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*Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman, and Early Christian Ideas* by Ingvild Sælid Gilhus

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*Reviewed by*  
C. Robert Phillips III  
Lehigh University  
[crp0@lehigh.edu](mailto:crp0@lehigh.edu)

Anyone who would offer an extended study of animals in classical antiquity must essay an oft choppy voyage between two scholarly perils. On the one side lies a Scylla of the sheer bulk of evidence and the scholarship involved in interpreting it. Articles in the standard classicist encyclopedias offer treatment both exhaustive and exhausting; they recount, as they inevitably must, the enormous quantity of ancient evidence while remaining cognizant of the equally enormous quantity of scholarship. On the other side lies a Charybdis of narrowing the evidence by means of chronology, theme, and interpretational guidelines. Most would, with Odysseus, favor a middle course between those two perils, since no one mortal can command all the evidence, all the scholarship, and all the possible interpretations. But Scylla and Charybdis make for rough sailing; the scholar sailing that middle course will be buffeted by important, often intractable, issues of genre and use of literary evidence, to say nothing how to yoke this all to the extensive archaeological evidence, especially from vase painting. Even after the voyage has led to the safe haven of a finished monograph, the scholar still risks storms on land. Despite a monograph's justifiably reduced purview, some readers will carp about what they consider to be a 'crucial' missing bit of evidence or its interpretation. They will be wrong. They should judge according to the integrity of the voyage, and the quality of the evidence offered in its support.

Gilhus focused her study on animals in Greco-Roman religion during 'a limited period in human history, the first to the fourth century CE' [3]. The period may be limited, but the issues of Greco-Roman religion in that period are enormous; the interaction with

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Christianity which Gilhus unhelpfully stylizes as ‘the transition from *paganism* to Christianity’ [3 (my italics)] redoubles the issues. Actually, what seems to interest her most is the transition from blood sacrifice to bloodless sacrifice, a theme evident throughout the book.

There are 12 chapters and a conclusion, all helpfully subdivided. The first four chapters cover the Greco-Roman material in roughly chronological progression, with the first devoted to key concepts or issues such as divination, sacrifice, and diet. Within that progression appear various themes such as soul and reason [ch. 2], vegetarianism and physiognomics [ch. 3], and metamorphosis into animals [ch. 4]. Throughout these chapters, Gilhus must inevitably range beyond the bounds of strict chronology in the interests of presenting the necessary complementary evidence and interpretation. The next three chapters are transitional: they examine both Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian material salient to the religious value of animals [ch. 5], to their sacrifice [ch. 6], and to critiques of sacrifice [ch. 7]. A wise move this, since it juxtaposes critics from the two contrasting religious traditions, often to good effect. The next four chapters consider the *New Testament*’s Lamb of God [ch. 8], as well as beasts and demons [ch. 9–11]. These chapters are particularly important because Christianity rejected the actuality, concept, and practice of animal sacrifice. The concluding chapter soars, considering, as it does, the θεῖος ἀνὴρ (divine man) and talking animals, both important issues given that animals were no longer sacrificed in Christian ritual and, hence, had an entirely different religious role.

Reader or reviewer must wonder ‘Animals or sacrifices—which is it?’ First, if sacrifices, Gilhus has said too little: nowhere does she provide an overview of Roman, let alone Greek, animal sacrifices; nor does she ever indicate the lack of a single canonical ritual and, thus, the extreme variability of the various possible components of the ritual. Worse, she seems to view the bloodless sacrifices of Christianity as an innovation. But what of the very old and important role, albeit enigmatic, of non-animal sacrifices in Greco-Roman religion? It has often been held that bloodless offerings characterized the worship of chthonic powers. For example, one Roman festival of the ancestral spirits (*manes*), the Lemuria (May 9–11–13), utilized offerings of black beans in the dead of night [Ovid, *Fasti* 5.419–492]. But contrast Odysseus’ use of blood to reanimate and consult the

spirits of the dead at the gates of the underworld [Homer, *Od.* 11.20–50, 97–99].

Second, if animals, Gilhus has said too little. It would be absurd to carp that she does not seem to know about simians in classical antiquity [McDermott 1938], since their relation to religion remains tangential at best. It would be less absurd, but still unreasonable, to complain that despite her obvious interests in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, she does not utilize his famous passage that ‘the Magi consider no animal to be fuller of religion than the mole’ [30.19: *nullum capacius religionum . . . animal*]. But her discussion of bees [73–74] misses the mark. She knows of Vergil’s Fourth *Georgic* but apparently only in passing. The connection of the bees with the tale of Aristaeus, Orpheus and Eurydice [4.315–558] entails issues of mystery religions and Orphism, surely germane to Gilhus’ thesis. Moreover, the idea of the bee’s arising spontaneously from an animal carcass (*bugoneion*) involves the issue of spontaneous generation and a diminished divine role, considerations which Aristotle thought significant enough to discuss at length [*De gen. an.* 759a8–761a11]. Such omissions, too numerous to list, occur throughout the book and greatly weaken its argument.

