habitat in which they lived, and their interaction with humans. Surprisingly this correlation has only received brief attention, and, to my knowledge, no books or articles have dealt with this topic at length.⁴

This paper provides evidence and analysis on this fascinating link between daemons and air. For the sake of clarity and organization, I have divided the paper into three main sections: 1) what daemons are made of, including their physical constitution and appearance; 2) where daemons live, work, and perform their supernatural tasks; and 3) how air is important to daemon / human interaction.

⁴ To my knowledge the only article dealing with air and daemons, at length, is J. Danielou, "Le demons de l'air dans la 'Vie d'Antoine'," *Antonius Magnus Eremita* 38, *Studia Anselmiana* (1956): 136-147. For general studies on daemons and related bibliographical information, see David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages," in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, ed. Mary Douglas (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 17-46; Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, The Carl Newell Jackson lectures 1976 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978); Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton University Press, 1993); David Frankfurter, "Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2003): 339-385; Kyle Fraser, "The Contested Boundaries of 'Magic' and 'Religion' in Late Pagan Monotheism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 2 (2009): 131-151; Gregory A. Smith, "How Thin Is a Demon?," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 4 (2008): 479-512; Charles Stewart, "Repression in Antiquity?," *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven* 20, no. 2 (2002): 181-203; Richard Valantasis, "Daemons and the Perfecting of the Monk's Body: Monastic Anthropology, Daemonology, and Asceticism.," *Semeia*, no. 58 (January 1, 1992): 47-79.

My research includes the following resources: The *Greek Magical Papyri*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Greek *Life of Antony*, and Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis*.⁵ These sources were chosen to provide a wide variety in both timeframe of origination and differences between pagan and Christian texts, as well as philosophical and metaphysical literature. The *Greek Magical Papyri* is a modern anthology of ancient collected spells, formulae, rituals, and hymns, thought to have been composed between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE. This collection offers a rare glimpse into writings that were not solely penned by the upper echelons of the society from whence they came, giving me the ability to investigate the universal and shared present in ancient thought.

In contrast to the common nature of the papyri are both the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis*. The former is another modern collection of ancient writings attributed to the mythical Hermes Trismegistus; it was used by adepts of Hermes as a pseudo-religious manual. On the other hand, Apuleius' work is a treatise composed on the nature, existence, and actions of daemons. Both texts provide metaphysical and cosmological descriptions of daemons. While both have been valuable to my research, Apuleius' work is especially useful in its elucidation of a daemon's material make-up and belief of daemon interaction upon human death.

Finally, I use Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* as my only purely Christian text. Although the work is more polished than my other sources – as it is a literary, narrative composition – the biographical information, as well as Antony's visions and descriptions of daemons, are vital to my research.

⁵ Hans Dieter Betz, trans., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Brian P Copenhaver, trans., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980); Apuleius, S. J. Harrison, and Vincent Hunink, "On the God of Socrates," in *Apuleius: Rhetorical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 225.

What Do Daemons Look Like? What Are They Made Of?

Ancient sources offer different accounts and evidence for a daemon's appearance, but, they do share some common features; mainly daemons share the element of air in regards to their physical appearance and constitution. In this section I will discuss the question of what daemons looked like, how they appeared to humans, and what substance they were essentially made of.

The appearance of daemons was a common topic in ancient texts. The *Greek Magical Papyri* contain many references to their appearance: Daemons could be “heavenly or aerial or earthly or subterranean or terrestrial or aquatic;”⁶ Daemons also possessed “aerial bodies” that most likely allowed them to take on the form of animals, changing their physical appearance, as in the “daimon with the face [of] a falcon.”⁷ This ability to shape shift, by taking the form and qualities of animals, could easily be attributed to air in which they are made of. A body made of air, an element that is fluid in nature, allows these daemons to easily change their shape and physical form. As the paper continues, this ease that daemon's possess will become a recurrent theme.

