

ABSTRACT

Serpentine Images of Power: Benevolent and Malevolent Depictions of Snakes in the
Minoan, Greek, and Roman World

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The image of the snake evokes the same terror and awe today as it did in the ancient Mediterranean world. In the mythology, literature, and religious traditions of the Greek and Roman sphere, snakes were understood to exhibit benevolent and malevolent characteristics simultaneously: they symbolized the fertility of a mother goddess in the Roman cult of Isis, they were harbingers of prophetic doom in Virgil's tale of the destruction of Troy, they were healers in the Greek and Roman cult of Aesclepius, and they envenomated travelers in Aesop's famous fables. Snakes also provide a link to the Underworld, and, by doing so, control the realms of life, death, and rebirth. Snakes guarded the *omphalos*, the "navel" or center of the world. Above all snakes embodied power because they were both commonplace and deified, as well as universally feared in the ancient Mediterranean world. By the time of the first century Roman writer Virgil, all of the aforementioned images of snakes were used to depict power, both benevolent and malevolent.

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SERPENTINE IMAGES OF POWER: BENEVOLENT AND MALEVOLENT
DEPICTIONS OF SNAKES IN THE MINOAN, GREEK, AND ROMAN WORLD

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Serpentine Ideology in the Mediterranean

In the ancient Mediterranean, snake imagery cannot be associated with simply one characteristic. Serpents were simultaneously venomous and life-giving; they were monstrous, but benevolent. Ancient Mediterranean snake imagery proves to be multifaceted and rather complicated. This paper will explore the complexity of serpentine ideology in the Minoan, Greek, and later Roman world with regard to the following three categories: mythology, literature, and religion. These three categories provide the most illuminating insight for purposes of understanding how ancient cultures understood the snake, particularly within the context of Virgil and the Roman world.

In each category (mythology, literature, and religion), the serpent symbolizes a bridge between the natural and the supernatural. Snakes in Greek mythology represent a passageway to the Underworld, or a passage between the living and the dead.¹ Snakes could also, symbolically, create a bridge between the born and the unborn. A snake was envisioned as an umbilical cord connecting the two different worlds together.² The *omphalos*, which means “navel” in Greek, was considered the center of the world. In some depictions, a snake guards the *omphalos*, making the umbilicus association quite explicit.³ Indeed, by guarding the *omphalos*, the snake acts as a filter and has the

¹ This belief that snakes were associated with the Underworld is observed by authors like Daniel Ogden (i.e., in his *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 2013) in light of texts such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

² Slater 1968. A similar connection between snakes and the Underworld can also be seen in the Near East, specifically in Mesopotamian and Hittite mythology and iconography; c.f. M. Vieyra (fig. 114, 1955).

³ Ogden 2013.

discretion to choose who is allowed on to the next realm. In Minoan and Archaic Greek mythology, a snake's power is especially emphasized. It is perhaps for this reason that the serpent is regarded as one of the most ancient symbols in Athens.⁴ Actually, the connection between serpent and royalty is nothing novel in the ancient world: Cleopatra is often associated with the cobra, and Chinese emperors were linked to dragons (which were often equated with serpents), showing a descent from the heavens. Even the name of the serpentine Gorgon Medusa means "Ruler."⁵ Erichthonius, the legendary King of Athens, was oftentimes depicted with serpents. Erichthonius presents just one example of how snake imagery permeated early Mediterranean culture (see Figure 1.1).⁶



Fig. 1.1: Athena and Her Adopted Son, Erichthonius.

Examining the mythologies, literature, and religion of the Greeks and Romans is critical for modern interpretations of the significance of snakes in the ancient Mediterranean. In this introduction specifically, Erichthonius serves as a symbolic representation that embodies the three aspects that I will explore in the following chapters. The story of his

⁴ Powell 1906.

⁵ Kershaw 2007.

⁶ Powell 1906. In the story of Erichthonius, Athena keeps him in a chest without the knowledge of the other gods, and the child is later found entangled in a snake.

birth is mythological in origin, documented in the writings of Apollodorus⁷, and religious because of his association with Athena,⁸ the patron goddess of Athens. Erichonius is simply one example of how the three categories of mythology, literature, and religion can be explored.

But in this thesis, I will use many different characters to convey snake representation in the Greek and Roman world. Moreover, as I argue, the ancient perception of the snake is varied and has both positive and negative connotations. Such connotations allow scholars to have a peek into the changing beliefs of snakes in the ancient Mediterranean world. The snake could represent many parts of a culture, but its consistent presence in mythology, literature, and religion reflects how significant a role it played in the life and belief systems of ancient Greece and Rome.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In the classical world, cults were developed for each god and goddess inside and outside of the traditional Pantheon.

CHAPTER TWO

The Snake as Represented in Mythology and Art

I. Introduction

One of the most prevalent images throughout the Mediterranean world is the snake. This is probably due to the fact that snakes, both venomous and non-venomous, were common in the Mediterranean just like they are today. The fear and awe of their power winds its way through ancient stories, as evidenced by various mythologies from Greece and Rome. Indeed, the serpent in mythology possessed numerous qualities, both benevolent and malevolent. Mythology allows for an expression of ancient beliefs, particularly in ancient Greek and Roman literature and religion, making it particularly necessary to explore this topic first.

II. The Minoans: The Snake as Mother Goddess

Minoan civilization was centered on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea. While we do not have any written examples of Minoan mythology to date, Minoan art is preserved in palaces and settlements (c.f. Knossos). An early representation of snakes can be found in a statue dubbed the “Minoan Snake Goddess,” discovered in 1914. This is a figure of a woman holding serpents⁹ in her hands, with the snakes’ heads pointed toward from her body (see Figure 2.1). The bodies of the snakes are wrapped around the arms of the female, yet the snakes are separate entities. The snakes can be contrasted to Medusa’s visage, where the serpents are very much a part of her being, framing her face.

⁹ Interestingly, there are no venomous snakes in Crete (McLaren 2005).



Fig. 2.1: Minoan Snake Goddess (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

Archaeologist Lacey Caskey believes the chryselephantine¹⁰ statuette is from the 16th century BCE. This dates to the end of Minoan civilization. Caskey described Minoan society as “this wonderful prehistoric civilization which, after having lain submerged, like the lost Atlantis, for three thousand years, has been brought to light again by the archaeological discoveries.”¹¹

This comparison is not far-fetched at all – like Atlantis, we lack a considerable amount of artifacts/archaeology for Minoan society. In addition, Caskey’s comparison of Knossos to Atlantis highlights the marine culture the Minoans had on the island of Crete as well as the marine power that was associated with snakes.

It must be noted, however, that the Cretan Mother Goddess (or possibly goddesses) was not only depicted with serpentine imagery. According to Kenneth Lapatin, Sir Arthur Evans had many names for the goddess: “Mountain Goddess,” “Earth Goddess,” “Goddess of the Caves,” as well as other names.¹² Although her names and associations are varied, all of her titles are associated with what could be considered the

¹⁰A chryselephantine statue is one that is overlaid with gold and ivory.

¹¹ Lapatin 2003.

¹² Ibid. We have a considerable amount of evidence showing that Minoan society was matrilineal.

feminine side of nature. It is noteworthy that mountains and caves were important cult centers to the Minoans. Thus, the mother goddess (or goddesses) is depicted within these sacred locations.



Fig. 2.2: The Mother of the Mountains, Excavated at Knossos.

The sealing image above is showing the Mother Goddess on top of a mountain, centered between two lions. Evans called her “Mother Rhea” and saw her as a prototype to the mother of Zeus.¹³ Therefore, in this instance, the serpent is merely one aspect of the goddess’s composition, and we should understand the Minoans from the standpoint that snakes were not necessarily the only imagery associated with an all-giving mother. It is noteworthy that snake figurines were most often discovered in cultic settings.¹⁴ In a sense, it seems that snake-handler figurines depict a mother goddess (or a priestess of the mother goddess) and the snakes themselves may represent life and death.¹⁵ They are most often connected to female fertility as well due to their connection to females in general. This paints a benevolent picture of snakes in Minoan society.

¹³ Ibid. In Greek mythology, Zeus was born on the island of Crete in a cave.

¹⁴ These statues were discovered in the early 20th century excavations of Knossos.

¹⁵ Marinatos 2007.

III. The Snake as Both a Malevolent and Benevolent Force: The Serpent's Role in Gorgon Myth

One of the most iconic representations of snakes can be found in the mythology of Medusa. In a sense, Medusa seems to be the product of the snake-female connection that originated in myths like the ones we explored in Minoan society. A Gorgon with vicious snake hair, Medusa was a malevolent force to be reckoned with. Only Perseus was able to “face” and defeat Medusa, thanks to Athena’s shield.¹⁶ Her ferocity and ghastliness can still be seen in Caravaggio’s 16th century depiction of *Medusa*, now housed in the Uffizi Gallery Museum (see Figure 2.3). While the snaky locks of her hair wildly writhe around her head, her visage shows a panic and shock that could only be found in pieces like the *Laocoön*, another snake-infused piece of art (see Figure 2.5).

