

*The Donkey King*

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**1 Introduction: The Complete Donkey**

*Der Leser war also gewarnt. Wer mit dem Esel nichts zu tun haben wollte, hätte dieses Buch gar nicht erst aufschlagen sollen.*

“The reader has been warned: if you didn’t want anything to do with donkeys, you shouldn’t have opened this book in the first place.” Martin Vogel, *Onos Lyras*, 16

To start with the lowliest, most obscene, and abject material and to delve into it so deeply that one emerges at last into the loftiest reaches of heaven may seem a strange approach to modern readers. But it is a method well suited to the interpretation of medieval Arabic literature, where we begin our asinine journey. For this is a literature that makes paradox, ambiguity, and the coincidence of opposites its constant theme.<sup>1</sup>

This is a study of the magical significance of the donkey, using medieval Arabic literature as the centerpiece of a discussion that will touch on the development of the figure through ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, through the medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worlds, and on into early modern Europe. By analyzing the use of the body parts of donkeys, as well as the invocation of demons, spirits, or gods who take the form of donkeys, it will show that in magical literatures across a vast range of time and space, the donkey has occupied a strangely liminal position. By focusing on his phallic associations on the one hand and on his ominous voice on the other, we will discover that the donkey has an unusually clear view into the world of the unseen and can consequently serve as a medium, an apotropaic presence, a holy fool, and a mirror to mankind.

I am a scholar of medieval Arabic literature, and much of my previous work has dealt with sympotic (banquet) literature, and specifically with the party-crashing character, or the uninvited guest. But my recent research focuses on magical texts, and specifically on a thirteenth-century Arabic grimoire, the *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (*Book of the Complete*) of Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī.<sup>2</sup> Though my focus is on medieval Arabic texts, I tend to read these in dialogue with ancient Greek and Roman as well as medieval and Renaissance European literatures. I have found the hub of these seemingly disparate (but actually intimately connected) research interests in the figure of the donkey. The donkey is the ragged, long-eared party-crasher on the gravest of philosophical and theological pursuits.

The first reaction upon hearing the word “donkey” is to laugh; similarly, the first reaction upon hearing the words “party-crasher” is to laugh. But the donkey and the party-crasher both present a deceptively simple comic appearance that

<sup>1</sup> See Bauer, *Ambiguity*, and Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*

<sup>2</sup> Al-Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa-baḥr al-kāmil*, whose edition, translation, and analysis was the subject of the Leverhulme Trust’s “Sorcerer’s Handbook Project: Medieval Arabic Magic in Context,” 2019–22.

hides a deep and powerful symbolic resonance. Like the divinity who arrives at your doorstep disguised as a beggar, these characters are microcosms who join the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the obscene and the sublime, into a single presence.

The accumulated significances around the donkey are ancient and share a remarkably widespread afterlife through much of Europe and the Middle East. These regions are the focus of this Element, which makes occasional tentative forays farther afield. I touch on the symbolic relationship between donkeys and other animals such as snakes, pigs, gazelles, roosters, and hoopoe birds, but I do not attempt to delve too deeply into the symbolism of mules or (God forbid!) horses. Asinine symbology alone provides more than enough material for one volume because everywhere I look when studying religion, literature, history, philosophy, and magic, I find the humble donkey.

This is a study of the use of donkeys – their image, name, and body – in magic, and an explanation of the web of symbolic associations that lie behind these usages. Obviously these associations are linked to the historical role donkeys have played in human society, for donkeys are among our most ancient animal companions; they were likely domesticated in East Africa around 5000 BCE, 3,000 years before the horse.<sup>3</sup> Their symbolic significance extends far beyond the magical into literary and artistic representations. Animal husbandry, literature, and art are not the focus of this present examination of the occult, but for a brief, accessible overview of many of these subjects, I recommend Jill Bough's *Donkey*.<sup>4</sup> There are far too many literary or novelistic treatments of donkeys to mention, but Richard Bulliet's *The One-Donkey Solution: A Satire* is the closest to our context. Andy Merrifield's *The Wisdom of Donkeys* reflects on many relevant works of literature and philosophy in the course of a personal account about traveling with a donkey through France. Nearer to our purpose is Nuccio Ordine's dizzying analysis of the ass as a symbol of holy foolishness and *coincidentia oppositorum* in the work of sixteenth-century philosopher and mystic Giordano Bruno.<sup>5</sup> Martin Vogel's *Onos Lyras: Der Esel mit der Leier* touches on most of the topics covered in this Element, all in the course of

<sup>3</sup> Todd, Tonasso-Calvière, Chauvey, et al., "Genomic History and Global Expansion of Domestic Donkeys," 1172.