Daemons were not considered absolutely evil, but all the sources, including the Christian *Life of Antony*, show instances of nasty, malicious, and dark beings of the air. In his famous battles against daemons and the devil, St. Anthony describes in great detail the physical characteristics of his foes: Anthony sees spirits that are “massive and tall” who can transform themselves into the visage of “women, beasts, reptiles in huge bodies” and sometimes as “thousands of soldiers.”⁸ Their nature, being of an air-like substance, would

⁶ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 103.

⁷ PGM 13.543 (186); PDM 12:11 (152)

⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 62, 48.

allow them to easily transform into different configurations. These entities were not only able to change form, but they could do so into very specific types. This would obviously become an issue for Christians, for how could they protect themselves from tricky daemons able to take the form of children, holy men, government representatives, and other seemingly innocuous people?

What I believe to be most interesting, and possibly the least explored facet of ancient historiography, is the idea of air being the main substance that a daemon is literally made of. From Apuleius we find many descriptions of a daemon's physical make up. "For they are not massed together from those inferior dregs of mist or from damp fog ... but are assembled from the purest, liquid and clear element of *aer*."⁹ He continues further in *De Deo Socratis* that daemons were a "loftier type."¹⁰ This ancient view is shared by many, for the ancient person thought of these intermediate beings as semi-divine. The idea of them being made of pure substances would then make sense in this context. Gregory Smith, in his article "How Thin is a Demon?" mentions that Evagrius and the Stoics had similar notions –daemons were "equipped with aerial bodies" and their very substance allowed for quick movement and possession.¹¹

Once again, Apuleius advances a more technical observation on a daemon's physicality, this time penetrating down to more specifics on the substance in which they were comprised of. He states that they are of a "much finer texture" and that their bodies possess "a small degree of weight."¹² Their "bodies are so loose-knit, lustrous, and fine-spun that all the rays of our gaze are let through by their loose texture" accounting for their ability to be

⁹ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, "On the God of Socrates," 204. For a detailed explanation of *pneuma*, a similar concept, see Smith, "How Thin Is a Demon?," 497.

¹⁰ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, "On the God of Socrates," 208.

¹¹ Smith, "How Thin Is a Demon?," 510.

¹² "On the God of Socrates," 203, 204. Apuleius continues to state that this "small degree of weight" is necessary so the daemon does not ascend to the heavens, but also prevents them from being "hurled down to the depths beneath." This concept will be explored in more detail towards the end of this paper.

both visible and invisible based on their wishes.¹³ Even St. Antony observes these creatures as being “thinner in substance” in his explanation of how daemons travel so fast, allowing them to create the notion that they can foretell the future.¹⁴ Actually, one of Antony’s many tirades against Greek beliefs was based on the daemons’ ability to mislead the pagan into believing in their powers of divination.¹⁵

In addition to air, smoke plays a role in the daemon’s physical composition. Both these forms, that of smoke and air, share commonalities, primarily in the fluidity that is paramount to air-like substances. During a talk given to his followers, Antony explains that they “shall see the antics of demons to be like smoke, and we shall see them in flight rather than pursuit.”¹⁶ While battling a daemon, Anthony recognizes that “he had an appearance of smoke that passes through the door.”¹⁷ One explanation for this connection to smoke is the need of daemons to travel fast; Norman Baynes, in “St. Antony and the Demons,” concurs that the bodies of these daemons, being more subtle than that of humans, allowed them to travel at great speeds.¹⁸ Although all of these conjectures could simply be a description of a substance not like air or fog, it is still a common characteristic attributed to these entities in a variety of the primary sources.

So, daemons possess a body, color and form, all of which are now clearly associated with air; their bodies consisted of a substance, one that is not easily or readily defined, but closely related to that of air. In fact, their relation to air is one of the main, over-riding features that are shared across a daemon’s actions in space and time. Apuleius offers a fine

¹³ Ibid., 205.

¹⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 55.

¹⁵ With regard to oracles, see Ibid., 56. For Antony’s opinions on the Greek pantheon and false Greek gods, see Ibid., 59,86.