It was not so good an idea, I think, to focus in chapters 2–3 on the transition between traditional Greek and Roman religion to Christianity. In order to prosecute that agenda successfully, one needs a sure touch for, and deep knowledge of, Greco-Roman religion in its socio-historical context, both of Gilhus’ period and of its antecedents. One needs the skills of a practicing classicist, although one does not need to be one, because many of these material are accessible only in the original languages. But that is not Gilhus, as the examples I have just given, and will give, sadly indicate.

Although Greek and Latin literature of Gilhus’ chosen period obviously relies heavily on its antecedent traditions, her book does not. For example, the index gives but one unhelpful reference each to Homer and Hesiod, thus raising the question of the textual foundation of her already compromised interpretative edifice.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the index is not good. It is incomplete for the animals it does cover, and omits many animals mentioned in the text: in short, the index makes the book toilsome to use and is itself misleading.

<sup>1</sup> I note that her bibliography of texts contains no reference at all to Homer.

As for matters of evidence, Gilhus does not appear up to her task. It is hard to have confidence in her views of the Greco-Roman non-Christian authors, since she relies almost exclusively on translations, and not the best translations in any case [287–293]. That is, too often she relies on the Loeb Classical Library.<sup>2</sup> Some volumes in that series, especially the more recent ones, are of very high quality indeed.<sup>3</sup> But there is real danger in using so many provably dated and inaccurate translations. The upshot is that where a translation is misleading, so is Gilhus.<sup>4</sup> Matters are rather better for the Christian authors. The texts from the Judaeo-Christian tradition tend to be reliable; *Sources chrétiennes* is mentioned, and various other recognized editions of authors. But even there, the translations are not always the best—for example, the translations from the Ante-Nicene Fathers which appear throughout.

But there arise issues larger than those of evidence *per se*. Which Greco-Roman religions and whose Greco-Roman religions is she considering—and what was ‘traditional’? Ancient Roman religious specialists thought traditional religion came from the period of the monarchy (usually given as 753–509 BC), especially and anachronistically from the reign of their second alleged king, Numa Pompilius. Likewise, much of the ancient Greek educational system was based on the paradigmatic vision of divine machinery in the Homeric epics. Reality differs. There were in fact multitudinous cults and wide variations of worship and theology even inside one cult—should one be surprised when several cities in the Greek East each claimed to be the birthplace of Aphrodite? In other words, although everyone knows that Greek and Roman religions were not ‘religions of the book’, Gilhus has not grasped the implications that this has for her account.

Which Romans and which Greeks? The socio-economic elites? They produced virtually all of the literary evidence, and yet they

<sup>2</sup> Gilhus fails to consult some fundamental collections of fragments that have not been translated: for example, given her interest in physiognomics [74–176], the absence of any reference to Förster 1892–1893 is striking.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Martin West’s *Hesiod* volumes [1966, 1978]; George Goold’s *Manilius*; Roland Kent’s *Varro: De Lingua Latina*.

<sup>4</sup> Curiously, she cites the older translations by date of reprint, so there inevitably arises the surely unintended misperception of very many recent translations when, in reality, many of those translations are a century or more old.

constituted a tiny minority of the total Mediterranean population in any era. The majority of the lower socio-economic orders? There the issue lies with merely getting the evidence. The elite's authors satirized the lower orders regularly; since the lower orders left virtually no literature, one is obliged to reinterpret the elite's evidence for them and to cull scraps of papyrus, stray inscriptions, and archaeology for clues. I offer such considerations as questions, because nowhere does Gilhus attend to them as she implicitly presents Greek and Roman religion as monolithic entities in monolithic societies, all the while privileging literary evidence over any other kind of evidence, while even in that literary evidence she demonstrates a serious lack of acquaintance with the authors, their traditions, meanings, and implications. Gilhus' views of Christianity verge on the antediluvian. Which Christianity and whose Christianity? Only in the fourth century AD did a canon of the *New Testament* books begin to appear. Despite that, and despite the same century's Council of Nicaea (AD 325), there simply did not exist, and never had existed, one 'orthodox' Christianity. Rather, there were competing varieties of Christianity, characterized by the ultimate contest-winners (Nicones) as 'heresies'. It scarcely needs elaboration that animals will serve very differently in, say, Nicene Christianity, Carpocratian Christianity, and Arian Christianity. Gilhus is aware of the alleged 'heresies', but apart from a few pages [238–242 with notes] her Christianity seems of the older unjustifiable scholarly view which posited one original and unchanging 'orthodox' religion; if she has considered the work of Walter Bauer [1971] and John Gager [1975], there is no sign of it here. She considers Gnosticism a hybrid of Christianity and Greco-Roman religion [108], contrary to recent thinking on the subject [see King 2003]. Gilhus' lack of clarity on these very basic issues of evidence and scope inevitably casts doubt on her deployment of evidence and on her interpretations both small and large-scale.

