

## The Aloe-bird in the Coptic Tradition

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[There is a bird in the Coptic tradition whose name is  $\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\eta$ , “aloe”. At least three Coptic texts mention the existence of this legendary species of bird of oriental origin whose main feature is the good smell that emanates. These texts state that, by its smell, this bird is capable of attracting other animals towards it. Its smell is also the main reason why it is coveted by kings and, therefore, searched and hunted. The aloe-bird was introduced in the Coptic version of the *Physiologus* as a manifestation of Christ, with features taken partly from the panther and the phoenix that appear in the original literary work. The allegorical meaning of the bird is to represent Christ. The origin and later fate of this symbol can only be conjectural due to the lack of sources. There are some hints to suggest that it has been the result of a confluence of information from different origins that sparked the imagination of the people. The identification of the aloe in the Coptic art is again hypothetical because of the lack of a description of its physical appearance and the absence of captions identifying it.]

**Keywords:** aloe-bird, Coptic literature, Christian symbolism, Coptic art, *Physiologus*.

Coptic tradition depicts a legendary species of bird from oriental origin whose name is  $\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\eta$ , “aloe”, and its main feature is the good smell that emanates. This paper attempts to reunite and examine all the information we know so far about this particular bird, to reflect on its origins, its role in the Coptic tradition and liturgy and its later reception, as well as to attempt to search this mysterious bird in the iconographic sources.

### 1. Written sources<sup>1</sup>

The  $\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\eta$ , a bird mentioned in the *Scala of Abu'l-Barakat*, a copto-arabic vocabulary published by A. Kircher,<sup>2</sup> appears also in several Coptic texts. The oldest of these texts is a fragment of a literary work attributed to Peter of Alexandria, *De divitiis* (cc0311), dated in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In this text, the aloe ( $\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\eta$ ) is not mentioned as a bird but simply as “an animal”  $\zeta\omega\omicron\eta$  ( $\zeta\omega\omicron\eta$ ). However, some of the elements that characterize the bird are also mentioned: an oriental

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1. The title of the literary works mentioned in this article and their date are taken from the information given in the webpage of the project PATHs (Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature. Literary Texts in their Geographical Context: Production, Copying, Usage, Dissemination and Storage. <https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/>) directed by P. Buzi; it contains, among other information, a classification of the Coptic literature, with the literary works (each of them with a *clavis coptica* identification) and the authors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. To cite the manuscripts, the system established by Emmel, (1990) will be used.

2. Kircher, (1643) p. 169.

origin, the extraordinary perfume that it spreads when it is alive but especially when it is dead; its perfume makes it very priced, coveted by kings, and, therefore, searched and hunted:

THERE IS A SMALL ANIMAL ΖΩΟΝ (ΖΩΟΝ), THAT YOU FIND IN THE PLACE WHERE THE SUN RISES, NAMED ALOE. ITS FOOD ARE PERFUMED PLANTS AND IT DOES NOT EAT ANYTHING ELSE BUT PERFUMED VEGETABLES; THEREFORE, ITS BODY ALWAYS SPREADS PERFUME. THUS, THE KINGS CAPTURE IT AND HIDE IT IN THEIR PURPURE GARMENTS BECAUSE OF ITS PERFUME. WHEN IT SLEEPS AND OPENS ITS MOUTH, THE SURROUNDING VILLAGES AND HAMLETS FEEL ITS PERFUME FROM A MILE DISTANCE. WHEN THE HUNTERS SEARCH FOR IT, WILLING TO CAPTURE IT, THEY WALK THROUGH MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS SMELLING AFTER ITS PERFUME AND IF THEY FIND IT, THEY ENCLOSE IT INSIDE A NET, AND A GREAT PERFUME SPREADS IN IT [the net] AND IT [the perfume] FLIES OVER A GREAT DISTANCE AND EVERYBODY KNOWS AND SAYS: “THEY HAVE CAPTURED THE ALOE”. NOT ONLY ITS BODY HAS PERFUME IN IT BUT ALSO THE GARMENTS OF THE HUNTERS THAT HAD CAPTURED IT AND THE NETS IN WHICH THEY CAPTURED IT. THEY EXTRACT ITS PERFUME TO SELL IT AT A GREAT PRICE. IT IS SAID ABOUT THE ALOE THAT WHEN IT IS ALIVE, SPREADS PERFUME, BUT WHEN IT DIES, SPREADS EVEN MORE PERFUME. THOSE WHO HAVE BOUGHT IT SAY: “THREE MEASURES OF FINE GOLD FOR ONE MEASURE OF IT”.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of this fragment the author adds an interesting sentence, in which he addresses his listeners or readers. In the Bohairic version<sup>4</sup> he says: “And I was not doing the philosopher (ΛΙΕΡΦΥΛΟΣΟΦΗ ΛΗ) saying these things, oh men, but I wish that your perfume spreads far away because of your good deeds that you have done during your lives”. Instead of that, in the sahidic<sup>5</sup> (and probably older) version he says: “And I was not doing the physiologue (ΕΝΕΙΦΥΣΙΟΛΕΓΕΙ ΛΗ) saying these things (...)”. The presence of this verb, ΦΥΣΙΟΛΕΓΕΙ, seems to connect somehow this fragment about the aloe-bird with the *Physiologus*-literature. The *Physiologus* is a literary work from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup> that consisted of several chapters in which the natural world (mainly animal, but it also includes some stones and trees) is allegorically interpreted to illustrate in a popular way the dogmatic and ethical principles of the Christian faith. Although it was originally written in Greek,<sup>7</sup> the *Physiologus* reached a great popularity and it was translated to the different languages of the Christian world, including Coptic.<sup>8</sup>