¹⁶ Ibid., 63–64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹⁸ Norman H. Baynes, “St. Antony and the Demons,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 40 (December 1, 1954): 9.

summary of daemons as a whole: “daemons are living beings in kind, rational creatures in mind, susceptible to emotion in spirit, in body composed of *aer*, everlasting in time.”¹⁹

Where Do Daemons Live?

In addition to daemons having both the appearance and constitution of air, there are even more ancient ideas of where daemons lived, moved, and ultimately, performed their responsibilities.

For modern scholars to understand the importance of daemons, living in the air is paramount for a more detailed understanding of daemons themselves. They do not simply live in the air for convenience, but because their very nature requires it. Being of the air, living in the air, and performing their responsibilities in the air are all inextricably linked together.

In the midst of a “lamp divination” in the magical papyri, the practitioner commands “come to me, spirit that flies in the air” while another spell, this time a charm for separation, addresses the daemon, saying “you who are in the open air.”²⁰ Further examples include a charm to restrain anger that acknowledges the daemon that is in the “everlasting air” and “air-traversing.”²¹

All of these examples confirm the shared but underappreciated understanding that these spirits exist in the air among the humans. In either case, it is evident that while modern readers may find this notion fascinating, albeit superstitious, the ancients found it to be common place and wholly acceptable. This is an important point. While scholarship has

¹⁹ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, “On the God of Socrates,” 205.

²⁰ PGM 7:560 (134); PGM 12:368 (166)

²¹ PGM 7:961 (143); PGM 3:496 (31)

only briefly pondered this concept, it is absolutely essential to understanding the minds of ordinary people in antiquity.

Basically, if a daemon is made of air, and lives in the air, it is able to perform its duties more efficiently and effectively. One of the more revealing passages in the papyri, from a ritual for love, not only recognizes the space where daemons live, but also that their very essence is somehow mingled with the air. The spell directs the magician to command the daemon to “dissolve into your own nature and mingle with the air, and go to her ... and attract her down to me with fire of the thunderbolt.”²² Traveling and dissolving in the air are just a few of the abilities afforded these entities.

Although the *Greek Magical Papyri* do not delve deep into why or how daemons come to exist in this airy space—instead, and more revealingly, they simply take it for granted—the spells themselves allow a chance to reconstruct how ordinary people viewed these supernatural entities. The very fact that the papyri mentions air in such a nonchalant manner proves the ubiquitous nature of this knowledge; a knowledge that was as self-evident as their beliefs in the gods, in their magic, and in the supernatural.

In fact, the ubiquitous nature of daemons in antiquity is underscored by the ostensibly ordinary nature of the *Greek Magical Papyri*. Many spells call upon the “aerial spirits.”²³ For example, in a rite for gaining an assistant, the magician is told to “acknowledge that he is a god; he is an aerial spirit which you have seen.”²⁴ The copious and off-handed references to daemons in the magical papyri imply the assumption that a universal understanding was shared by many, if not the majority, of people during this time.

²² PGM 62:17-20 (293-294)

²³ PGM 1.50-51 (4)

²⁴ PGM 1.96-97 (5)

While the magical papyri provide evidence on the ubiquity of daemons living in the air, both the *Hermetica* and *De Deo Socratis* explore a deeper, philosophical cosmology, explaining not only the presence, but also the reasons for daemons inhabiting the space between the gods and men.

The belief in aerial daemons was not restricted to magicians and holy men, as the *Corpus Hermeticum* demonstrates a metaphysical and cosmological explanation, in both the everyday existence of daemons as well as the meaning of air. The mythical Hermes Trismegistus is teaching his disciple the nature of daemons. He first begins explaining why some people may not believe in these spirits: “We do not see them all in their true aspects, but some as far too large, others as much too tiny; they look like this to us either because they are far away from us or because our eyes have gone bad. Or else, because they are so very tiny” which allows “many to believe they do not exist at all.”²⁵ Hermes continues, clarifying of whom or what he is speaking: “I am speaking now of the demons that always stay near us [presumably because they exist ‘above’ humans], so I believe, and the heroes who dwell between the purest part of the air above us and the place where there are no fogs or clouds.”²⁶ Once again, here is an instance in which the daemon naturally lives and “works” in the air, a self-evident and axiomatic concept.