While I have written above that Gilhus rightly will not be bound by strict chronology in the Greco-Roman chapters, she has unfortunately not avoided an oft willy-nilly oscillation between topics. Consider the second chapter, 'United by Soul or Divided by Reason' whose chronological and thematic leaps have no apparent rationale. Thus, there is a wild ride from Plutarch to Philo to Homer [44–51], the last appearing in a riddling reference [see below]. Then, she goes on to a woefully brief treatment of Philostratus on Apollonius

of Tyana [53–56], and concludes with the obviously here misplaced discussion of Origen and Celsus. When such seemingly gratuitous, free associations of genre, geography and author appear, they do no good since they level important differences of genre and intellectual *milieu*. Indeed, the chapter's conclusion [61–63] might be summarized as 'There was an ancient philosophical debate on animals. There were unsolved problems. Let us move on to vegetarianism.' Vegetarianism, the subject of the next (third) chapter rightly opens with Pythagoras. But how seriously can one take a treatment which shows no awareness of Walter Burkert's fundamental study [1972]? This is not the traditional reviewer's carping on the omission of a favorite (to her/him) piece of bibliography. Even casual use of Burkert would have saved Gilhus' discussion. I note in passing that Burkert does not appear at all in her bibliography; although I have been critical in print of some of Burkert's more recent work [see Phillips 1998, 2000b], he and Martin Nilsson indisputably constitute the two 20th-century scholars whose works are fundamental for the study of Greek religion. Unhappily, the absence of Burkert and Nilsson from Gilhus' bibliography does not surprise. Unhappily again, such a lack of logic, scholarship, and evidence characterizes all the chapters of Gilhus' book.

I turn now to a brief selection of missed opportunities, and supply either some clarification of points Gilhus has made enigmatically, or introduce some requisite considerations of which she does not seem cognizant. In both cases, I organize them thematically the more readily to demonstrate their relevance for her undertaking. This brief enumeration is not meant imply that she should have presented precisely these items of detail since, as asserted above, that would be unfair. Nevertheless, it remains passing strange that she gives no hint of anything of their ilk.

*Varieties of Myth and Ritual* The metamorphosis of humans into animals constitutes a major aspect of animals in Greco-Roman religion; Gilhus rightly devotes her fourth chapter to it. But her perspective and, hence, most of her observations on same start from an almost fatal flaw. She takes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as canonical. This will not do. Certainly, Ovid offers important evidence for the Roman appropriation of Hellenic mythological traditions at the start of her chosen period, but he scarcely initiated it. For example, Livius Andronicus' third-century BC Latin translation of Homer's *Odyssey*

must surely have included Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men [*Od.* 10.233–243]. While Gilhus observes that Actaeon still retains his human mind in Ovid's version [80–81], what of Io, to whom she gives but cursory discussion? In the first century BC, Calvus did a mini-epic (epyllion) about Io's transformation and unhappy wanderings; at least two of the poem's surviving fragments strongly imply she retained her human mind as well [see [Courtney 1993](#), 205 #s 9, 10]. In short, the fact that Ovid's work represents the first fully preserved account of transformations does not make his the first Roman account ever.<sup>5</sup>

Further, were these even Roman 'mythologies' at all, or literary tropes? Here lies a major issue of Roman religion—whether the Romans had mythologies before their contact with the Greeks and what constituted those mythologies. There is an ever larger issue of what constituted a mythology. Was there one core mythology which remained relatively stable across time despite various tangential accoutrements added to it? Or did the very mythology and, hence, its range of meanings shift across time as a kind of theological amoeba? Discussion of these last issues has long been, and unfortunately still is, a scholarly blood sport; nevertheless, it behooves any scholar dealing with mythologies to stake out a position. Returning to the particular, compare Gilhus' brief summary of Ovid's version of the Io mythology [79] with the enormous number of variations which existed in the Hellenic tradition [[Gantz 1993](#), 198–204]. Again, on the issue of humans retaining consciousness while in animal form, there is the famous literary example of Homer's appearance to the Roman poet Ennius (early second century BC) in which the Greek bard recalls becoming a peacock [[Skutsch 1985](#), 71, ix]. This raises the still larger theme of transmigration of souls, a belief which was certainly well known by the time of Herodotus [*Hist.* 2.123] and earlier with the Presocratics.<sup>6</sup> Largest of all is the myth-ritual issue. Such theoretical concerns have long exercised not just classicists but also anthropologists and historians of religion. Wherever one comes down on the myth-ritual issue, and one really must alight somewhere, there then arises the question