The connection of the aloe-bird with the *Physiologus* is reinforced by a manuscript<sup>9</sup> from El Fayum, published in 1895 by A. Erman and dated by him between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup> It contains a fragment of a text, attributed explicitly to the *Physiologus*, about two birds: the aloe and

3. Reconstruction made by Van Lantschoot, (1950) pp. 345-346 from VA-V Copt. 61, fols. 95v-96r. (Bohairic); US-PM M 602, fols. 9v-10r (Sahidic); FR-BN Copt. 130<sup>5</sup>, fol. 102 [Crum, (1903) pp. 394-395]; and BE-LL Copt. 42 [Lefort, (1940) pp. 126-128].

4. VA-V Copt. 61, f. 96r. Cf. Van Lantschoot (1950) p. 346.

5. US-PM M 602, f.10r. Cf. Lefort, (1940) p. 126, note 2.

6. Scott, (1998); Vollenweider, (2019).

7. The standard edition of the *redactio prima* was published by Sbordone, (1936), who identified four variants (ΜΓ, Σαλς, WO, AEII); Perry, (1941) p. 1113 added manuscript G (Cod. 397 of the Pierpont Morgan Library), that is related with the ΜΓ tradition. Later Offermanns, (1966) published a new edition based on manuscripts M and G, considered the closest to the original. Kaimakis, (1974) completed the critical edition of the *redactio prima* by adding the other variants.

8. The Coptic *Physiologus* has not reached as in a complete version or a full manuscript. Its existence can be deduced from the presence of vocabulary from the *Physiologus* in Coptic and the references to the work in different Coptic authors. See Van Lantschoot, (1950).

9. DD-BE P. 7999.

10. Erman, (1898) p. 53 dates it in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, although it does not use any dating criteria; Beltz, (1978) p. 106 (n° II 51) dates it to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but it does not mention any criteria either.

the charadrius. While the charadrius is one of the animals that appear in the original Greek *Physiologus*, the aloe does not appear in it; this suggests that an own version of the work, different from the Greek one, was developed inside the Coptic tradition.<sup>11</sup> This text includes all the information that we find in the fragment of work attributed to Peter of Alexandria, but it now specifies that the aloe refers to a bird (ⲉⲗⲁⲏⲧ) and adds new information about it: after eating it retires to their den for three days, after which it gives a great roar and attracts different animals towards it. It also makes a connection between the aloe and Christ, in the perfume of the resurrection and the three days spent in the tomb, after which he spoke aloud to the distressed: “COME, REPENT AND I WILL FORGIVE YOU YOUR SINS”. It also mentions a legend in which the aloe ate and drank in the Paradise until it found an incense tree where it lived, eating from its perfumed leaves.

THERE IS A BIRD IN THE EAST, ABOUT WHICH IT IS SAID THAT ITS NAME IS ALOE. IT ALWAYS SMELLS GOOD, BUT WHEN IT DIES, SMELLS EVEN BETTER. EACH ONE OF THEM IS WORTH TWO MEASURES OF GOLD AND IT IS GIVEN AS A PRESENT TO THE KINGS.<sup>12</sup> MAY OUR GOOD DEEDS SMELL AS GOOD AS IT [the aloe].