Hermes’ belief was not one of neutrality, but includes the accepted notions of good and evil, for “when a soul is full of evil, it becomes impossible to reach the air,” in effect, qualifying a daemon’s existence in the air as solely a by-product of its nature.²⁷ The soul cannot travel easily through the air when it is full of daemons. Antony echoes this sentiment in a daydream he experiences: he saw “foul and terrible figures standing in the air, intent on

²⁵ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ronaldo Guilherme Gurgel Pereira, “The Hermetic Logos : Reading the ‘Corpus Hermeticum’ as a Reflection of Graeco-Egyptian Mentality” (Thesis, University of Basel, 2010), 159.

holding him back so he could not pass by” to heaven and “in this sphere [of air] the enemy holds sway by doing battle and by attempting to stop those who are passing through.”²⁸

Perhaps the most systematic description of air, daemons, and location, is supplied by Apuleius in *De Deo Socratis*. As with other ancient texts, Apuleius places daemons in the air, specifically “placed between us and the gods not only in their physical location but also in the essence of their mind,” for they possess both the immortality of gods and the propensity for human emotions.²⁹ Furthermore, he posits a theory for their location. He contends that the bodies of daemons “have both a small degree of weight, to prevent them from ascending to the heights above, and a little lightness, to prevent them being hurled down to the depths beneath.”³⁰ This weighty substance that daemons are made of is in fact airy in nature. Gregory Smith is useful in unpacking this idea: he states that because of the physical composition of daemons, and the fact that the air closest to the earth is densest, it allows these entities to exist in the middle air referenced above by Apuleius.³¹

But why should all these daemons live in the air? *De Deo Socratis* contains a few theories to answer this question. First, Apuleius believes that since the daemons are of an airy nature, their nature is to operate and live within that element. In fact, it is accepted in his writings – daemons “move around in the regions of *aer* ... just as the appropriate creatures move around in every part of creation,” whether circling above or walking below.³²

Secondly, the basis of Apuleius’ metaphysical structure has rational beings divided into three parts, with gods the highest, daemons as intermediate, and humans as lowest. It is important to point out that these rankings are both spatial, with regards to the layers of

²⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 79.

²⁹ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, “On the God of Socrates,” 205.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

³¹ Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 483.

³² Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, “On the God of Socrates,” 201.

existence, but also the status of these entities within nature.³³ Charles Stewart elucidates this idea in “Repression in Antiquity?” He illustrates that “in the Hellenistic period [daemons came] to mean a lesser kind of spirit” whose job it was to “transmit dreams sent by the gods.”³⁴ Daemons were intermediate beings in both the literal and figurative sense.

Finally, it is essential to remember that daemons had a job to perform. They were not simply ethereal creatures flying about in the air, but actual entities entrusted with actions and responsibilities. While the definition of what daemons are meant to do varies widely between sources and individuals, Apuleius contends “all the predictions of the diviners, all the expiatory rites of the Etruscans, all the sacred precincts of the lightning-seers, all the prophetic verses of the Sibyls ... [these are] the tasks of certain powers intermediate between god and man.”³⁵ This is because the gods are too majestic to meddle in these small affairs and that “it is not the task of the gods above to descend to such things; this is the province of intermediate divinities, which move around in the regions of the *aer*, next to the earth.”³⁶ While not explicitly referring to daemons, Apuleius’ use of ‘intermediate’ is a clear clue to the entities he was referring to. This was clearly one of the reasons ancients placed daemons in the air, because it is the literal middle between humanity and the gods.

Daemonic Interaction with Humans

The most intriguing aspects of daemon’s intermingling and interaction with air may be seen in their day-to-day contacts with humans. Breathing and exhalation, along with travel, take a place of significance in the following passages. The idea of daemonic possession, whether forced or not, becomes clearer – it would have been easy for an air-like

³³ Ibid., 195. For a concise list of secondary sources related to layers of air see Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 483, n. 12.