<sup>4</sup> Tobias and Morrison also provide a breezy, popularizing account of all things asinine in *Donkey: The Mystique of Equus Asinus*, which includes many full-colored photographs of donkeys and their artistic representations.

<sup>5</sup> Ordine, *La Cabala Dell'Asino: Asinità e Conoscenza Giordano Bruno*: the analysis focuses almost entirely on the writings of Bruno himself, and does not mention the Islamic or Arabic treatments of this subject, but provides a very condensed history of the ancient and medieval symbolism of the ass in "Myths, Fables, Tales: The 'Asinine' Materials," 9–18, the notes for which furthermore provide numerous references to primary and secondary sources. The work was translated by Baranski and Saiber as *Giordano Bruno and the Philosophy of the Ass*. Also see

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advancing his charming but rather extreme argument, that the God of the Bible was a donkey god and the donkey himself is at the root of human culture.<sup>6</sup> I refer to a number of other useful studies throughout, notably Kathryn Smithies's *Introducing the Medieval Ass*, Richard Bulliet's *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers*, Kenneth Way's *Donkeys in the Biblical World*, Peter Mitchell's *The Donkey in Human History*, and Bassām 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jābī's *Akhbār al-ḥamīr fī-l-adab al-'Arabī* (*Accounts of Donkeys in Arabic Literature*), as well as many articles pertaining to donkeys in Greek, Latin, Egyptian, and Arabic literatures and beyond. When I stray outside my own area of expertise (medieval Arabic literature), I rely on the secondary scholarship and readily available translations, and I therefore apologize in advance for trampling on so many others' fields of expertise.

We will begin our exploration of *Asinità* (as Bruno calls it) with the thirteenth-century Arabic grimoire that lies at the crossroads of the civilizations that are the focus of this Element. We will see that the donkey appears in this handbook of magic as a powerful symbol of the unseen realm, used in both curses and love spells, as well as in the production of terrifying, sleep-disturbing visions. Because I argue that we can understand these varied and often contradictory uses as concentrated around two key features of the donkey – his phallus and his voice – I generally refer to the donkey as “he,” given the symbolic weight of the male generative organ in this study. We should note, however, that one of the most famous and significant donkeys in human history, Balaam's biblical ass, was a jenny.

Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī's thirteenth-century Arabic grimoire (the *Kitāb al-Shāmil* or *Book of the Complete*) strives to contain all of the magical operations that a complete practitioner of the occult arts might wish to employ, ranging from curses and demonic contracts to rituals of planetary ascent and protective uses of the holy texts. It draws from ancient Greek sources, includes chapters on the tantric rituals of India as well as on magical uses of Hebrew liturgy, and contains many ancient remnants of Zoroastrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian magic, which, as in most medieval grimoires, appear in a form so corrupted that they are difficult to identify with confidence. Many of the texts that it reproduces went on to influence the occult traditions of medieval Europe: its “Volume of the Moon”

Silvia de Leon-Jones, “Ass, Asino Cillenico, and Cavallo Pegaseo,” in *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah*, 109–117.

<sup>6</sup> He excuses his apparent exaggeration by saying that it is his way of overcompensating for the neglect that the history of donkeys in human culture has thus far received in the scholarship (Vogel, *Onos Lyras*, 527). Unsurprisingly, his thesis proved controversial, and even the kindest reviewer calls it “startling” and “provocative,” and observes that “it is difficult to judge whether we have here a valid thesis or an obsession with the animal that crops up at every turn” (Frankel, “*Onos Lyras*,” 117).

and “Volume of Venus” in particular were translated into Latin.<sup>7</sup> It is indeed, therefore, a complete book at the crossroads of the various times and places we will address in this Element, and a fitting place from which to begin our wide-ranging exploration of the magical donkey.