THE *PHYSIOLOGUS* SPEAKS TO US ABOUT THE HONOR OF THE ALOE AND THE PERFUME THAT IT SPREADS; IT IS GIVEN AS A PRESENT TO THE KINGS.

THE *PHYSIOLOGUS* SAID: WHEN THE ALOE EATS, IT ENTERS ITS DEN AND RESTS FOR-THREE DAYS. AFTER FULFILLING THE THREE DAYS, THE ALOE ROARS LOUDLY AND THE HARTS, ELEPHANTS AND BIRDS SURROUND IT BECAUSE OF THE SMELL OF ITS PERFUME, STANDING ALL THESE CREATURES BEHIND IT.

THOSE THREE DAYS THAT THE ALOE SPENT IN ITS DEN REPRESENT THE THREE DAYS THAT THE SAVIOR SPENT IN THE TOMB. THE PERFUME THAT THE ALOE SPREADS IS THE PERFUME OF THE RESURRECTION IN WHICH THE SAVIOR WAS RESURRECTED. HE APPEARED TO THOSE WHO BELIEVED IN HIM. THE ALOE GIVES A LOUD ROAR, IN WHICH IT IS ASSIMILATED TO CHRIST, WHEN HE CALLS THE DISTRESSED: “COME, REPENT AND I WILL FORGIVE YOU YOUR SINS”.

IT IS STATED ABOUT THE ALOE THAT WHEN THE HUNTERS CATCH IT, THEY GIVE IT TO THE KINGS AS A PRESENT BECAUSE OF ITS GOOD SMELL. THOSE WHO HAVE SEEN IT HAVE SAID THAT THE NET IN WHICH IT IS TRAPPED SPREADS ITS PERFUME DURING SEVEN WEEKS.

THE *PHYSIOLOGUS* TEACHES US ABOUT THE GREAT HONOR THE ALOE RECEIVES. IT TAKES ITS FOOD FROM THE PARADISE AND DRINKS WATER FROM THE FOUNTAIN [...] THE BAPTISM. THEREFORE, IT SPREADS MORE PERFUME THAN THE OTHER BIRDS OF THE SKY [...] IN WHICH OUR SAVIOR [...] THE ALOE IN GIBEÓN, BECAUSE ITS HONOR IS GREAT [...] VISITED THE LAND [...]. IT [the aloe] LIVED IN THE TREE OF INCENSE (ⲓ) DURING LONG TIME, UNTIL JERUSALEM WAS BUILT. IT [the aloe?] SAW A TREE THAT PRODUCED [...] IN ITS BEAUTY, ITS FRAGRANCE AND ITS LEAVES; IT [the aloe] LIVED IN IT WITH ITS BABY BIRDS AND ITS [...] DURING LONG TIME, UNTIL JERUSALEM WAS BUILT.

WHEN DAVID DIED, HIS SON SALOMON STOOD IN HIS PLACE. HE VISITED THE MOUNTAIN OF GIBEON AND SAW THE TREE AND HE WAS AMAZED. ON THE TREE HE SAW THE BIRD, WHO WAS NOURISHED FROM ITS

11. Already hinted by Budge (1894): p. xxxiv, when talking about the addition of the history of the crow to the reference of the *Physiologus*' chapter of the turtledove in the Bohairic version *In Michaelem* (cc0148), of Ps.-Eustathius of Thrace (GB-BL Or. 8784 fols. 164v<sup>o</sup>-166r<sup>o</sup>). Erman (1895) confirmed it with the publication of the manuscript which contains the information, linked to the *Physiologus*, about the aloe-bird, which is not included in the original version of the work. See Van Lantschoot, (1950) for more references.

12. Unusual use of the word ⲧⲁⲉⲓⲟ (ⲧⲁⲓⲱ, ⲧⲁⲓⲁ) as “present”, instead of the normal “to honor”, “honor”. This translation was corrected by Von Lemm, (1903) pp. 57-58. See TLA lemma no. C4152 (ⲧⲁⲉⲓⲟ), in: *Coptic Dictionary Online*, ed. by the Koptische/Coptic Electronic Language and Literature International Alliance (KELLIA), <https://copticdictionary.org/entry.cgi?tla=C4152> (accessed 2022-10-15).