³⁴ Stewart, “Repression in Antiquity?,” 193.

³⁵ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, “On the God of Socrates,” 201.

³⁶ Ibid.

creature to enter into another through breathing. The importance of daemon's corporeal features explains the ease with which their actions took place. In the following passages an exciting discovery emerges –in addition to the daemons needing to live in the air and use the air as a substance related to their physical makeup, their interaction with humans was also explicitly and strongly tied in with air. The complexity of daemonic interaction, from the divine breath of possession and power, to the concept of what occurs upon death, becomes explicit and the link with air becomes understood.

The Element of Air as Breath

The easiest way to understand human-daemon interaction is to start from the most basic element; in this case, the air itself, namely in breath and breathing. All of the sources mention breath, air, the divine wind, and so forth. These elements play an important role in the *Greek Magical Papyri* in particular. There are numerous instances where the magician must “draw breath from the divine into” himself in preparation for the spell and to “draw in breath from the rays.”³⁷ The divine, particularly “the rays,” refer to the divine spirits which the magician is calling upon, in this instance calling upon divine assistance from Helios, the Sun God. Of course, in these instances, the humans were not only preparing their mind and body for the rite, but also, in a literal sense, drawing in the ‘breath’ of inspiration and the power needed to perform their magic.

This concept of divine breath is neither new nor unique. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* refer to the gods breathing “might into men” and into minds providing the supernatural power or sight into the future needed for these Greek heroes to complete their

³⁷ PGM, 50 ; PGM 48

tasks.³⁸ As Gregory Smith acknowledges, “parts of the papyri suggest that there is a ‘divine breath of life’ with cosmic origins and implications.”³⁹ As with the *Greek Magical Papyri*, the *Corpus Hermeticum* refers to the “divine breath of truth,”⁴⁰ to the “cosmos breathing,”⁴¹ and similarly to the Papyri, to drawing in of divine breath.⁴² All of this breathing, all of this air moving about from entity to entity, granting power and insight, becomes one of the most important aspects of ancient daemons. Even more so, the association of air with all the above actions once again underscores the importance of the topic pursued in this paper.

Even though the divine breath of the magical papyri may be beneficial to some, it was not always so. Daemons, especially upon inhaling sacrificial smoke, could become dangerous. From Smith we learn that Origen, the early Christian scholar, warned people to be careful with sacrifices “because the smoke makes demons fat and dangerous.”⁴³ Intrinsically, if the sacrifice was preformed improperly, the smoke from that offering could cause ‘evil’ daemons to become more powerful. Heidi Marx-Wolf explains that, according to Porphyry, “the pneuma of the daemon gone bad, ‘lives on vapors and exhalations ...and it draws strength from the smoke that rises from blood and flesh.’”⁴⁴ Smith continues upon this point by adding that “a soul could absorb too much, drink too deeply of the vapors to which it was attracted and become ‘thick’ like a cloud.”⁴⁵ Obviously, care and attention to detail were needed in performing most magical rites unless the magician’s aim was, in fact, to call upon a ‘dangerous’ daemon.

³⁸ Smith, “So-called Possession in pre-Christian Greece”; Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York N.Y. U.S.A.: Viking, 1990), 19.159, 20.110; Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Viking, 1996), 19.138–139.

³⁹ Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 497.

⁴⁰ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴³ Qtd in Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 483.

⁴⁴ Heidi Marx-Wolf, “High Priests of the Highest God: Third-Century Platonists as Ritual Experts,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 495.

⁴⁵ Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 485. Interestingly Smith offers more on the Christian understanding of demons. He points out that “nearly half of the fifteen anathemas produced by the second council of Constantinople in 533 deals more or less directly with material origin, character, and destiny of spiritual beings.”