A significant proportion of this *Book of the Complete* deals with rituals used to contact the jinn, typically invisible creatures made of fire, who are featured in both the Qur’an and the hadith (accounts of the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad). Jinn come in many varieties, practice many faiths, and take many forms, and they can be summoned for many magical purposes. In the *Book of the Complete*, they are often summoned with the intention of causing overwhelming lust in an intended victim. The first specific jinn that this grimoire describes arrives in the company of donkeys. We may ask why the jinn king takes this entourage, and how we can explain the troubling imagery that surrounds his ritual:

On seals restricted to [particular] names of kings of the jinn. The first is a seal of Abū Isrā’īl Būzayn ibn Sulaymān, who is king of the donkeys. If you want to craft with it, clear out a house, sweep it, and sprinkle it with water, and spread it with fine carpets. When it is the time of the evening prayer, take care that the eyes of men are asleep, then get up and enter the house, and suffumigate it with aloeswood and costus, and put a glass vessel in the middle of the house, and cast into it something that I will explain to you afterwards. Let the goblet be of white glass, except that on the first night when there could be colours in it. Then gird yourself and draw the magic circle . . . Then you sit in the magic circle for seven, fourteen, or twenty-one nights, as you prefer, and recite the incantation on the first night – seven, fourteen, or twenty-one times – so that they may come to you on the first night, the middle night, or the seventh night.

On the first night they bring you more than a hundred thousand, when they will come to you striking with their weapons all around the land. On the second night, they bring about a thousand, and on the third, three hundred, until the seventh night, on which they bring seven hundred thousand. When it is the time to bring the great king Abū Isrā’īl Būzayn ibn Sulaymān, you will see something like a mule and a donkey, and on their backs there will be different types of carpets and rugs in that house, and the dais of the king is put in place, and on its right, seventy thrones, and on its left, seventy thrones. Then Abū Isrā’īl arrives and is seated on the dais with his servants standing at its feet. And this is the sign of Abū Isrā’īl: that there will be many things like shadows and spectres to the point that the top will reach the roof of the house. Then open his mouth, and if he accepts, he will take your head into his mouth. Do not be afraid, for

<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that they were translated directly from Sakkākī’s version, but that Sakkākī preserved a text in his compilation that definitely reached Europe by some route. See Saif, “A Preliminary Study,” 27–28, on the Lunar Mansion chapter, and Ockenström, “The Deviance of Toz,” on the book of Venus. Moreover, Arabo-Islamic jinn-summoning rituals like this one clearly also influenced medieval European Solomonic demon-summoning rituals. See Gordon, “Al-Sakkaki’s Grimoire and Medieval European Books of Ritual Magic.”

[fear] will destroy you; he is a Muslim and will not kill you. Then he will speak with you, and fulfil whatever you desire, so divulge your will, and he will reply. Then make the contract and the agreement with him . . .

If you want to learn this seal, make a seal of good quality steel, with a gemstone of it [as well], and let the stone be round without any corners, and engrave on it this engraving [as below]. And make the circle like a serpent with two heads, and in the middle, the seal of Solomon, fitting there exactly, neither too big nor too small. This is the seal which I mentioned; take care that it is done well.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1** A seal of Solomon surrounded by snakes. On the outer circle, it reads: “With the obedience of Israfil, the modesty of Gabriel, and the goodness of Michael, God is One, All-Conquering, *I will be what I will be, the Lord* [in Hebrew], surely you must answer, O Būzayn son of Solomon the Donkey [King], Hie! Hie! Swiftly! Swiftly! Now! Now!” On the inner circle, it reads: “Lo! it is from Solomon, and lo! it is: In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful; Exalt not yourselves against me, but come unto me as those who surrender.”<sup>9</sup> The star itself is inscribed with the Hebrew phrase *I will be what I will be, the Almighty God of Hosts*, plus [nomina barbara] and “May God fulfil you, for He is the Hearing, the Knowing.” Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa-baḥr al-kāmil*, “Cairo” manuscript, Juma al-Majid Cultural Centre, folio 117a.

<sup>8</sup> Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (“Cairo” manuscript), 115b–117a. Unless otherwise stated in the bibliography, all translations are mine.  
<sup>9</sup> Qur’an 27:30–31, translated by Marmaduke Pickthall.

A number of questions present themselves in this evocative passage, namely why is the donkey king the first and arguably most important jinn king presented in this manuscript? Why does his name associate him with Israel and with Solomon in particular? Why is he a Muslim but an ambiguously friendly/unfriendly being? Why the focus on his mouth? Why might we feel an urge to laugh at such a frightening and solemn spell merely because it mentions a donkey?