In certain versions of the Medusa story, it is never clear whether Medusa starts out beautiful or bestial. In his *Theogony*, composed ca. 700 BCE, Hesiod simply says that the Gorgons lived “beyond glorious Okeanos” and Medusa was violated on “a soft meadow strewn with flowers,” not in Athena’s temple.¹⁷ Perhaps the flowers are meant to symbolize Medusa’s beauty and innocence.¹⁸ What is clear in Hesiod’s tale is that Medusa’s consent does not matter.¹⁹

Before Ovid’s Roman-era narrative of Medusa’s story Medusa was always depicted in mythology as a monster – an ugly, horrifying creature like her infamous

¹⁶ Athena’s shield is also known as the *aegis*.

¹⁷ Hesiod, *Th.* ll. 274-279 (Athanasakis, transl.).

¹⁸ Virgins are often depicted as being raped in fields of flowers. For instance, the rape of Persephone by Hades occurred in a field of flowers.

¹⁹ It must not be ignored, however, that the Classical gods exhibited rather animalistic habits. Hesiod even describes Poseidon as “dark-maned,” calling to mind the likeness of a horse (Hesiod, *Th.* l. 278; Athanasakis, transl.). Like the other gods, Poseidon is often depicted as an animal succumbing to its base desires.

Gorgon sisters. In Aeschylus' fifth century BCE telling, Medusa is born with her snaky locks. Aeschylus describes Medusa and her sisters as three beings "with snaky locks, winged Gorgons, loathed by men".²⁰ Along with such creatures as the eyeball-sharing Graeae²¹ and the Harpies²², the Gorgons were offspring of sea deities. Indeed, snakes are oftentimes connected to water, and it is a recurring theme in Greek mythology.²³

In Ovid's ca. 1st first century BCE rendition, Medusa's head becomes the prominent decoration on Athena's shield.



Fig. 2.3: Caravaggio's Medusa in the Uffizi Gallery Museum, Florence, Italy (Photo Taken by Author).

Concerning the unfortunate Medusa herself, the snakes upon her head serve as both weapon and armor, a result of being violated in the Temple of Athena.²⁴ Because this unholy act occurred in the Virgin Goddess' temple, Athena punishes the once beautiful Medusa by cursing her with serpentine locks. In this instance, Medusa is merely

²⁰ Whitelaw and Collins 1907.

²¹ According to *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Howatson 270, 2011), the Graeae were actually sisters of the Gorgons; they shared one eye and one tooth among them and personified old age.

²² The Harpies are bird-like creatures with the face of women.

²³ Multiple sea gods are sometimes combined into a single "Old Man of the Sea," which is an expression that many believe originated from the story of Sinbad (Kobayashi 2001).

²⁴ Ovid, *Met.*4.803 (Anderson, ed.).

a victim of never-forgiving fate.²⁵ Despite her slithering mane, Medusa fails to defeat Perseus. Her death at the hands of Perseus takes place during her weakest moment – in deep sleep. Medusa is victimized once again – both by Perseus and by her own mortality. In this mythological story, snakes are a symbol for Medusa and the injustice she endured, and like a twisted chain reaction, she becomes the victimizer, paralyzing her victims because she is paralyzed by fate. But, for Medusa’s victims, snakes are also an image of power.²⁶ She is able to “freeze” her victims because of the fearsome image she embodies.

Consider once again Caravaggio’s *Medusa*: the viewer may notice that the medium of the art piece is a shield strikingly similar to Athena’s shield. Any other medium could not express her story in a better manner. If the *Medusa* was painted on a canvas, it would not have had nearly the same powerful impact.²⁷ Usually Medusa is the one who is feared; to see her eyes filled with terror is another perspective entirely.²⁸

Traditionally, depictions of the Gorgons are exceptionally terrifying. For instance, the Temple of Artemis in Corfu originally sported a snake-clad Gorgon on a pediment.²⁹ Created ca. 580 BCE, this pediment shows Medusa kneeling, surrounded by her offspring: Pegasus is on her left (with only the remnants of his hind parts remaining) and Chrysaor, or “the man with the golden sword,” is on her right (see Figure 2.4)³⁰. Also, she is guarded on each side by feline creatures.

²⁵ In this version of the Medusa story, it is quite interesting that the victim (Medusa) becomes the victimizer.

²⁶ Power in this sense is a controlling force over others. We could also compare the serpentine imagery of power to imperial power.

²⁷ Favaro 2005.

²⁸ It is particularly the perspective of Perseus.

²⁹ Pedley 2011.

³⁰ Woodford 2015. In addition, the gorgon is in the traditional archaic pose, with one leg bent on the ground.



Fig. 2.4: Gorgon Pediment in Archaeological Museum of Corfu.

The Gorgon exhibits flaring nostrils and big round eyes, which are rather exaggerated qualities. Snakes protrude from underneath her ears and are intertwined around her waist like a belt. In addition, her flatness forces the viewer to observe her full prowess.

Medusa's children Pegasus and Chrysaor were born from her detached head. Medusa, therefore, effectively acts as a bridge between life and death.³¹ Like the phoenix that rises out of its ashes, so does life come from her death. But rather than the rebirth of Medusa, two new creatures are born. In this aspect, Pegasus and Chrysaor represent the benevolent component of Medusa (or rather, Medusa's death).

Medusa also survives in the droplets of blood that so carelessly fall on African soil from the *kibisis* bag that Perseus carries, creating the venomous vipers known in the Sahara.³² Unlike the birth of Pegasus and Chrysaor, this birth of malevolent beings represents the evil nature of snakes. Finally, Medusa lives on not only in the birth of her children, but in the name Perseus gives his daughter. Perseus names her "Gorgophone," meaning the "Killing of the Gorgon."³³

As the different stories reveal, the snake-headed Medusa is both feared and awed. Yet even after her death, she brings life and renewal. The connection between life and

³¹ See Chapter 1.

³² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.770 (Anderson, ed.).

³³ Kershaw 2007.

death is an important feature of classical mythology. As Bernard Knox has argued, snakes “stand for rebirth, the renewal which the Latin poetic tradition associated with the casting-off of the serpent's old skin in the spring.”³⁴

IV. Laocoön: The Malevolent Force of Snakes

Snakes are not only bringers of life but also harbingers of misfortune. The famous mythological tale of Laocoön is a prime example which depicts the more sinister side of serpentine ideology (see Figure 2.5).

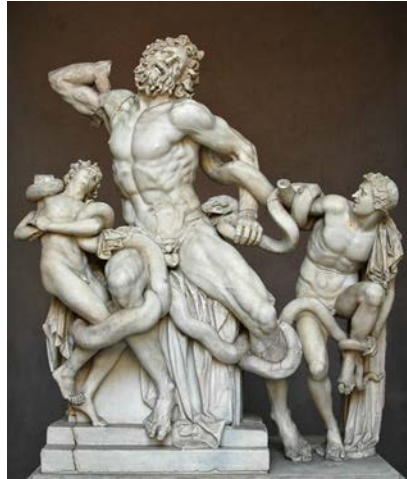


Fig. 2.5: Laocoön and His Sons, Vatican Museums, Rome.

In one of the most gruesome and graphically detailed sections of the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes the horrific death of Laocoön and his sons.³⁵ John Bodoh gives an excellent description of the events: “In the second book of the *Aeneid* Virgil relates the destruction of Troy by the ‘twin Atridae’, Agamemnon and Menelaus. This event is prefigured in the Laocoön episode, where the twin serpents, approaching from Tenedos, attack Laocoön, a priest of Troy, and his sons”.³⁶ Below is a passage from the *Aeneid* describing this event:

³⁴ Knox 1950.

³⁵ Virgil died in 19 BCE, and the *Aeneid* was published soon after (against his death wishes).

³⁶ Bodoh 1987.

A pair of serpents with endless coils are breasting the sea and side by side making for the shore... They in unswerving course make for Laocoön; and first each serpent enfolds in its embrace the small bodies of his two sons and with its fangs feeds upon the hapless limbs... gliding away, the dragon pair escape to the lofty shrines, and seek fierce Tritonia's citadel, there to nestle under the goddess's feet and the circle of her shield (Fairclough, transl., *Aeneid* 2.203-227).

The twin serpents originate from the water, highlighting the water-snake connection in Virgil's works. Bodoh affirms this interpretation in his description of the events "The sea of Neptune sends intelligent monsters from Tenedos to attack him... His fate prefigures the destruction of Troy, whose people he represents."³⁷ Laocoön and his sons become the ultimate sacrifice for the gods, foreshadowing the fall of Troy. Indeed, in this example, snakes are acting in the interests of a deity or deities.³⁸ The attempt at performing the divine rights of Poseidon ultimately brings the downfall of Laocoön and his sons. Thus the malevolent nature of snakes is evident in their use as weapons of war.