Not only can the divine breath empower ritual magic users, it can also assist the Christian in protection from ‘evil demons.’ Breath is linked to and integrated with possession and, by its reverse, exorcism. Of the primary sources, the *Life of Antony* deals with this idea overtly.⁴⁶ Antony’s experiences with daemons provided him with an upper hand in combat. His most effective weapon was the literal exhalation of breath, along with the name of Christ, to banish the daemons he came in contact with.⁴⁷ During one episode a tall daemon appeared to Antony, claiming to have the power of God. Antony then “puffed at him, and speaking the name of Christ I made an attempt to strike him ... and at once, with the mention of the name of Christ, this giant figure vanished, along with all his demons.”⁴⁸

Possession & Exorcism

In the *Greek Magical Papyri* there are examples of both welcomed and forced possession. One example of a willing possession occurs during a ritual for inhaling the daemon of a cat. In the spell, the practitioner first has to strangle the animal, releasing its essence.⁴⁹ This essence – literally the breath escaping the cat’s body – contains the power needed to complete the spell. The magician was not only a willing participant in the ritual, but very specifically welcomed the divine ‘air’ of the cat into his own body.

However, the majority of spells are for possessing others, usually in the form of love spells and curses. While offering myrrh over a set of coals, a magician calls upon the “flesh-eater” and “inflamer of the heart” to possess the unknown female.⁵⁰ The magician commands the daemon: “I am not sending you to far-off Arabia; I am not sending you to Babylon, but I

⁴⁶ Although not exclusively, as there are multiple spells in the PGM that show the names of Judeo-Christian gods used to exorcise daemons. See Smith, “So-called Possession in pre-Christian Greece,” 408.

⁴⁷ Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 503.

⁴⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 61.

⁴⁹ PGM 3 (19)

⁵⁰ PGM 4.1445,1505 (66-67)

am sending you to her NN ... so that you may serve me on the mission to her.”⁵¹ Until this point in the spell, we could simply assume this is a command for the daemon to perform an external action on the female, but the spell continues. “Do not enter through her eyes or through her side or through her nails ... but rather through her soul.”⁵² The magician is commanding the daemon to possess his ‘beloved’ and force her to do his wishes. Tellingly, this is accomplished by the daemon, whose body is ‘airy’ in nature, entering into her through an opening on her body.

Not all the spells in the *Greek Magical Papyri* are for these means, however. There are many examples of charms, phylactery, and spells used to protect the user from daemons and, in some cases, exorcise them. A “tested charm of Pibechis” uses many of the above methods for those possessed by daemons. The spell instructs the magician to place a lamella on the patient, for “it is terrifying to every daemon, a thing he fears.”⁵³ The charm continues, asking the practitioner to “blow once, blowing air from the tips of the feet up to the face” to finish the spell.⁵⁴ Once again, here is another instance where air and breath play a part in not only the possession but the ritualistic movements as well. Evagrius, a well-respected monk and Christian writer in the mid third century, expands on the knowledge of daemons in ancient times, adding that daemons actually “stamp” the mind of the person being possessed, typically performing this action while the victim is sleeping, thus motionless.⁵⁵

⁵¹ PGM 4.1505-1510 (67)

⁵² PGM 4.1525-1526 (67)

⁵³ PGM 4.3015 (96)

⁵⁴ PGM 4.3080 (97)

⁵⁵ For a detailed description see Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 510. I have purposely left out references to Antony and the Desert Fathers in this section. Certainly they were known for their demon fighting abilities, but for the most part, exorcisms were performed by speaking the name of God or Jesus Christ. For a plethora of evidence and analysis on monks and their use of “breath” see Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 88; Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*. Furthermore, a newer avenue of interesting scholarship has focused on boys as perfect vessels for possession. For more, see Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 481, 500. David Brakke, “Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 3 (2001): 509.

Daemons: Good or Bad?

The moral status of a daemon obviously has no necessary relation to its composition, but as in other cases the role of an aerial constitution turns out to have surprising implications. In other words, the air did not discern the intentions or motivations of a daemon, yet the air did play a part in how the daemons would interact, especially with the more complex activities associated with the afterlife as well as their interactions with the Greeks.