<sup>5</sup> Gilhus' footnote [78n1] is utterly baffling, as if to retail names she has gotten from a handbook without pondering their relevance.

<sup>6</sup> The clearest brief introduction to this enormous topic appears in [Lloyd 1993](#), 59–60.

of how to apply it to Gilhus' period. On the Roman side, matters are bedeviled by the issue of what Roman mythology 'was'. On the Greek side, there are continuities with the earlier traditions, but continuity does not imply unvaried transmission [see [Dowden 1992](#), 102–118].

*Mechanics of Roman Ritual* How can a monograph which claims sacrificial ritual as major concern avoid a clear explication of animal sacrifice and its issues [22–26]?<sup>7</sup> Few without competence in Roman law will understand Gilhus' claims about the legal liability (noxal liability) for injuries caused by animals, and just as important yet totally absent in her presentation is the consideration of what constitutes a 'tame' or 'wild' animal.<sup>8</sup> Then, there are various ritual details small and large. Of the former, consider the Roman instauration, the repetition of a ritual otherwise marred by a flaw such as an animal's being understandably averse to offering its life for the ritual and running away. How often did this happen, and how often was a full instauration practiced [see [Cohee 1994](#), [Nock 1939](#)]? Of the large issues, consider the *ver sacrum*, the dedication of the agricultural fruits to the gods. An extremely old and widely practiced Italic ritual, this was a kind of mass sacrifice by an entire population [cf. [Phillips 2002c](#)]. But for Gilhus, the difficult fact remains that there was no one canonical sacrificial ritual common to the polytheistic religions of her period. There were common features, of course, to all sacrificial rituals. But those were outweighed by the cult-specific components. In short, the sacrificial rituals in Greco-Roman polytheism were even more polymorphous than one might plausibly expect from religions not 'of the book' [cf. [Phillips 2002a](#)].

*The Nature of Animals and Divination* Three pages [26–28] on this animals and divination seem rather brief, briefer still when only half of them are devoted to the Greco-Roman material. In such a compressed format, an enormous amount of basic information is inevitably suppressed, consequently skewing the further use that Gilhus makes of it. All agreed that signs of the gods' intentions could and did appear; the issue became what constituted a sign. In a way, the famous line from Homer where Eurymachus criticizes a prophecy from birds is crucial: 'while many birds fly in the sky, not

<sup>7</sup> On the Romans, see [Phillips 2000a](#).

<sup>8</sup> Gilhus wrongly downplays noxal liability [22–23]; as for wild and tame animals, see [Frier 1982–1983](#).



all of them have meaning' [*Od.* 2.181–182]. The very complex and detailed Roman system had the advantage of avoiding this, although it should be noted that much of the Roman system came from the Etruscans (who are totally missing in Gilhus' account). Thus, there were the haruspices, the augurs, and the information to be drawn from a sacrifice, to give but three examples. Gilhus' treatment is so general as to confuse anyone except the specialist. She knows of Jerzy Linderski's work, but not his fundamental article on the regulations for the augurs [1986]. Her discussion of Cicero's well-known passage on the absence of a liver from a sacrificial victim [*De div.* 1.118–119, 2.36–37] seems totally misguided since she takes it as satire, when in reality it presents two very real, contradictory interpretations. She treats omens, augury, and haruspices as aspects of the same thing, despite their different methodologies, organizations, and the different people who could practice each method. That is, Gilhus has leveled so much here that the enormous complexity and sophistication of the Roman system vanishes.