V. The Snake as Protector and Healer: A Benevolent Perception

The Rod of Aesclepius and the Caduceus are both serpentine symbols often associated with health.³⁹ Aesclepius was a divine physician who, in Greek mythology, was associated with the city of Epidaurus on the Peloponese.⁴⁰ In Roman mythology, Aesclepius was transported from Epidaurus to an islet in the Tiber in the form of a snake.⁴¹ In both Greek and Roman mythology, Aesclepius was associated with snakes that were used in healing rituals,⁴² particularly in the Hellenistic and Roman era. Snakes became so synonymous with Aesclepius that his other symbol, the staff, was combined

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The snakes could have been sent by Poseidon, Apollo, or Athena; there is not one accepted version of the tale.

³⁹ Giroire and Roger 2007.

⁴⁰ Caton 1914.

⁴¹ Dunlop 2007.

⁴² It was not necessarily snake venom that was utilized but the actual movements of the snake itself.

with a serpent to depict the healing and magical arts. The staff of Aesclepius is sometimes confused with the Caduceus of Hermes, a winged stick with two snakes.⁴³

Aesclepius' serpentine imagery can also be seen in the constellation *Serpens*. The constellation shows a figure named Ophiuchus, holding a snake that is wrapped around his body – a depiction that is oddly similar to that of the Laocoön statue (albeit a much less sinister depiction). Astronomers believe Ophiuchus to be Aesclepius himself, who is simply being shown as a physician “skilled in the use of snakes.”⁴⁴

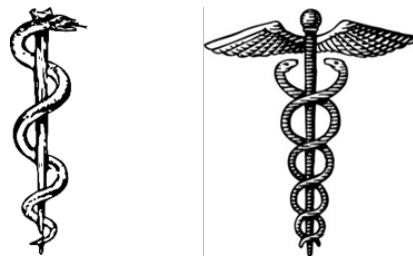


Fig. 2.6: Rod of Aesclepius (Left), Caduceus (Right).

The connection between serpent and staff may sound familiar to readers of the Bible. Serpentine imagery permeates the book of Exodus, particularly in the Exodus story of the transformation of Aaron's staff into the snake. It appears that both stories draw upon the same beliefs concerning the power, fear, and magic of snakes. They also draw upon the belief of snakes as healers: for Aesclepius, the snake healed literal illness, for Aaron, the snake healed spiritual illness.⁴⁵

⁴³ The Hermes staff is used in modernity as the symbol for journalists and postal workers. Since Hermes is the messenger god, this comes as no surprise. According to Morford and Lenardon's *Classical Mythology*, the confusion arises when the U.S. Army Medical Corps adopts the Caduceus as its official emblem (page 266, 2014). In addition, medical businesses also began using the Caduceus at the disgruntlement of other medical professionals. After all, Mercury (Hermes) was associated with thievery. Even though the Rod of Aesclepius is argued to be the official symbol for the medical industry, the Caduceus nevertheless has a strong presence in the medical field.

⁴⁴ Snake-handling was not uncommon in ancient times.

⁴⁵ Unlike the Genesis serpent, the staff serpent is serving the purpose of God rather than going against God's will. Of course, Pharaoh's magicians are able to do the same thing with their staffs, but Aaron's snake consumes them (Exodus 7: 8-12).

VI. The Snake as a Moral Teaching Device

The famed Greek fable teller, Aesop, regularly used snakes to characterize negative human qualities, including craftiness, foolishness, and trickery. Aesop uses the imagery of the snake as a tool to convey a moral of a story. For instance, in “The Farmer and the Snake” the story describes a farmer saving a frozen snake from death. In return, the snake tragically bites the farmer. The moral of the story is that “The greatest benefits will not bind the ungrateful.”⁴⁶ According to Barbara Stanford, the snake represents a “conflict style” representative of a specific type of person.⁴⁷ Kindness does not always return kindness. In this instance, the snake is depicted as a selfish creature with little awareness of the kindness bestowed upon him.

“The Fowler and the Viper” is another fable that uses snakes to convey a moral message. The fowler hunts for birds, but is instead hunted himself - by a viper at rest at his feet. Perhaps we could relate this back to the saying “what comes around goes around.” Indeed, the fowler is ultimately the victim in the story. Another fable, “The Labourer and the Snake” has a similar message to the first two tales. A snake bites a cottager’s infant son, and killing the boy, prompts the cottager to strike the snake with an axe. Not wanting to get bitten in retaliation, the cottager seeks peace with the snake, who bluntly says (anthropomorphically) “whenever I see you I shall remember the loss of my tail, and whenever you see me, you will be thinking of the death of your son.”⁴⁸

Two other Aesop’s fables, “The Viper and the Fly” and “The Wasp and the Snake” have similar messages. The former speaks of a snake who attempts to eat a fly.

⁴⁶ Aymar 1956.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The fly then says, “You are likely to get little from me, whose business it is to bite others,” suggesting that one should not expect benefits from those who wish to do the harm. The latter fable concerns a wasp, who stings a snake to the point of death. The snake, however, kills himself in order to stop his enemy. The snake literally took the wasp down with him, saying “My enemy and I shall perish together.”⁴⁹ All of these stories speak of the parasitic relationship between snakes and humans or snakes and other animals. In all of these tales, snakes are rather crafty but not always wise (as evidenced by the tale of “The Wasp and the Snake”). Despite their inclusions of talking animals, these fables depict realistic settings and reveal the fear that humans and animals have for snakes.

VII. The Eagle and the Serpent: The Case of Rome

In Roman mythology, Rome is often depicted as both eagle and serpent. These powerful images represented Rome’s considerable dominion and influence over their conquered territories. The *Ara Pacis Augustae*, or “Altar of Augustan Peace” uses both eagle and snake images to depict the power of Roman authority. The *Ara Pacis Augustae* was constructed to commemorate Augustus’ victory over the Gauls in 13 BCE. While the altar was meant to depict peace, this peace came at the expense of the Gauls. One small scene on the *Ara Pacis Augustae* depicts a snake eating baby birds. Karl Galinsky describes the image as being “discrete” and connects the scene to the snake-infused *Eclogue IV* of Virgil.⁵⁰ The concept of imperialism is clearly evident in this depiction, with the greater superpower (Rome) consuming the weaker nation (see Figure 2.7).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Galinsky 1992. *Eclogue IV* will be discussed in the next chapter (Ch. 3).



Fig. 2.7: Snake Consuming Baby Chicks on Ara Pacis Augustae, Rome.

Not only does the snake have the advantage of being a bigger, more skilled predator, the baby birds have the disadvantage of inexperience and physical weakness. The artist took an image from everyday life: a snake crawling into a bird's nest and eating the chicks. This depiction symbolizes the geo-political realities of the Roman Empire. Rome was geographically larger than the cities and small kingdoms it conquered, so the metaphor is not far-fetched. In addition, the imagery also shows that the weaker nations did not even have the opportunity to fully flourish. In modernity, the depiction seems a bit unjust in that Rome was not fighting with anybody "its own size" per se, but "picking on the small guys" in order to strengthen its power.

In the *Aeneid*, a different perspective is offered. The interaction simile is now between an eagle and a serpent:

And as when a tawny eagle, soaring on high, carries a serpent she has caught, her feet entwined and her claws clinging tight, but the wounded snake writhes its sinuous coils, and rears its bristling scales, and hisses with its mouth, towering aloft... just so from the Tiburtian line Tarchon carries off his prey in triumph. (Fairclough, transl., *Aeneid* 11.751-758).

Richard Bruère describes this simile in the context of the *Iliad*⁵¹ by explaining that the "eagle has by far the better of the struggle," utilizing the *Aeneid* as a comparison. In

⁵¹ *Iliad* was written by Homer in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. It concerned the events that took place during the 10-year siege of Troy.

particular, he states, “Virgil uses the comparison to illustrate the victory of Tarchon, an Etruscan warrior who seizes his opponent Tiburtus and carries him off in triumph.⁵² Although the serpent is a symbol of power, the eagle tends to be a more acceptable symbol for Rome’s greatness. The snake, however, reveals the sinister side of Roman conquest.

VIII. Conclusion

Through the mythologies of Medusa, Laocoön, Aesclepius, Aesop’s *Fables*, and the eagle and the serpent, serpentine imagery permeates the heart of Mediterranean culture. In the instances of the Gorgon Medusa and Laocoön, the snakes represent malevolence. However, in the death of Medusa, life arises from death. The use of snakes in the cult of Aesclepius represents the power⁵³ and healing snakes possess. According to Aesop, snakes are inherently selfish and must be feared. Hence, snakes are simultaneously malevolent and benevolent: they must be feared but also revered.

The passing down of certain mythologies have a considerable impact on classical literature. Written storytelling, unlike earlier oral forms, are critical in the interpretation of a culture’s ideals and beliefs. In this way, the connection between serpentine imagery in literature shall be explored in the next chapter.

⁵² Bruère 1956.

⁵³ In this sense, power refers to the power over life and death.