PERFUMED LEAVES. HE [...] AND TOOK SOME ROOTS FROM IT [the tree]. HE [Salomon] PUT HE LEAVES IN A CUP AND DRANK AND A PERFUME SPREAD FROM ITS BODY.<sup>13</sup>

WHEN SALOMON BUILT ITS CITY, HE PLANTED THE ROOTS [...] AND IT GREW A TALL VINE TREE THAT HE ESTEEMED MORE THAN ALL HIS TREASURES. WHEN SALOMON DIED, THE VINE TREE WITHERED, AND THE TREE OF GIBEON BOWED ITS HEAD.<sup>14</sup>

Another mention of the aloe and its perfume was noted by O. von Lemm<sup>15</sup> in a liturgic hymn of the resurrection from the *Coptic lectionary of the Holy Week* (cc0789<sup>16</sup>), A LITURGICAL BOOK WHERE FRAGMENTS OF HOMILIES from different authors were reunited, compiled in the twelfth century and that was progressively expanded with extracts of other homiletic texts.<sup>17</sup> As well as the text published by Erman, in this text the aloe reunites different animals around it and, as a hymn of the resurrection, it suggests that the aloe-bird was a symbol of the resurrection of Christ.

SHINE, SHINE,  
MOUNT OF OLIVES,  
MEETING PLACE OF THE ANIMALS  
THAT GIVE OFF PERFUME.<sup>18</sup>  
HE STANDS IN THE CENTER,  
THE ALOE.  
THE PERFUME OF ITS WINGS  
FILLS ALL REGIONS.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. *The aloe-bird, a confluence of diverse traditions*

The curious thing about the depiction of the aloe in literary works is that it seems to be the result of the confluence of information from various sources. The behavior of aloe mentioned in the text published by A. Erman (the withdrawal to its den for three days after which it comes out giving a loud roar that attracts different animals) seems to be influenced by the content of the chapter of the *Physiologus* on the panther, symbol of the risen Christ, in which it is said that ...

... WHEN IT HAS SATIATED HIS APPETITE, IT LIES DOWN IN ITS DEN, AND ON THE THIRD DAY IT AWAKENS FROM SLEEP AND SCREAMS ROARING WITH A POWERFUL SOUND. AND THE FAR-OFF AND NEAR

13. Möller, (1901) p. 107 called the attention towards a Coptic chant which seems to mention an aspect of this same legend of Salomon and the tree where the aloe lived. This chant comes from a manuscript (DD-BE P. 9897) dated from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and from unknown provenance, and it is part of a dialog between Salomon and the queen of Saba: "There is a tree that grows in my region. / Salomon, lord of the kings of the earth. / It [the tree] rises a lot and expands and from it hang fruits. / If you take leaves from it, squeeze them in a cup and drink, / and a perfume will spread from your body".

14. Erman, (1985) pp. 54-57.

15. Von Lemm, (1910b) pp. 359-361.

16. It is indicated in PAThs that, provisionally, this *clavis coptica* is assigned to the whole of the Coptic Lectionary pending a later analysis of the different textual units it contains.

17. Suciú 2014: 677; Basilios; Coquin, (1991), pp. 1435a-1437b.

18. Burmester, (1943) p. 465, note 2 indicates that the sentence "meeting place of the animals that give off perfume" is also found in the manuscripts FR-BN Copt. 7 fol. 282 y FR-BN Copt. 70 fol. 310r<sup>o</sup>.