As the *Greek Magical Papyri* show, daemons were not inherently evil, at least not in the mind of pre-Christian Romans. In fact, it was common to call upon daemons to assist in foretelling the future, of providing power to the magician, and of sending messages between mortals and gods.⁵⁶ For example, in reference to the divine spirit, a papyrus instructs the user to command a god: “Give your strength, rouse your daimon, enter into this fire, fill it with divine sprit, and show me your might.”⁵⁷ Actually, Apuleius suggests that all people should understand that “things are done by the will, power, and authority of the gods of heaven, but [through] ... the service, effort, and agency of the daemons.”⁵⁸

Naturally, for as many sources and anecdotes of daemons as neutral or good beings, there are just as many instances of them being evil, malicious, and treacherous, generally in the writings of Christian authors. One of the best sources is from the Greek *Life of Antony*. Anthony understood the ‘daemons’ of Greek and Roman culture to simply be manifestations of evil.

One instance of their “evil” acts is the daemon’s ability of telling the future, for with their skill of divination they were able to deceive the Greeks into believing them to be of a

⁵⁶ Barnes states that there was “widespread belief that the demons possessed the power to foretell the future” in Baynes, “St. Antony and the Demons,” 9.

⁵⁷ PGM 4.965-970 (57)

⁵⁸ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, “On the God of Socrates,” 200.

divine nature. Antony believed their prophetic powers to come from their speed and light bodies. Gregory Smith describes this speed as one of the “assumptions about bodily and aerial density” that allows the daemon quickness.⁵⁹ Antony suggests that daemons “who use bodies thinner in substance than those of humans” are able to spy the beginning of an occurrence, like the arrival of someone, and “get a head start” in foretelling the “future.”⁶⁰ This is just one of the ways in which Antony explains the Greeks misplaced piety in their gods. For Antony, the oracles of the Greeks “were led astray in former times by the demons” who could whisper the future in the oracles’ ears.⁶¹

Explaining further, Antony states that it was not divine inspiration but instead the experience, practice, and swiftness of daemons that allowed this false sense of prophecy.⁶² Of course, whether right or wrong, a true Christian would give no credence to the pagan beliefs of magic, spells, and prophecy, for only through their God could anything be known. Needless to say, this is an important explanation of daemon’s ability to “see” into the future. In fact, Antony believes that daemons, when finding someone fearful or ignorant, like the Greeks, will appear and pretend to act as a deity. In this way, the daemons are able to control the faith of the pagans.⁶³

Another of the many tools available to the Christian daemon is the ability to transform themselves by using open entrances in a person’s body and through the ability of creating a whole new shape and figure for themselves. While discussing the many tricks available to a daemon, Antony explains that daemons will attempt to “frighten you by fabricating phantasms, transforming themselves” into all manner of “beasts, reptiles ... [and] thousands

⁵⁹ Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 505.

⁶⁰ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 55.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59.

of soldiers.”⁶⁴ Additionally, they will “chant with sacred song and ... recite sayings from the Scriptures,” sometimes while invisible in the air around the monk.⁶⁵ In the former instance, the daemons was most likely in the guise of a fellow monk or pious man of Christ. Antony instructs his followers to expect noises and disturbances similar to that of “tough youths and robbers” and to protect themselves from the daemons who have utter contempt for virtue.⁶⁶ The fact remains that at the heart of a daemon’s power is its connection with air, allowing for easy movement, easy transformation, and easy entrance into a human’s body.

A final example from Antony, one that synthesizes his thoughts on daemons, reads: “Schemes for working evil came easily to the devil, so when it was night time they made such a crashing noise that the whole place seemed to be shaken by a quake. The daemons, as if breaking through the building’s four walls, and seeming to enter through them, were changed into the forms of beasts and reptiles.”⁶⁷ Revealingly, the ability to enter walls, as with modern notions of Casper the Ghost, is something only an aerial being can do.

Upon Death

A final and important discovery with regard to human-daemon interaction and the air relates to cosmology, demonology, and beliefs about what happens upon death. There are loose correlations between the sources. Apuleius, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Greek Magical Papyri*, and the *Life of Antony* all seem to share a few basic principles: upon death, the human travels through the air; the daemons living in the air were responsible for a sort of chaperone duty; and daemons are intimately involved in the punishment of humans.