CHAPTER THREE

The Snake as Represented in Literature

I. Introduction

Snake imagery appears as an important theme in literature as well as mythology. However, unlike mythology, literature gives scholars a foundation for what one writer (or multiple writers) believe is important in their particular culture. Many of these stories begin in oral form and when they are written down, it allows for certain stories to be preserved through the course of time. In this sense, one of the major components that literature incorporates is the reflection of a classical author (or authors) and the opinions expressed about certain stories that may have been well-known at the time. In this sense, it is possible to observe an ancient perspective on the benevolence and malevolence with regard to snakes through written accounts.

The Roman poet Virgil (70 BCE-19 CE) is considered one of the finest Roman writers of the Augustan age. Most modern scholars consider the Augustan age the height of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Virgil and Augustus were friends for a considerable portion of their lives. Virgil's writings have proven to be an invaluable literary contribution to our general knowledge of the Augustan age. His three most famous works include the fourth *Eclogue*, *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*. Another important literary work is the *Culex*, which is in a collection of minor poems (some of which are attributed to Virgil) called the *Appendix Vergiliana* (compiled in late antiquity).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Fairclough 1922.

All four works contain compelling imagery of the serpent in both mundane and spiritual perspectives. Other literary works from Archaic Greece to Empire Rome discuss snakes in various ways, including such literary works as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (1st c. BCE) and Horace's *Satires* (30s BCE).⁵⁵ These sources will be considered in light of Virgil's work. Despite having varying literary styles and subjects, these literary works are all similar in that they mention the snake. Whether the serpent is represented metaphorically or as a physical being, it is present in an array of Greek and Roman literature.

II. Virgil in Eclogue IV

Virgil's *Eclogue IV* was written in the latter half of the first century BCE. The story depicts a boy (possibly Augustus) who grows up and becomes divine, conquering the world. This conquest ushers in a utopian age. According to Virgil, in order for the perfect age to come, the old, less perfect age must shed away.⁵⁶ One of the signifiers for this great age, according to Virgil, is the obliteration of snakes. Earth will seem like paradise and the "serpent, too, shall perish, and the false poison-plant shall perish."⁵⁷ The death of the venomous snake is a significant component in the purification process in order for the new world to come. In this depiction of snakes, they are not divine but rather a malevolent force that must be removed from paradise.

Edward Courtney contrasts the Virgilian concept of the great age to the signifiers of a terrible age. For instance, Courtney states that the "post-Saturnian age"⁵⁸ (mentioned

⁵⁵ Also, several pieces of literature were mentioned in the first chapter, including Aesop's *Fables* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

⁵⁶ Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.24-25 (Fairclough, transl.).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ This refers to the bleak age following the Golden Age of prosperity.

in *Georgics* 1.129-30 as marked by predatory wolves and poisonous serpents.”⁵⁹ Another description of a great age can be found in Hesiod’s 8th c. BCE didactic poem *Works and Days*. Hesiod calls this great age the Golden Age, or the Age of Plenty. No evil exists in this age, in the same way no evil exists in Virgil’s great age. The difference is that the age is in the past for Hesiod and time has moved out of this state. The New Testament depiction of the New Eden or the Second Coming of Christ in Revelation could be described as an age of plenty. For Eden in Genesis, evil took the form of a serpent, but in the Second Coming, the culmination of evil is destroyed. This evil is depicted as “the ancient serpent.”⁶⁰ In biblical writings, evil is brought into the world and eventually taken out. The serpent’s participation in Roman literature and Biblical versions of utopia (from a Christian perspective) show a universal acceptance of the purging of sin. Sin can be equated to evil, and evil equated to the serpent.

Virgil’s negative attitude toward the snake starkly contrasts with the rather positive and fertility-oriented views held by the ancient Minoan people and also later Greek depictions of snakes as healers and wise creatures. It also diverges from the perspective of snakes as guardians of different realms. However, snakes are feared in Greek mythology as well as in Roman literature such as Virgil’s *Eclogue*, and its absence quite desirable. The snake, much like the serpent in the New Testament text of Revelation, serves as a symbol of evil that cannot exist in the Golden Age.

The 4th *Eclogue* has always stirred up debate with its uncanny likeness to the Bible. While the majority of the Old Testament texts are much earlier, the text that Virgil composes in the 1st century BCE has a rather New Testament feel. Of course, New

⁵⁹ Courtney 2010.

⁶⁰ C.f. “The dragon, that ancient serpent” in Revelation 20:22.

Testament texts date to several decades after Virgil's death.⁶¹ However, Virgil most likely had some knowledge of other Mediterranean cultures, and perhaps derived inspiration from Hebrew eschatological movements.⁶²

III. The Viewpoint of Horace

As Virgil lists the atrocities that will fade with the coming of the Virgin in his *Eclogue*, he specifically lists that the first evils to be removed are the poisonous plant and the serpent: "The serpent, too, will perish, and perish will the plant that hides its poison."⁶³ This was a deliberate literary move made by Virgil. The word poison can easily be associated with the serpent (in the sense of venom) as well as a plant. Horace, an affluent writer in the first century BCE, describes this association. In the time of Cleopatra VII (69 BCE-30 BCE), the association between poison and serpent venom is clearly made evident in Horace's *Satires* 2.8: "quem nos sic fugimus uli | ut nihil omnino gustaremus, velut illis | Canidia afflasset peior serpentibus Afris ('In vengeance we fled in such a way that we tasted nothing, as though Canidia, worse than African snakes, had breathed on those things', *Sat.* 2.8.93-95)." Suzanne Sharland, who translated the above statement also notes that African snakes were believed in the Roman world to be the "fiercest of serpents, and even their breath was believed to be foul and poisonous." She notes the connection between venom and poison, stating "Snakes and snake venom may have been uppermost in Roman minds at this time due to the famous suicide of Cleopatra VII of Egypt, who is purported to have died by self-inflicted snake-bite."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Virgil lived from 70 BCE to 19 BCE. Similarities arise because the New Testament probably utilized the some of the same information Virgil had compiled.

⁶² Nisbet 1978.

⁶³ Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.24-25 (Fairclough, transl.).

⁶⁴ Sharland 2009.

Snake venom is considered a form of poisoning in much the same manner arrows are considered poisonous if they are dipped in snake venom. Poison and venom were considered one and in the same,⁶⁵ and both held importance in the realm of warfare. Thus, snakes are imagined as weapons of war in much the same way they are envisioned in myth: namely, as tools of the gods utilized to punish mortals. “The mythical lore that grew up around Hercules’ invention of snake-venom arrows reveals the complex attitudes of the ancient Greeks toward weapons that delivered hidden poisons.”⁶⁶

There is also evidence in the *Iliad* for the association of snakes and warfare: the shield of Agamemnon, the great king of Mycenae, boasts a gorgon head intended to paralyze any enemy looking upon it with fear.⁶⁷ In Book XI, lines 32 through 37 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon’s shield itself is described as “crowned with the fierce, clear glance of the Gorgon, with Terror and Fear around it.” It was probably at the translator’s discretion to capitalize (and therefore personify) Terror and Fear. However, they are personified emotions that clarify how the viewer would react to Agamemnon’s shield.⁶⁸

When considering Virgil’s *Aeneid*: Androgeos is the first Greek victim to perish when he mistakes Aeneas for an ally (like one who unexpectedly comes upon a snake), and like the first Trojan victim that dies (Laocoön), his death is associated with the serpent. The redundancy in the manner both men died is similar to the redundancy exhibited in the *Culex*, which will be expounded upon later. Redundancy is associated with a circular path of actions; in turn, the circle can often mean rebirth and renewal, one of the common motifs which is found to be associated with the serpent in general. This

⁶⁵ Unlike those in the past, we differentiate between poison and venom.

⁶⁶ Mayor 2008.

⁶⁷ This is strikingly similar to Athena’s *aegis*.

⁶⁸ Abstract concepts were oftentimes personified.

renewal or rebirth reveals the continued motif in literature from the story of Medusa and the symbol of Athena, who personifies the malevolent nature of snakes.

IV. The Snake Genius in Book V and Additional Snake References in the Aeneid

Although quotes concerning serpents are present in many books of the Aeneid (Books II, III, IV, V, VII, VIII, and XI), there is one instance in Book V that draws a considerable amount of attention from classical scholars.⁶⁹ In Book V, Virgil describes an encounter between Aeneas and his recently departed father (who, in this instance, is in the form of a snake).

So had he spoken, when from the foot of the shrine a slippery serpent trailed seven huge coils, fold upon fold seven times, peacefully circling the mound and gliding among the altars... the serpent tasted the viands, and again, all harmless, crept beneath the tomb, leaving the altars where he fed (5.84-93, Fairclough, transl.).

In this particular section of the book, the harmlessness of the snake is emphasized. The snake is seen in a more positive light. According to Horsfall, the “snake represents the *famulus* or *genius* of Anchises.”⁷⁰ The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states that the *genius* is a male’s divine double.⁷¹ Although Anchises dies in Book III, his *genius* (albeit a snake) appears alive and well as a prophetic sign for his still-living son.