We are also struck by the “sign” of the donkey king – the shadows and specters piling up to the roof of the house. The jinn in general have the power to disturb human minds with their illusions and specters, perhaps especially in our sleep, but this is particularly true of Abū Isrāʾīl.<sup>10</sup> I would argue that this is because of his relationship with donkeys. An earlier chapter of the *Book of the Complete* tells us how to create “illusion,” or *takhyīl*, a word whose etymological root, kh-y-l, is related both to the phantom images that haunt half-sleeping lovers (*khayāl*) and to horses (*khayl*). The word *takhyīl* itself often refers not to a magical illusion, but to a poetical figure of speech whereby one creates a metaphorical likeness and then manipulates that likeness as if it were the true object of the verse: a kind of poetic voodoo doll.<sup>11</sup> The equine undertones of this word’s root are not obvious or typically remarked upon, but are nevertheless notable given our context.

The talisman of illusion. When the moon is in [the fifth] mansion, take the mud from a river running north, and make of it an idol of a [person] with his hands together, and with three heads, and the feet of a donkey, with a staff in his hand. And inscribe the first letter on his back, and the second [set of] letters on his chest, and suffumigate with the incense of the mansion. Say to it: “Excite the spirit of fantasy in this house, and make various frightful images appear!” Then bury it in the house. You will see various images and unsettling shapes.

Although this talisman does not specifically mention the jinn, the statue’s donkey feet are a telltale sign used to identify jinn of otherwise human appearance.<sup>12</sup> A later chapter of this grimoire describes an operation performed with equine footwear, used to activate an invocation to disrupt sleep, and calling on the donkey king for this specific purpose:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Jacobi, “The ‘Khayāl’ Motif” and Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover.”

<sup>11</sup> See Van Gelder, “The Lamp and Its Mirror Image.” Also see Hammond, “From Phantasia to Paronomasia,” which links *takhyīl* to the Greek concept of *phantasia* as well as the *ṭayf al-khayāl*. I argue elsewhere that the *khayāl* (phantom image) of the jinn and its link both to the poetic figure of speech (*takhyīl*) and to the *ṭayf al-khayāl* (a dream visitation from the specter of a distant beloved), is central to the operative power of the sorcerer as depicted in the *Book of the Complete*. See Selove, “Dream Theory of Translation.” Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (“SOAS” manuscript), 38a–38b.

<sup>12</sup> El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 172n4.

<sup>13</sup> Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (“Cairo” manuscript), 159b–160a. The donkey king is again invoked for this purpose on 173a.

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**On another** [method] to excite. Take a shoe from the left foot of a mule or a horse, with three holes, and mix it with the blood of a black chicken, and write the incantation and the seal upon it, and cast it on the fire, suffumigating it with blue bdellium until it grows red. This is the incantation: “I conjure you, O band of kings and demons, and O masters of sorcery and foul whispering, of the soldiers of Iblīs (Satan),<sup>14</sup> and the demon Danhash, by the words of Maymūn the Nubian, and Maymūn the Zengid, and Maymūn the Abyssinian, and Maymūn, Master of the Indian assistants, by the right of Kūzīn Shu‘abād<sup>15</sup> Solomon the donkey, King of Abyssinia,<sup>16</sup> take and bind the sleep of [Name] with love of [Name], son of [Name]!”

This section is found in a short chapter devoted entirely to insomnia. The chapter’s closing thought confirms the link between donkeys and terrifying, sleep-disturbing visions. Immediately following this chapter is another on hatred and division, and this new chapter opens with yet another donkey spell. So donkeys end and begin these adjacent chapters of dark and aggressive magic. The following quotation provides the closing lines of the insomnia chapter and continues on into the next chapter on hatred as described:<sup>17</sup>

The master of the Hidden Laws said that you bury the head of a dead donkey in the house of the person you wish [to affect] and no person will sleep in that house so long as the head is buried thus.<sup>18</sup> This is one of the secrets of the hidden laws. This chapter is now complete, with praise to God, may He grant success.

**Chapter Three** on hatred, binding, sundering, and enmity in hatred and division.

The Shaykh Sirāj al-Dīn Abū Ya’qūb al-Sakkākī said: If you want to start down this path, take a piece of black wax and form two images from it, one in the name of the hater and one in the name of his mother, in such a way that the [statues] are both hollow. Write this incantation and this seal on a donkey skin and on the robe belonging to the hater, or if that is not possible, then on a menstrual rag or some other cast-off, hateful, loathsome rag, and wrap the donkey skin and the rag all together, and put it inside the image representing the hater, and recite the incantation seven times, saying at the end: “Raise and cast enmity, hatred, dispute, ignorance, affliction, and battle between them, such that they will not marry, nor walk side by side, nor look upon one another except in enmity, division, shackles and adversity, and such that there will be no affection or harmony.”