19. GB-BL ADD. 5997 fol. 311v<sup>o</sup> [Burmester, (1943) pp. 465-466 [417-418]].

BEASTS HEAR ITS ROAR. AND FROM ITS ROAR SPREAD ALL KINDS OF PERFUMED AROMAS AND THE BEASTS, FOLLOWING THE PERFUME OF THE ROAR OF THE PANTHER, APPROACH IT.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, the aloe show similarities to the phoenix, which also appears in the *Physiologus*: both are birds from the East (the *Physiologus* states that the phoenix is a bird from India<sup>21</sup>); both are related to aromatic substances; the perfume that the aloe emanates, especially after death, can be related to the fact that the phoenix when it is going to immolate itself, “impregnates its wings with aromas”<sup>22</sup> before being cremated and then reborn. Furthermore, in his Latin interpretation of the Copto-Arabic *Scala of Abu'l-Barakat*, A. Kircher identifies the aloe with the phoenix (*Avis Indica, species fœnices*),<sup>23</sup> although in this same vocabulary the ΠΑΛΛΩΗ, the aloe, is distinguished from the ΠΙΦΥΝΙΣ,<sup>24</sup> the phoenix: it means that for the Copts they were two different birds. All three of these animals, the phoenix, the panther, and the aloe, symbolize the risen Christ. As for the later fate of the aloe, the Arabic translation of ΠΑΛΛΩΗ in the *Scala of Abu'l-Barakat* equates it to لسمندل, the *samandal*-bird from the Arabic mythology. The *samandal* was often associated to the salamander and its legend has also been confused with that of the phoenix,<sup>25</sup> in both cases due to its relationship with fire. Marco Polo, in his travel book, talks about the *samandal* bird, but claims to believe that it is flexible asbestos,<sup>26</sup> a mineral substance with a filamentous structure, unalterable to fire, that was used to make fireproof cloth. He also says that there is a kind of indica wood of the aloes species that was used to perfume the mouth and the whole body, which was called *samandoura* (note the similarity with the word of the bird *samandal*) and that is resistant to fire.<sup>27</sup> In fact, W.E. Crum<sup>28</sup> in his *Coptic Dictionary* suggests that the name bird ΑΛΛΩΗ comes from confusion with the plant ΑΛΛΩΗ. The Bible mentions two plants with the name “aloe”. The aloe plant mentioned in Psalm 45:8 is said to be a very fragrant plant that, next to myrrh and cassia, perfumes the robes of the king.<sup>29</sup> This recalls strongly one of the functions of the aloe-bird, which is chased and hunted to be given as a present to the kings, who “HIDE IT IN THEIR PURPURE GARMENTS BECAUSE OF ITS PERFUME”. On the other hand, on the New Testament, an aloe plant is used in the burial of Jesus, which can also be linked to the aloe-bird through the perfume of the risen Savior.

### 3. In search of the aloe-bird beyond the texts

The popularity of birds is a well-known feature of Coptic art.<sup>30</sup> One could expect that a bird like the aloe, that was identified with Christ, should have a presence in Coptic art. Although there is no known representation that could be identified as the aloe, it is possible that some images of birds

20. Anonymus, *Physiologus* 16 [Martínez Manzano; Calvo Delcán (1999) pp. 165-166].

21. Anonymus, *Physiologus* 7 [Martínez Manzano; Calvo Delcán (1999) p. 147].

22. Anonymus, *Physiologus* 7 [Martínez Manzano; Calvo Delcán (1999) p. 148].

23. Kircher, (1643) p. 169.

24. Kircher, (1643) pp. 169, 167.

25. Van den Broek, (1972) p. 207.

26. Dozy, (1881) p. 687; Ferrand, (1913) p. 587, note 1.

27. Ferrand, (1913) pp. 284-285; 547.

28. Crum, (1939) p. 6.

29. I wish to thank my dear friend Karina Velikova for not only reviewing my English text, but also for calling my attention to this information.

30. Ortali, (2012) pp. 373-383; Spanedda, (2012) pp. 511-532.

depict it. We find a great variety of birds in Coptic art: many of them can be easily identified;<sup>31</sup> others are not identifiable because of their schematic depiction (especially in textiles) or because of their hybridity. We find an example of a hybrid bird in a wall painting in the 19/20 kôm of Qusur el-Izeila, inv. 12561 (Kellia, Fayum), dated between the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup>. In this scene we see two strange animals in the shape of a bird located each on either side of a cross (Figure 1). Could this be in the eyes of the occupants of this cell in Kellia a representation of the aloe-bird, symbol of the resurrection of Christ? We do not know any physical description of the aloe, so without a caption that confirms it, it is not possible to say. However, in this same cell in Kellia there is also another *Physiologus*-related animal, the unicorn (identified, in this case, with an inscription).<sup>32</sup>

Another possible depiction of the aloe could be the bird reproduced in the stela of the Coptic Museum inv. 8579 (former inv. 8673).<sup>33</sup> In this monument we can see an unidentified bird with deployed wings on the top of a cross. Below the bird and at both sides of the cross there are several animals that seem subordinated to the bird (Figure 2). Normally the bird depicted in this kind of Coptic funerary stela is identified with the eagle, but could it be in this case a representation of the aloe-bird that with its perfume attracts other animals? The funerary context fits well with the symbolism of the aloe and its perfume with the risen Christ that gives off the perfume of resurrection.