In addition to his analysis of Anchises’ *genius*, Horsfall focuses on the cultural and anthropological context of the burial of Anchises. In actuality, the burial is not directly mentioned but instead is inferred from Book V. “...Anchises, who returns to the land of the living as a serpent... and as a prophetic vision to Aeneas bracket the book... [Details] of the honours paid him suggest strongly not Roman ritual but Greek hero-

⁶⁹ Particularly, Nicholas Horsfall (2000) Bernard Knox (1950).

⁷⁰ Horsfall 2000.

⁷¹ Hornblower 2012 (page 66).

cult.”⁷² Perhaps this is to be expected, considering Rome (and by default, a particularly Roman culture) had yet to be founded in the tale.

The differentiation between the burial practices is also recognized by author Gordon Williams, who notes that the circumstances surrounding Anchises’ funeral are odd in other ways, particularly in the fact that “Anchises is the only personage in ancient antiquity whose funeral-games were held on the anniversary of his funeral rather than at the funeral itself.”⁷³ In addition, Virgil “imagined the Trojans in Carthage a short time after the death of Anchises and that he therefore composed Book V with the real funeral of Anchises, not its anniversary, in mind.”⁷⁴ Although the funeral itself is rather abnormal and curious in its cultural context, one could argue Anchises lives on through his *genius* and through the funeral games used to celebrate him.

In addition, the number seven is mentioned when Virgil describes the coils of the snake. Seven proves to be a significant number in multiple religious and cultural contexts.⁷⁵ However, in a specifically classical context, the reader might want to consider the Seven Hills of Rome.⁷⁶ As *The Virgil Encyclopedia* states, “the seven hills of Rome – Palatine, Capitoline, Aventine, Quirinal, Viminal, Caelian, and Esquiline – define the expanded metropolis.”⁷⁷ Perhaps the seven folds of the snake are prophesizing what is to be Rome, starting with the founding of Italy. It also plays upon one of the symbols of Augustan age, the snake and the serpent as an earth symbol.

⁷² Horsfall 2000.

⁷³ Williams 1979.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ There are 7 days in a week, God created the world in 7 days, etc.

⁷⁶ There were also seven ships of Aeneas’ fleet which could have also originated from the concept of the Seven Hills.

⁷⁷ Thomas & Ziolkowski 2014.

Lastly, Horsfall notices the way Virgil emphasizes the harmlessness of the snake. “The serpent is explicitly *innocius*⁷⁸... and the Trojans are *laeti*⁷⁹: no sense in saying that snakes in the *Aen.* must necessarily signify doom and evoke Laocoön.”⁸⁰ The twin snakes that kill Laocoön and his sons serve as foils to Anchises’ serpent. However, their dramatic exits are eerily similar: the twins exit under the shield of Athena:

But, gliding away, the dragon pair escape to the lofty shrines, and seek fierce Tritonia’s⁸¹ citadel, there to nestle under the goddess’s feet and the circle of her shield (2.225-227, Fairclough, transl.).

This is much like Anchises’ *genius* exiting under the tomb: “all harmless, crept beneath the tomb, leaving the altars where he fed.”⁸² The description of snakes retreating under reverent or divine objects even has a parallel in art history.

The three details of a cult-statue of Athene, the position of her round shield and the retreat of the snakes under the shield's protection together recall one of the most famed sculptures of antiquity: the forty-foot cult-statue of Athene Parthenos by Pheidias, housed in the Parthenon at Athens.⁸³

The viewer can easily see the serpent arising beside the shield, calling to mind the association between snake and *aegis*. It also indicates power. This common belief in the power of snakes is evident in the shield and serpent. In addition, it is another example of the serpentine/warfare influence on both literature and mythology.

The similarities between the two snake scenes are rather obvious, but as Horsfall suggests, “Roman beliefs and the text itself may be allowed more weight than a dogmatic application of rigid schematism in the interpretation of symbols.”⁸⁴ While Laocoön feels

⁷⁸ This is Latin for harmless.

⁷⁹ This is Latin for happy.

⁸⁰ Horsfall 2000.

⁸¹ Tritonia is an epithet for Athena.

⁸² Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.91 – 93.

⁸³ Harrison 1987.

⁸⁴ Horsfall 2000.

fear (with the twin snakes), Aeneas feels “stunned” when confronted with his father’s *genius*. While Laocoön’s snakes are deathly, Anchises is “benign.”⁸⁵ The differences are as stark as the similarities.



*Fig. 3.1: A Replica of the Statue of Athena Parthenos (Nashville, TN).*⁸⁶

The analysis of Anchises’ *genius* is critical in the interpretation of the snake in classical times. However, Virgil presents even more serpentine depictions. For instance, Virgil uses a snake in the description of a character named Allecto. Allecto is a Fury sent down by Hera to stop the queen of Laurentum, Amata, from giving her consent to a marriage between Aeneas and Lavinia, Amata’s daughter:

The huge snake becomes the collar of twisted gold about [Amata’s] neck, becomes the festoon of the long fillet, entwines itself into her hair, and slides smoothly over her limbs (7.351-353, Fairclough, transl.).

Snake imagery is used to depict the way Hera (through her Fury Allecto) poisons Amata’s mind. Angus Bowie argues that “psychological effects undergone by characters

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ The modern reproduction is based on a 2nd c. Roman copy and Pausanias’ description.

are often described in strongly physical terms” and he points to this episode in Book VII as an example of the way a certain emotion (fear or doom) was conveyed in literature.⁸⁷

Horsfall comments that “Allecto then flings a serpent [at her] which has recently attracted much attention... the snake’s poison is working.”⁸⁸ The snake Allecto flings is not a natural snake, but merely a personification of manipulation. Perhaps divine intervention is the poison for all who are doomed to ill fates.

Another connection between Allecto and serpentine imagery is present in the seventh book of the *Aeneid*. This passage, however, focuses mainly on Allecto herself as opposed to the effects she has on others:

While thus over the plains they fight in even warfare, the goddess, her promise fulfilled, when once she has stained with blood and opened with death the first encounter... ‘Whatever issue of sorrow is still to come I will deal with myself.’ So spoke Saturn’s daughter; but the other raises her serpent-hissing pinions and, leaving the heights above, seeks her home in Cocytus (7.540-564, Fairclough, transl.).

Allecto is a malevolent character in the *Aeneid*. Mackie describes Allecto in the following manner:

As with the Aeschylean and Euripidean Fury-figures, Allecto is a daughter of Night (7.331). Her function in the *Aeneid* is to do Juno's bidding, to evoke hatred and war on the Trojans' arrival in Latium. The war that eventually takes place is testimony to the effective conduct of her task.⁸⁹

Although Allecto is simply obeying orders, she enjoys the harm she causes. She is also an effective tool for Hera even though this “tool” eventually backfires against Aeneas. In addition, Virgil often utilizes the serpent in the context of simile. In Book II, the snake is seen as an image of renewal:

⁸⁷ Bowie 2002. In other words, the presence of the snake foreshadows Amata’s eventual downfall.

⁸⁸ Horsfall 2000.

⁸⁹ Mackie 1992.

Even as when into the light comes a snake, fed on poisonous herbs, whom cold winter kept swollen underground, now, his slough cast off, fresh and glistening in youth, with uplifted breast he rolls his slippery length, towering towards the sun and darting from his mouth a three-forked tongue (2.471-475, Fairclough, transl.).

The snake removes its old life and begins anew. Again Horsfall offers an important interpretation of the metaphor: “The varied richness of Virgil’s imagery is inevitably underrated on account of the relative neglect with which certain metaphors, however striking, are treated, if they do not form part of those large complexes (serpents, flames) which have been the focus of study for over forty years.”⁹⁰ Is Horsfall mocking Bernard Knox’s *The Serpent and the Flame*?⁹¹ Maybe, but Horsfall’s main point is to convey the significance of considering metaphors outside of the serpent and the flame complex. In this case, the snake is sloughing off his skin and is becoming a renewed being.

Yet another example of a snake metaphor being used to convey an emotion can be found in Book VIII of the *Aeneid*:

Then the Salii⁹² come to sing round the kindled altars, their brows bound with poplar boughs—one band of youths, the other of old men—and these in song extol the glories and deeds of Hercules: how first he strangled in his grip the twin serpents, the monsters of his stepmother (8.285-290, Fairclough, transl.).

Again Virgil paints a picture of twin serpents (cf. Laocoön), although the Hercules story was most likely nothing new to Virgil’s readers, as these myths were passed down for generations in oral traditions. Galinsky, however, believes that Virgil makes a compelling connection between the myth and the actuality of Aeneas’ situation. “Yet as Aeneas’ *ratio*⁹³ in the latter part II is contrasted by the serpent metaphor Pyrrhus’ violence, so the

⁹⁰ Horsfall 2000.

⁹¹ The snake consumes like fire. Like the snake’s tongue, fire licks up buildings.

⁹² The Salii are priests of Mars (Ares).