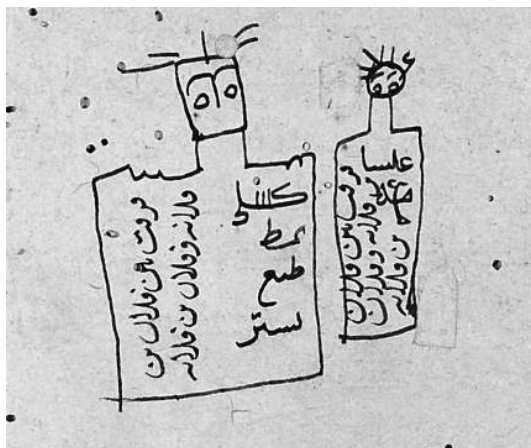
<sup>14</sup> On the ambiguous status of the Islamic Satan, see Section 2.

<sup>15</sup> Both the vowelings and meaning of these words are not clear.

<sup>16</sup> This epithet is only ever applied to the jinn Maymūn elsewhere in this text, and its inclusion here may be the result of a scribal error.

<sup>17</sup> Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmīl* (“Cairo” manuscript), 162b–163a.

<sup>18</sup> This may refer to the author of the “ninth-century Pseudo-Platonic *Kitāb al-nawāmīs* (‘The Book of Sacred Secrets’)” translated into Latin as the *Liber vaccae* (on which see Saif, “The Cows and the Bees,” 1).



**Figure 2** A spell of hatred to be inscribed on a donkey skin. The inscription reads: “I have divided between [Name] son of [Name] and [Name] son of [Name]” – SOAS library MS 46347, *Kitāb al-Shāmil wa-baḥr al-kāmil*, folio 179b

These spells provide a representative sample of the use of donkeys in this grimoire, which employs them most commonly for spells to cause hatred and affliction (a total of nine additional times to those already cited, once more especially by means of afflicting the enemy’s sleep). But *The Book of the Complete* also lists the donkey as one of the animals beloved to Venus and prescribes its milk as the key ingredient in a love spell: “Engrave [the seal] in the hour of Venus on Friday when the moon is in Taurus, then use it to stamp white sugar kneaded with donkey milk, and give this stamped [substance] as a drink to whoever interests you, and he will love you passionately.”<sup>19, 20</sup>

The use of donkeys for all of these purposes – to accompany conjured demons, to cause hatred, to induce insomnia, illusions, and nightmares, and to promote love and sexuality – is already found in the Greek Magical Papyri.<sup>21</sup> This diverse collection of magical texts from Greco-Roman Egypt, dating mainly from the first few centuries CE and written in Greek, Demotic, and

<sup>19</sup> Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (“Cairo” manuscript), 16b.

<sup>20</sup> Sakkākī, *Kitāb al-Shāmil* (“Cairo” manuscript), 32a.

<sup>21</sup> See Lucarelli, “The Donkey in the Graeco-Egyptian Papyri,” which describes insomnia and nightmare spells on 92 and 94, a spell for sending dreams on 99 and for causing illusions on 101, hatred spells on 95 and 96, a donkey-riding goddess/demoness on 92 and 93, and love spells on 98 and 99. The texts described cover centuries of material starting in the second century BCE. Lucarelli considers the Set-donkey, prominently featured in Section 2 of this Element, to be at the root of these examples of donkey magic.

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Coptic, describes magical uses for donkeys that remain stable for centuries. The uneven balance between donkey parts employed in curses and in love/protection spells also remains stable; in general, the negative connotations of donkeys continue to outweigh the positive throughout the history of asinine symbolism. For example, the thirteenth-century Latin *Picatrix* (itself a translation of the Arabic *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*), recommends the use of donkey parts in eight spells of cursing and enmity, but only three of love and protection.<sup>22</sup> In general, the donkeys' negative symbolic qualities are their most apparent, while their opposite positive qualities are hidden, but arguably deeper, more mysterious, and therefore closer to the truth of creation.

The passage just cited refers to the “hidden laws” (*nawāmīs*) that govern creation. These are the divine secrets that lie behind the efficacy of the ingredients of magic spells.<sup>23</sup> They imply a network of significations hidden beneath the apparent image on the surface of things. Why does the form of the donkey hold these powerful and often contradictory meanings? Why do donkeys haunt our nightmares and lend their form to our monsters and demons? Why do they nevertheless appear to us in daily life as benign creatures, and why in our religions do they serve as the mounts of our prophets and our gods? Our quest for answers takes us first back to the ancient world.