On the other hand, one of the most profusely represented birds in Coptic art is the peacock<sup>34</sup> (influenced, undoubtedly, by the international Christian art of the time), which very often has funerary connotations (Figure 03). One could expect that a such important iconographic motive as the peacock would have an equivalent presence in the Coptic literature. Nevertheless, the peacock appears to be practically absent from Coptic literary texts. A rare mention that could be found about the peacock (ⲧⲁⲟⲥ) is a text from Shenoute in which pagans and heretics are compared to two birds (the peacock and the *smoun* goose): both can be found in the church spreading their arms or wings:

FOR NO WONDER THERE IS A FAITHLESS PAGAN OR HERETIC IN THE CHURCH. IN FACT, EVEN THE BIRDS THEMSELVES ARE IN THE CHURCH. SEE! THERE ARE THE PEACOCK (ⲧⲁⲟⲥ) AND THE *SMOUN* GOOSE. IF THE HERETIC AND THE HEATHEN EXTEND THEIR HANDS AND RAISE THEM HYPOCRITICALLY, NOTICE THAT THE BIRDS THEMSELVES OFTEN DO SO, SPREADING THEIR WINGS. AND, WILL YOU FIGHT SATAN, YOU IMPIOUS, WHO LACK THE SHIELD OF FAITH WITH WHICH TO STOP HIS ARROWS?<sup>35</sup>

The reference to the presence of birds inside the church is certainly curious; S. Emmel sees no reason not to believe that birds or other animals were frequently in the church;<sup>36</sup> É. Amélineau also considers that birds freely entered the church, although he is striking that no other document testifies that there were peacocks in Egypt.<sup>37</sup> It could be said, if we have to consider real the statement of Shenoute that birds habitually entered churches, the word ⲧⲁⲟⲥ should refer to another type of bird, a more common one in Egypt, and surely not to the peacock. Furthermore, it is strange that the only mention of the peacock in Coptic texts has negative connotations given its

31. Ortali, (2012) pp. 373-383.

32. Rassart-Debergh, (1989) p. 77, fig. 67.

33. Crum, (1902) p. 139, pl. XLVII (inv. 8673); Kamel, (1987) pp.62-63, n° 153, pl. XXII.

34. Brune, (2004) pp.1185-1203, on the depictions and possible meaning of the peacock in the Coptic art.

35. Shenute, *As I sat on a mountain* (cc0631), MONB.HB 261-262 [Leipoldt, (1908) p. 45].

36. Emmel, (2004) p. 611, note 546.

37. Amélineau, (1911) p. 336, note 11.

popularity in Coptic art. Would it be possible to identify the aloe with the animal identified in Coptic art as a peacock? The peacock is found mainly in the area of India; likewise, the aloe was believed to have an oriental origin as described in the *Scala of Abu'l-Barakat* (which mentions it as *Avis indica*) and in the texts (“a bird from the East” in the text of Erman and “small animal **zōon**, that you find in the place where the sun rises” in the text of Peter of Alexandria, *De divitiis* (cc0311)). Although the characteristics that the Christian tradition attributes to the peacock (incorruptibility of its flesh) are not the same as the characteristics of the aloe (perfume), they do seem to have a certain connection in its symbolism of the risen Christ.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Coptic tradition developed the legend of the aloe, a scented bird, coveted by kings. The Copts included the aloe into the literary tradition of the *Physiologus* and identified it with the risen Christ. Some of the characteristics of the aloe seem to have been transferred from two animals of the *Physiologus*-literature: the phoenix (bird of oriental origin and related with perfume) and the panther (after three days in its den it goes out giving a great roar and attracts other animals). In the later tradition, the aloe was equated with the *samandal*-bird of Arab mythology. Its name and its characteristic perfume also seem to relate this bird to the aloe plant. As we can see, it is possible that the origin and later fate of the aloe-bird has been the result of a whole series of confusions and a mixture of information in a world in which misinformation about distant places awakened the imagination of men. Trying to identify the aloe in Coptic art is very difficult due to the absence of a physical description of the bird and the absence of captions that identify it as such. Therefore, every attempt to identify it is, for the moment, merely conjectural.

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Figure 01. Hybrid bird from a wall painting in the 19/20 kôm of Qusur el-Izeila, inv. 12561 (Kellia, Fayum) (from Rassart-Debergh, (1989) p. 74, fig. 64)



Figure 02. Stela with a bird on the top of a cross with several animals under it. Coptic Museum inv. 8579 (former inv. 8673) (from Crum, (1902) p. 139, pl. XLVII)



Figure 03. The peacock coffin. Ägyptologisches Institut, Heidelberg, inv. 500 (from Huber; Nauerh, (2018) p. 442, fig. 8)