⁹³ *Ratio* is Latin for “reason.”

serpent image in VIII serves to express Hercules' transition from *dementia*⁹⁴ to *ratio*; in full control over his reason he slays the serpent which represents, by implication, unthinking violence."⁹⁵

This may be a connection to the end of the *Aeneid*, particularly when Aeneas kills Turnus without mercy or reason, but in that specific case, Aeneas' reason (the snake) would have been defeated by the powers of fate (Hercules). The image of the snake also appears in the portrayal of Androgeos' emotions. Androgeos was the man who confused Aeneas for one of his own Greek soldiers:

As one who has crushed a serpent unseen amid the rough briars, when stepping firmly on the ground, and in sudden terror shrinks back as it rises in wrath and puffs out its purple neck; so Androgeos, affrighted at the sight, was drawing away (2.379-381, Fairclough, transl.).

The image of the wanderer coming unexpectedly upon a snake is not necessarily a new concept in classical literature (cf. Aesop's Fable, "The Man and the Serpent"). Yet another snake metaphor is mentioned in Book V:

Just as often, when caught on the highway, a serpent which a brazen wheel has crossed aslant, or with blow of a heavy stone a wayfarer has crushed and left half-dead, vainly tries to escape and trails its long coils; part defiant, his eyes ablaze and his hissing neck raised aloft; part, maimed by the wound, holding him back, as he twists in coils and twines himself upon his own limbs—with such oarage, the ship moved slowly on (5.273-280, Fairclough, transl.).

The pathetic state of the ship (rather than a certain character) is compared to a snake this time. The battered and bruised state sounds like a snake struggling to slither back to its underground home. The connection between the ship and Troy's downfall may not be so ambiguous as it seems. Virgil consistently employs a deeper context to what may seem superficial.

⁹⁴ *Dementia* is Latin for "insanity."

⁹⁵ Galinsky 1966.

V. Snake Imagery in Young Virgil's *Culex*

The *Culex* in the *Appendix Virgiliana*, most commonly attributed to a 16- or 21-year old Virgil, has a distinct serpentine story that may sound very similar to readers of classical literature. Although the *Culex* is not nearly as renowned as Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Eclogues*, and the *Georgics*, it offers compelling case for a negative interpretation of snakes.

There has been much debate on whether Virgil even wrote the *Culex*, even though it is attributed to Virgil by several ancient authors. The *Culex* was “written under the spell of Lucretius” as scholar Edward Rand attests, enforcing the idea of how young Virgil was when he wrote this piece now considered to be part of his *Appendix Virgiliana*.⁹⁶ This would mean that Virgil was either finishing the *Georgics* or starting his *Aeneid*.⁹⁷ Perhaps Virgil did receive some inspiration from Lucretius' work (which includes *De Rerum Natura*). Lucretius was older, but he and Virgil would have been contemporary writers. In any case, the poems of the *Appendix Virgiliana* provide the insight of Virgil before his more major works.

They reveal many important facts about his daily life, his occupations, his ambitions, and his ideals, and best of all they disclose the processes by which the poet during an apprenticeship of ten years developed the mature art of the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. They have made it possible for us to visualize him with a vividness that is granted us in the case of no other Latin poet.⁹⁸

Virgil was resourceful in that he gathered information for his writings from any number of sources. The Roman author mentions a rather interesting account of a snake attack that was prevented by a gnat.

⁹⁶ Rand 1919.

⁹⁷ Fariclough 1922.

⁹⁸ Frank 1922.

The victim kills the snake with a bough.⁹⁹ The gnat, who was also killed in the process, is made a burial mound. The human, who was going to be victim of the snake, “raised a circular hill of earth.”¹⁰⁰ The words *formatum* and *formans*¹⁰¹ are used in a redundant manner in the *Culex*. The passage below also below begins and ends in *memor*¹⁰²:

And now his mindful care, pursuing the toil begun, heaped up a towering work, and with broad rampart the earthy mound grew into the circle he had traced. Round about this, mindful of constant care, he sets stones, fashioned from polished marble (ll. 394-398, Fairclough, transl.).

Although Rand notes that this is “a kind of vicious cycle of redundancy, ending where it began”, it also is characteristic of a snake.¹⁰³ One need only to consider the rebirth motif associated with serpents discussed in the previous chapter. The circular components of this passage only enforce the death and rebirth of life. When a snake sheds its skin, it is in essence removing the debris of its old life and starting anew.

In addition, outside the gnat motif of the story, this story is not that different from those expressed in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. Rand emphasizes this connection when he says that all these pieces of literature share a story “where a shepherd is enjoined to slay a snake in the fashion described in the *Culex*.”¹⁰⁴ After all, the *Culex* and the *Ciris* (another portion of the *Appendix Virgiliana*), “are epics and belong to the same genus as the *Aeneid*.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the *Culex* is a legitimate consideration in the analysis of the ancient perception of the serpent.

⁹⁹ This bough may bring to mind the golden bough that allows Aeneas to travel into the Underworld.

¹⁰⁰ Rand 1919.

¹⁰¹ These are Latin connotations for forming something.

¹⁰² In this case, *memor* is associated with mindful.

¹⁰³ Rand 1919.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Like the wooden horse that came upon sleeping Troy, so too does the snake come upon the unaware victim.

¹⁰⁵ Fairclough 1922.

VI. Snake Imagery in De Rerum Natura

Lucretius (1st c. BCE) also proves to be an invaluable source for the serpentine literary tradition. However, we must consider Lucretius' work in a different context. In his *De Rerum Natura*, one word is utilized that particularly peaks the interest of the reader: the Latin term *tractu* (dragged). According to Knox, *tractu* can refer to either flames or serpents. In *De Rerum Natura*, *tractu* is used to refer to fire. In order to evaluate this, one scholar, Brooke Holmes, researched Lucretius' speech patterns.

Holmes explains a shift that Lucretius makes in order to elaborate on the effective use of fire in the context of humanity. Holmes argues that Lucretius shifts from "ingenuity to greed, as the intelligent applications of fire give way to the rise of cities and kings, the discovery of gold, and the invention of property."¹⁰⁶ The association of snakes with greed is yet another negative and unappealing aspect of serpents. Snakes are greedy and take away valuable possessions in the Lucretian viewpoint. So far, snakes had represented everything from fertility to tricksters attacking when the victim is weakest. The idea of greed associated with fire, and fire associated with the serpent ties the ideas of greed and fire together. Flame and greed both have a connection to fiery passion, but the connection to greed is somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps the greed of the snake can be seen in its greediness for power as seen on the *Ara Pacis* where, as mentioned earlier, a serpent representing the powerful Rome, consumes its weaker victims.

VII. Conclusion

The literary sources mentioning the serpent as a negative force or as a being associated with fire prove varied and fascinating. The depth in Virgil's work in particular

¹⁰⁶ Holmes 2005.

allows us to pursue a more comprehensive perception of the snake in that we see both its physicality and spirituality, its benevolence and its malevolence. Virgil's work is used constantly in scholarly discussions simply for its ability to stand the test of time and legitimize the mythologies presented in this chapter and the previous chapter. It is necessary to refer to literature as a way to look into the mind of those long gone. Snakes were seen as a greedy creature, consuming weaker beings whole, like a flame consumes its victims.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Snake as Represented in Religion

I. Introduction

The previous chapters have mentioned the diverse depictions of serpents in Greek and Roman mythology and literature. In this chapter, I will analyze the impact of serpents in Roman religion. From the Etruscan Kingdom (753-509 BCE) to the fall of the Roman Empire (476 CE)¹⁰⁷, this chapter will explore the various religious practices of the Romans through time and space as well as incorporate Greek influence on Roman religion itself.

II. Religion in Early Rome

Rome was no exception to the influences of foreign entities. In this case, we will look at religion. Early in the 20th century, anthropologists believed that “animism” was one of the Romans’ first formal religions.¹⁰⁸ Cyril Bailey differentiates animism from magic: “animism is distinguished from the magic on the one hand, and from anthropomorphism on the other, as a belief in ‘spirits’ and ‘powers,’ but spirits sometimes hardly personal at all and never attaining the full personality of anthropomorphic god.”¹⁰⁹ The comparison between magic and animism here is intriguing. Magic, especially in Bailey’s 1932 work, could have meant any cultic or

¹⁰⁷ The fall of the Roman Empire occurred after the last Roman Emperor, Romulus, was overthrown.

¹⁰⁸ Bailey 1932.

¹⁰⁹ Bailey 1932.

performative action in nature that a scholar did not understand.¹¹⁰ It is unfair to denote a culture's religious practices as magic when the culture itself sees their religion as an understood fact of life.

When scholarly bias had been recognized as a subjective way of looking at ancient civilization, the animism interpretation was then understood as a common misconception in the late 20th century. In fact, it was believed that "individuals turned to the gods directly in search of support with their everyday problems of health and disease."¹¹¹ Hence, the earlier animism interpretation had developed from observing other "primitive" cultures rather considering the culture of Rome. Although comparing past and present cultures allows the individual picture the everyday lives of ancient societies, this ethnohistoric "picture" may not necessarily contain veritable, accurate elements. Truly, "we must abandon also any attempt to discover a single linear progression in the history of Roman religion"¹¹² in order for anthropologists and classicists alike to understand the broad picture of Roman religion. This may not produce the entire picture that we want. Instead, it produces part of a mosaic that is yet to be complete.