## 2 The Ancient Donkey and His Afterlives

This section provides a brief overview of the ancient symbolism of the donkey and his medieval afterlives.<sup>24</sup> It focuses especially on the Egyptian god Set, who lies behind many of these associations, including the purported link between donkeys and Judaism, as well as the donkey's darker resonances in Christianity and Islam. I also introduce here the donkey as mount of prophets and gods in multiple religious traditions, thus setting the stage for the following sections, which will revisit these themes and explore them more deeply in relationship to the phallus and the bray.

<sup>22</sup> Book three of *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic*, edited by Attrell and Porreca. Saif, “From Ghāyat al-ḥakīm to Šams al-ma‘ārif,” explains, “The compendium known as Ghāyat al-ḥakīm (The Goal of the Sage, aka Picatrix), among the most influential of premodern grimoires, epitomizes the earliest tradition of natural magic in Islam. Usually associated with the astronomer and mathematician Maslama I-Mağrībī (d. ca. 398/1008), this erroneous attribution was made by Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 808/1406) and others. Maribel Fierro convincingly identifies the author as the traditionist and occultist Maslama I-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964),” 299.

<sup>23</sup> Saif translates the word as “sacred secrets,” and explains that the more common translation as “laws” derives from the etymological link to the Greek *nomoi* (“The Cows and the Bees,” 1).

<sup>24</sup> Bough's “Donkeys in Human History, Mythology, and Religion” (*Donkey*, 45–75) provides illustrative photographs of many of the mythological and religious figures described in this section.

The Egyptian god Set was sometimes depicted with a donkey head.<sup>25</sup> The connection between Set and donkeys lies behind centuries of donkey magic. As Johnston notes, “It is probable that [the Setian] significance of the ass eventually became more broadly applied . . . so that it became a sort of all-purpose demonic animal, and its body parts became all-purpose amulets, *similia similibus*.”<sup>26</sup> In the early Dynastic period (ca. 3100–2181 BCE), Set appears as an ambiguously friendly/unfriendly god, but he later came to represent evil, chaos, and foreignness.<sup>27</sup> Thus, he is usually depicted as a trickster and as the murderer of his brother Osiris (god of fertility and death). Set’s donkey companions’ loud brays and large penises were at odds with the ancient Egyptian sense of decorum.<sup>28</sup> Since donkeys were also the companions of the wild people of the desert, both they and Set himself came to stand for the chaos surrounding and threatening the civilization on the banks of the Nile. Donkeys would have been a common sight, however, all over Egypt, and an integral part of daily life, and in that homely, workaday light, they seem a strange symbol for uncanny foreignness.<sup>29</sup>

Both Set and his donkey companions are ambiguous beings, integral to and outside of Egyptian religious life. Thus, though they were “known for their evil doings and menacing abilities, their wickedness seems to have also served gods and humans in many occasions.”<sup>30</sup> For example, donkeys were buried in ancient Egyptian tombs, facing eastward toward the sunrise; it may be that in Set’s role as the slayer of Osiris (a god closely affiliated with the sun god Ra), Set himself gained a (negative) association with the sun.<sup>31</sup> This would explain the mysterious claim by Aelian, a third-century Roman author, that the ass is hated in Egypt because he “voids excrement after turning its back to the rising sun.”<sup>32</sup> It is in any case typical of the symbolic donkey to contain both the thing (in this case, the sun) and its negation in one being. Thus we also see the donkey, symbol of Osiris’s murderer, serving elsewhere as Osiris’s doorkeeper, and as the mask of the sun at night.<sup>33</sup>

As Vandenbeusch explains, this asinine ambiguity is embodied in the word *hiw*, which means both snake and donkey, or sometimes, a hybrid snake–donkey creature. It also refers to the frightening noise that both animals make

<sup>25</sup> The most complete recent study of this association can be found in Love, “Crum’s Chicken.”

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, “Defining the Dreadful,” 385.

<sup>27</sup> See Turner, “Seth,” which speculates that his ambiguous status arose from the troubled relationship between Upper and Lower Egypt.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, *The Donkey in Human History*, 54n50.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell, *The Donkey in Human History*, 45 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Vandenbeusch, “Thinking and Writing ‘Donkey,’” 138.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, *The Donkey in Human History*, 54. <sup>32</sup> Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, 10.28.

<sup>33</sup> Guilhou, “L’âne, portier de l’au-delà,” 183.