There is also another way of looking at signs from the gods, and it consists in focusing on how the ancients conceptualized them. Gilhus' use of 'prodigy' to fit all signs will not do. Anything out of the ordinary, as the ancients variously considered 'the ordinary', could be a θαυμάσιον or *mirum* (wonder). If a religious specialist deemed such an appearance significant, that meant that the sign offered probative information of divine will, for him and for those to whom he possessed credibility. But simultaneously, anyone could proffer such an interpretation and, once again, his claim of probative information of divine will would be credible for him and for those to whom he possessed credibility. That is, there was a twofold system: religious experts and non-experts both interpreted omens, and sometimes even the same omens. There also existed a category which was not merely θαυμάσιον or *mirum* but called a τέρας in Greek or *monstrum* in Latin. Each could be a token of divine will, but with a quality of the dire or dangerous. For example, a seriously deformed human or animal birth constituted a τέρας/*monstrum*. It is unclear how the Greeks handled such an appearance, but the Romans typically would either kill it or expel it [see McBain 1982]. Finally, such words were not limited to signs: the terms θαυμάσιον/*mirum* and τέρας/*monstrum* are applied to various mythological entities in a dizzying number of permutations as a function of author, author's

ideology, and genre. Finally, Aristotle uses τέρας to describe deformities without the least hint of any inherent divine communication [*De gen. an.* 767b4–14, 769b1–10, 29–30].

*Material Evidence* Here Gilhus offers little. I give one example, not to imply she should have used this particular one, but to demonstrate what material evidence can offer. Since Gilhus' sole interest in Greco-Roman mythological animals devolves on the metamorphoses of humans into them, it does not surprise that beings such as Cerberus, Chimaera, and Typhon are passed over. I focus on Cerberus the canine who traditionally guarded the entrance to the underworld. He is simply 'the dog' in Homer [*Il.* 8.366–369]. Hesiod gives him 50 heads [*Theog.* 311–3412], while Pindar seems to have assigned him 100 heads [Scholiast to *Il.* 8.368 = Pindar frg. 249b Snell]. Later literary evidence makes him three-headed [Sophocles, *Trach.* 1098; Pausanias, *Graeciae desc.* 3.25.6], sometimes of three bodies [Euripides, *Herc.* 24]. There are frequent elaborations on the nature of the heads. As for quantity, one to three heads appear to be the norm for Greco-Roman material evidence. Why not more? One could, of course, argue a case for mere stylistic and technical limitations—how does a vase painter depict more than, say, four heads? All of this raises important questions of the relation between artistic and literary traditions while, writ large, there looms the question of why there was no canonical version of Cerberus' anatomy and what that says about how the ancient conceived animals in the mythico-religious realm.<sup>9</sup>

*Greek Traditions* No one should expect Gilhus to trace the development of animals and religion *in extensis* previous to the first century AD. But everyone should expect some use of those earlier periods to cast light on her chosen period. One simply cannot understand and interpret the evidence from one period fully without regard for the earlier traditions which fed that evidence. But she demonstrates minimal awareness, at best, of the earlier periods. For example, the index gives one reference each to the two authors with whom Greco-Roman literature begins, Homer and Hesiod. The former [75] appears in her section on physiognomics, where she asserts that comparison between humans and animals is common. In one sentence, she has

<sup>9</sup> West 1966 on *Theog.* 312, 769–773, Woodford and Spier 1992 both provide full details, the latter especially on the material evidence.

unburdened herself on the famous Homeric simile and missed absolutely everything about its implications for her study [see [Reizler 1936](#)]. The passage from Hesiod [23] involves the issue of νόμος, which she mistranslates as ‘law’ rather than ‘way of life’ for animals coming from Zeus [Hesiod, *Op.* 276–280: see [West 1978](#), *ad loc.*]. That is, she has missed the point of the passage she does cite, and has not utilized Hesiod’s extraordinarily rich information on animals and religion for the light it can cast on the texts of authors of her chosen period. Put simply, she does not take account of the earlier Hellenic traditions, a serious failure because these traditions were appropriated and incorporated into the later Roman traditions, and because they continued to be observed in the Hellenic regions of Roman empire. Cults continued, Hellenic rituals continued, Greek authors continued. By neglecting the earlier Hellenic traditions, then, Gilhus offers a partial and imperfect view of the contemporary evidence for animals in her period.

I would repeat what I have tried explicitly to state at several points above. There is simply too much material for Gilhus to have taken account of all of it. There are serious issues with the evidence she does use. Put differently, her period’s literary evidence would go some ways to sufficing for her topic if, and only if, she had attended to its implications and underlying traditions. (By ‘underlying traditions’, I mean both the earlier literary evidence and also the material evidence.) But Gilhus seems to have snatched some evidence, grabbed the first scholarship to hand, and soldiered on. The result is unsatisfying not only for her analysis of the Greco-Roman traditions but as they provide a point of comparison with her (somewhat surer) discussion of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If one will work outside one’s field, one should at the least become tolerably conversant with the evidence of that field, its scholarship, its issues, and how it operates. This Gilhus has not done.

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