In actuality, little is known about the earliest Roman religion. Evidence of particularly Roman writings have only been dated to the 240's BCE and later.¹¹³

However, scholars do know that early Roman religion (particularly during the Kingdom

¹¹⁰ It is important that archaeologists evaluate not only the cultural context of the ancient civilization they are studying, but also the cultural viewpoint they are coming from. In anthropology, this is called cultural bias. In extreme circumstances this can be denoted as ethnocentrism, or when one believes their culture is better than another's.

¹¹¹ Beard et al. 1998.

¹¹² Ibid. The linear progression to which the authors are referring concerns the approval of an old idea for the sake of preserving an accepted viewpoint. In this case, animism was the accepted ideal; since other cultures had shown a tendency toward animism, archaeologists rushed to assume that the same pattern of religious development applied to Greek and Roman cultures.

¹¹³ Dowden 1992. This, of course, does not include the influence of Greek writers like Homer, who is believed to have lived in the 9th or 8th centuries BCE.

period and the Early Republic) was “dominated by men and war” with three critical gods: the *Paterfamilias*, the *Quirinus*, and the *Co-vir*.¹¹⁴ The *Paterfamilias*, meaning the father of the household, is often associated with the paternal Jupiter or Zeus. The *Quirinus* was later linked to Romulus, the first ruler of Rome; he represented the adult, male Roman citizens. *Co-vir* was likened to Mars (Ares) because of his warrior mentality and characteristics.

In most of Roman history, religion was heavily male-oriented. All of the major offices were held by men, with the exception of certain mystery cults and the Vestal Virgins.¹¹⁵ In Pompeii, remnants of *aediculae*¹¹⁶, or small shrines associated with ancestor worship, were discovered. One household niche contained a *genius*¹¹⁷ of the *paterfamilias* in the form of a bearded snake¹¹⁸ (see Figure 4.1). This image may conjure up a moment in literature discussed earlier: one must not forget the *genius* of Anchises, Aeneas’ father, as he slithered out from under his tomb. There is something missing, however, from the image. *Lares*, a guardian spirit that may be synonymous with the concept of *Genius*, is supposed to be depicted with two snakes: one male and one female to represent husband and wife as a sort of symmetrical balance between feminine and masculine. The Lararium from the House of the Vettii is a special case in this way.¹¹⁹ In the representation of the snake, there are hints of blood sacrifice – another characteristic of early Roman religion.

¹¹⁴ Dowden 1992.

¹¹⁵ This is a contrast to Greek and religion which had both male and female representatives in cultic activities.

¹¹⁶ This is later denoted *lararia*.

¹¹⁷ Remember the *genius* is the divine counterpart of a relative who is recently dead.

¹¹⁸ Dowden 1992. The beard signifies that the snake is male. In addition, beards are also associated with kingship – Egyptian pharaohs had beards to signify power and utilized the Uraeus, or the standing serpent, in costume decoration.

¹¹⁹ Boyce 1942.



Fig. 4.1: Lararium from the House of the Vettii, Pompeii, Italy.

Looking at the pediment, one can see the skull of a sacrificial oxen, an offering-dish, and a cooking-knife, all elements of ritual sacrifice.¹²⁰

III. Religion in the Roman Republic

When the Republic came into being at the traditional date of 509 BCE, religion began to shift away from Etruscan influences.¹²¹ Greek religion began to have a considerable influence during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. As Dowden states, “the age of the Etruscans was now over.”¹²² Indeed, many of the Roman gods have Greek parallels, indicating the overlapping nature of the different Pantheons. In addition, new religions were introduced during the era of the Republic. The “Two women for Conducting the Rites” would consult the Sibylline books for new religious procedures.¹²³ The original

¹²⁰ Rüpke 2007.

¹²¹ The traditional date for the destruction of the Etruscan Kingdom was 509 BCE. Dowden 1992.

¹²² To Dowden, the transition from Etruscan influences to Greek influences was a defining aspect of the controlled Republic.

¹²³ Dowden 1992. Sybil is the prophetess of Apollo. The “Two women” are like religious priests who had power over the religious dictates of Rome.

books were made in the 90s BCE and were used as a way of introducing Greek gods into Roman culture. Even though these books date to the early first century BCE, new cults were introduced to Roman culture much earlier than this. A variety of cults, however, appeared during the Republic. Not all of the cults were supported and many were not allowed because they did not comply with the Republic's interests.¹²⁴

The utilization of the Greek pantheon of gods was more commonplace, although it is critical to understand that the Greek and Roman versions of polytheism differed in that the Greeks tended to worship the twelve Olympians as a group while the Romans had a tendency to worship the Olympians individually (thereby forming aforementioned cults).¹²⁵ In addition, the Roman pantheon started to take on the appearance of a ruling class as the Republic came to an end and the empire started to emerge.¹²⁶ Romans adopted aspects of Greek culture and moulded those aspects in a manner that coincided with the ideals of their society. The association between gods and the upper class was a continuing trend that remained present until the fall of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Romans even began to create genealogies to tie the history of their families to godly lineages.

IV. Religion in the Roman Empire

After Rome became an Empire, it continually expanded and contained many provinces. In order for the emperor to be able to control such a massive (and growing) population, it was necessary that he establish a cult for himself. As far as religious

¹²⁴ Because of their secrecy from those in control of Rome, mystery cults were often suppressed, particularly the Cult of Cybele.

¹²⁵ Adkins 1996.

¹²⁶ Rüpke 2007.

policies during the Roman Empire period go, there were not many restrictions on cult practice. However, the most necessary duty every citizen had to perform was worshipping the emperor himself in his own cult: “Imperial cult was organized from scratch in the West by Augustus and was a necessary and deliberate part of imperial policy.”¹²⁷

In charge of the imperial cult were the *Ulviri Augustles*, who served as a type of order for towns in Italy outside of Rome.¹²⁸ This was much easier than establishing a national religion – because the Empire covered so many areas, it was almost impossible to impose every Roman cultural norm on the conquered people.¹²⁹ In addition, the necessity of the imperial cult allows the residents of the Roman Empire to immediately recognize the bust of their emperor, or his profile on a coin. Even deceased emperors were recognized in the Cult of Roma.¹³⁰

Cults were everywhere and cults were varied. Some of the more popular cults (besides the imperial cult, of course), were those of Jupiter (Zeus), Juno (Hera), and Minerva (Athena).¹³¹ However, yet another fashionable cult was the cult of Isis. Isis was a goddess originating from Egypt who gained much popularity due to her role as a mother goddess. Women were especially attracted to her cult, and it gained popularity in Rome. This cult held special prominence in Pompeii, where archaeological evidence has been discovered connecting the cult of Isis with elements of snake imagery. In particular,

¹²⁷ Dowden 1992.

¹²⁸ Rüpke 2007.

¹²⁹ Dowden 1992.

¹³⁰ Adkins 1996. In the Greek world, the emphasis was on the living ruler (as opposed to a deceased ruler). When Julius Caesar became the first leader to be deified by the senate, he set the pace for how Romans viewed imperial cults. So, when Augustus came into power as first emperor, the idea of deification stuck.

¹³¹ Dowden 1992.

two goblets have been analyzed: both show a priestess crowned with a snake¹³². In addition, a relief in Pompeii shows two women, one with a vulture on her head, and facing a pedestal on which rests a serpent. Lastly, a wall painting shows a variety of characters, one of which is a priestess with a snake entwined on her left arm and a lotus atop her head¹³³ (see Figure 4.2). The snake around the arm of the priestess of Isis is in no way harmful like the snake that entangles Laocoön and his sons; a more positive light is shed on the snake as an integral part of the ritual associated with the Isis cult.¹³⁴



Fig. 4.2: Isis Priestess Welcomes Greek Heroine Io as She Rides on a Personified Egypt.

Yet another interesting concept to consider is that Isis was originally an Egyptian goddess, but her form was altered to fit the standards of the Roman belief system.

Perhaps the snake imagery also originated in Egypt, which, throughout history, proves to

¹³² Heyob 1975.

¹³³ Burham 2015 & Heyob 1975; It should be mentioned that Burham believes the snake priestess to be Isis herself; in this instance, I am using Heyob's conservative interpretation of the woman to simply be a priestess of Isis as opposed to Isis herself.

¹³⁴ Think of arms on "Minoan Snake Goddess."

have an abundance of snake imagery in religious paintings, jewelry, and pharaoh regalia.¹³⁵

Even close by, in Crete, we see a similarity between one of the cults and its goddesses. For instance, the Minoan snake goddess mentioned previously in this writing represented a mother goddess and a goddess of fertility. Similarly, the Romans portrayed Cybele as a mother goddess (a Magna Mater). After scholars studied this pattern, they came to the conclusion that Cybele had a Minoan counterpart named Rhea.¹³⁶ Multiple gods with common traits or characteristics were most certainly commonplace.