Apuleius believed that daemons were with humans from the moment of birth, being “assigned to individual humans as witnesses and guardians in the conduct of their lives”

⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 38.

allowing the daemons to be judges of both human's actions and thoughts.⁶⁸ He continues, saying that upon death, that same 'guardian' daemon "seizes hold of us and drags us off" through the air to trial.⁶⁹ At this point, the daemon is available to verify or refute the humans past actions and based on "his testimony ... judgment is pronounced."⁷⁰ Of course, an obvious question after reading this passage is who or what exactly passes this judgment? Hermes explains that after a soul leaves its body, "it passes to the jurisdiction of the chief demon who weighs and judges its merit."⁷¹ If that daemon believes the human to have merit, that person is allowed to stay "in places suitable to it" but if found wanting, that soul is consigned to the "storms and whirlpools of air" where "its endless punishment [is] to be swept back and forth between heaven and earth."⁷² Certainly similar to modern Judeo-Christian notions of an afterlife, but distinctly ancient in their assumptions, these passages offer a revealing view on ancient metaphysical thought.

Along with being a witness at the human's judgment, daemons would also take part in the punishment. Jean-Pierre Mahe states that "the wicked undergo many torments in the open sea" and that the punishment takes place in the air, not on the earth.⁷³ He continues, citing the Nag Hammadi, "the punishment of the wicked after death does not normally take place under the earth but on the way up to the heavens [and if the daemon sees vices he] throws him down so that he is suspended between heaven and earth and punished with a great punishment."⁷⁴

A chief daemon in the air acting as judge and jury is not exclusive to pagan texts. In a first-hand vision, Antony witnessed this ascent and judgment, although with a Christian view.

⁶⁸ Apuleius, Harrison, and Hunink, "On the God of Socrates," 208.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 208.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 84.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Preliminary Remarks on the Demotic 'Book of Thoth' and the Greek Hermetica," *Vigiliae Christianae* 50, no. 4 (January 1, 1996): 354–355.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 354 – 355.

While daydreaming, Antony “was amazed to see how many foes our wrestling involves and how many labors someone has in passing through the air.”⁷⁵ As he was being led through the air, Antony “saw some foul and terrible figures standing in the air, intent on holding him back so he could not pass by.”⁷⁶

As I have shown, the cosmology and beliefs in the after-life are as complex as any found in the modern world. And similarly, the beliefs in both the ancient and modern mind are predicated on an unknown force, with unknown helpers, assisting or harming humans upon their death.

Conclusions

The implications of daemons and the air are as important as they are varied. In addition to modern scholarship now possessing a fuller understanding of the look and make up of ancient daemons, the mechanics of possession and exorcism becomes easier to understand if read literally. It makes sense that these supernatural beings could easily and frequently possess the body of a human now that their constitution has been established as an airy, fine substance. For how hard can it be to enter into the nose, ears, eyes, or other entrances of the body, if one is made up of the element that surrounds everything and everyone?

Additionally, the metaphysical cosmology of daemons, broadly assumed in classical antiquity, allows for future comparisons to non-western religions as well as the Judeo-Christian traditions. I find the notion of daemons as witnesses to one’s actions, as well as punishers of one’s misdeeds, to be both fascinating and faintly reminiscent of foundational

⁷⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Athanasius: The Life of St. Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, 79.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

tenets in some world religions. A relationship might be traced between Western and Eastern religions that believe in spiritual entities acting as guardians, witnesses, and punishers of deeds done on earth.

Finally and perhaps most obviously, is the prevalence of a shared system of beliefs about daemons among pagans and Christians, Greeks and Romans, commoners and the elites. The four primary texts consulted varied in the purpose, audience, and creation, yet all rely implicitly or explicitly on the ubiquitous nature of daemons and the normality of air.

Now that the connection between daemons and air has been established and shown to be frequent and pervasive in the ancient sources, the importance of air in demonology is clearly evident. Almost wholly ignored in modern scholarship, it is an area of study that is not only ripe for further investigation, but due a place in the historiography of the ancient world.

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