V. The Fall of Roman Empire

The founder of Rome and ancestor of Aeneas was Romulus, twin of Remus (see Figure 4.3). Romans believed that because the founding of Rome began with fratricide (Romulus killing Remus), Rome was due to suffer turmoil repeatedly throughout its existence.



Fig. 4.3: She-Wolf Feeding the Twins Romulus and Remus.

¹³⁵ C.f. the Uraeus, which sits atop the Pharaoh headdress unifying Upper and Lower Egypt.

¹³⁶ Roller 1999.

Livy describes this cycle as a process of foundation, decline, and refoundation.¹³⁷ Miles describes Livy's logic quite eloquently:

This potentially recurrent sequence comprises a specific cycle in which the acquisition or prospect of wealth distracts Romans from their essential loyalties, traditional religion is neglected, Rome is threatened by foreign enemies, and there is danger that the city of Rome will be abandoned by its own citizens for a more splendid alternative, until a refounder appears.¹³⁸

Unfortunately, when the Roman Empire “fell” in the 5th century CE, there was no “refounder” to unify it again. This section will explore the status of Roman religion on the verge of the Empire's collapse.

In the first few centuries CE, the Christian cult lacked support from the Roman Empire. Christians were persecuted for their religious beliefs. For instance, Christians were not willing to participate in living emperor cult worship, and certain traditions such as drinking the blood of Christ and consuming the Holy body sounded cannibalistic to the surrounding Roman cultures at the time. Nevertheless, in 311 CE, Emperor Galerius issues an order restoring the right to be a Christian.¹³⁹ Galerius, who was originally the principal Christian prosecutor, ordered toleration¹⁴⁰ of Christians on his deathbed. In late 312 CE, Constantine became the emperor of the Western portion of Rome¹⁴¹ (and the emperor of all of Rome in 324 CE) and issued the Edict of Milan, allowing Christians to have freedom in their religion.¹⁴²

Now that Christians were free to express their beliefs without fear of persecution, Romans were introduced to even more evidence of snake imagery. Consider for instance

¹³⁷ Livy was particularly thinking of refoundation in the context of Augustus.

¹³⁸ Miles 1997.

¹³⁹ Dowden 1992.

¹⁴⁰ Note the word “toleration” – Christians were in no way supported until the rule of Constantine

¹⁴¹ The Roman Empire split into the East and the West under the rule of Diocletian in AD 284.

¹⁴² Dowden 1992. Recall the story of Constantine's victory after he sees the Chi Rho.

the staff of Moses and the bronze serpent,¹⁴³ or the Genesis serpent who took part in the original sin of humankind. An example of art depicting snakes is a fresco-painted vault in Rome, dating to about 320 CE¹⁴⁴ (see Figure 4.4). In this vault are a series of religious images: to the left of the niche is a depiction of the temptation of Adam and Eve. On the right, there is a figure prostrated in prayer, and in the center a peacock. This fresco was painted in the century before the fall of the Roman Empire.¹⁴⁵ According to Jaś Elsner, at this point in time, “These kinds of images... create a new relationship of the individual Roman with a new mythology, a new past. The world referred to is no longer ancient Roman but a narrative of Judaeo-Christian scripture.”



Fig. 4.4: Vault and Walls of the Arcosolium of Cubiculum in Rome, ca. 320 CE.

The painted image of the Christian serpent differs slightly from that of the one from Pompeii. The snake is not bearded¹⁴⁶; instead, it is rather plain-looking. However,

¹⁴³ Yamauchi 1981.

¹⁴⁴ Elsner 1998.

¹⁴⁵ The “fall” of the Roman Empire is historically cited to be AD 476 by Gibbon, who was a prominent scholar in the 19th century. In this year, Odoacer overthrew the last Roman Emperor, Augustulus Romulus. Note: I put “fall” in quotation marks because one cannot necessarily put a date to the decline of a culture; the “fall” of the Roman Empire was a continuous progression, not an event.

¹⁴⁶ C.f. the Pompeii bearded snake example.

the way it wraps itself around the tree is somewhat reminiscent of the Rod of Asclepius. In addition, the Adam and Eve image, albeit difficult to see is symmetrical. There is a simple harmony in that Adam and Eve are each other's counterpart.¹⁴⁷ Although this part of the fresco is not as elaborate as the bearded snake in the Isis wall-paintings at Pompeii, both location place a central importance on the image of snakes. In the vault, the serpent draws attention by being placed in the center, between Adam and Eve. In the Lares painting, the snake is the largest figure and directs the viewers' attention to the altar (which the snake is supposedly travelling toward). Again, it is necessary to compare the likeness of the snake to the serpents that entangle the Laocoön statue. Both are static in that they do not physically move, but both pieces of art successfully give the viewer an allusion of movement. The slithering movement of the snake is only emphasized when the viewer travels around or beside the pieces.¹⁴⁸

VI. Conclusion

The religion of Rome was varied and, in no sense unified. Hundreds of cults were developed, including a very popular one today: Christianity. The closest Rome came to establishing a state religion was when cults of the emperor were established in all parts of the Roman Empire. However, many cults shared symbols, albeit for different reasons. For Isis, the snake represented life, renewal kingship. For Christianity, the snake embodied evil from the beginning of creation. Yet both the Isis cult and Christianity understood the prominence of snakes in interpreting the religious past and present. Despite their similarities, the Roman cults were still distinctly separate from their Greek, original

¹⁴⁷ Recall that snakes that come in pairs often represent husband and wife.

¹⁴⁸ The first instance applying an allusion to art actually occurred more than 17,000 years ago in the Lascaux Caves; when a visitor walk by with a lighted torch, the cave wall paintings appear to dance.

counterparts. The influx of Greek religious ideals were not only imitated, but also altered to conform to Roman ideals.¹⁴⁹ Religion, like Roman mythology and literature, proves pertinent in understanding the complexity and unique ideas of a specific culture. Why religion is not culture, it is often the infrastructure that supports the culture itself. Unfortunately, archaeologists and classicists can only go so far in interpreting religion. Because religion is an abstract, cognitive concept, centered on beliefs, we will never truly know what ancient people were thinking. The artifacts that archaeologists discover give us an idea of what symbols were associated with certain religions, but very little idea of how they were used and interpreted. What is clear, however, is that snakes continued to play a role in the newly emerging cults and religions of the Roman Empire.

¹⁴⁹ The act of taking from another culture and adding on to the original traditions is called cumulative culture in anthropology. Cumulative culture is what makes us human – it distinguishes us from apes (who have a primitive culture) and other animals.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Mythology, literature, and religion can serve as a lens for better understanding what a culture (or cultures) considers important. An exploration of Mediterranean mythology highlights the use of snakes as both benevolent and malevolent creatures. An analysis of literature proves even more enlightening, simply because we have more evidence to illustrate how certain classical civilizations utilized snake imagery in their writings. Literature also reveals a wide range of views on snakes. The great Roman writer Virgil did not depict snakes in one manner. Rather, he offers a multilayered view snakes are seen as bringers of death as well as vehicles of prophecy through the form of the beloved *genius* of a family. Lastly, religion provides insight into the cultural practices associated with mythological and literary beliefs. Religion divides snake ideologies into what is normal and what is divine, what is benevolent and malevolent. For the cult of Aesclepius, snakes had the ability to heal and remove the illness from the body. In the cult of Isis, snakes were images of the divine. The snake embodied the power of kingship as well as the power to overcome death.

When one traces the development of snake imagery in mythology, literature, and religion, some intriguing similarities and differences emerge. In the Minoan era, snakes embodied the mother goddess and made the connection between life and death explicit. This same belief is echoed in the later Roman cult of Isis. The Greeks applied serpentine power to mythologies, often associating snakes with deities in both positive and negative manners. For Medusa, she is a taker of life, but in her death, she provides life. Of course,

these mythologies would then influence Roman mythologies, literature (particularly in the context of Virgil), and various mystery cults. Virgil uses both the well-established traditions of snakes, but he also establishes new traditions in his literature. Building upon older traditions, he believes snakes can be tools of the gods to do their will, but also divine symbols of familial ancestors. But his newly emerging traditions use snakes as a sign of an evil age, a concept which is unknown in the earlier Greek traditions.

Serpent imagery is simply *ingrained* in Mediterranean culture: it is not enough, however, to merely recognize that snake imagery engulfs this culture; we must also consider the reason for this fascination with serpents. Like the snake that sheds its skin to reveal new life, an analysis of snake imagery and the power associated with it allows us to understand the ancient connection between human and serpent. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, snakes were clearly feared and awed. Ultimately, it is the power of snakes--as depicted in art and literature--that draws the modern reader or hearer into to their tales. Truly, the power associated with snakes, as well as the fear and awe they elicit, are what make snake imagery in ancient myths, stories, and religion so relatable to modern readers.

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