

## Article

# The Meaning of the Snake in the Ancient Greek World

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**Abstract:** Despite playing no meaningful practical role in the lives of the ancient Greeks, snakes are ubiquitous in their material culture and literary accounts, in particular in narratives which emphasise their role of guardian animals. This paper will mainly utilise vase paintings as a source of information, with literary references for further elucidation, to explain why the snake had such a prominent role and thus clarify its meaning within the cultural context of Archaic and Classical Greece, with a particular focus on Athens. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on dualistic opposites, such as life/death, nature/culture, and creation/destruction. This paper argues instead that ancient Greeks perceived the existence of a special primordial force living within, emanating from, or symbolised by the snake; a force which is not more—and not less—than pure life, with all its paradoxes and complexities. Thus, the snake reveals itself as an excellent medium for accessing Greek ideas about the divine, anthropomorphism, and ancestry, the relationship between humans, nature and the supernatural, and the negotiation of the inevitable dichotomy of old and new.

**Keywords:** snake; ancient Greek world; Greek material culture; Athenian pottery; Greek mythology; serpent



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## 1. Introduction

Animals are a popular subject of research because they are considered an excellent entry point into humans' concerns. It is often said that humans think of animals in human terms, i.e., that there is a connection between how we see ourselves and the way we see animals, and that we use our own experiences and categories as social beings to make sense of the animal world around us (Douglas 1990). Our concepts of animals reflect, in fact, human concerns. Lévi-Strauss (1962, pp. 127–28) consideration of natural species as 'good to think with' is well known. But animals are far from being mere passive objects upon which humans act: indeed, human and non-human animals interact with each other to various degrees. The latter moreover have their own agenda, and as Ingvald Gilhus rightly emphasises, their 'specific ways of behaviour and own interests' (Gilhus 2006, p. 6), which in turn contributes to how humans conceive them.

Biologist Paul Shepard went further and theorised that humans *need* animals in the most basic evolutionary way, as the latter would be essential elements in the growth and development of the human person and basic to the development of speech. He ultimately argued that the mind is the product of natural history and that animals are indispensable to our becoming human in the fullest sense (Shepard 1978, p. 2, see also Mason 2007). The consideration of animals both as signifiers and as agents is probably related to humans' changing attitudes towards a central question of human-animal relationship brought by the so-called "animal turn" in the Humanities and Social Sciences: that of humans' shared phylogeny with animals. That is, whether animals and humans fall within the same category, and the assertions of extreme difference (animals as lacking soul, intelligence, and feelings), or similarities between both (Ritvo 2007, pp. 118–22). Despite the evident tensions, most scholars specialising in the study of animals believe that animals and human beings do fall within the same category, as Harriet Ritvo notes (Ritvo 2007, p. 119). This

consideration opens the door to study animals in their own right, as agents impacting human beliefs and behaviours.

Among all animals, one stands out for its semiotic potential: the snake, a species that induces awe and fear in equal measure. Quoting the German 19th-century classicist Friedrich G. Welcker, Küster (1913, p. 1) defined the serpent as the most ambiguous of animals (*das vieldeutigste Tier*). Walter Burkert's observation about the snake as the 'most unsettling of creatures for man', 'uncanny in shape and behaviour' is well known (Burkert 1985, p. 195). Mundkur (1983), for his part, asserted that 'for the whole human species' the snake has a special significance that sets it apart from all other animate objects, and proposed the idea of a seemingly primordial role of the snake as a focus for human cultic behaviour. In turn, Willis (1994, p. 236) conceded that 'no other animal is so rich in meaning for the whole human species'. While we should always be wary of calls to universality, the snake is, indeed, one of the animals that features prominently in the visual, written, and oral cultures of many peoples, ancient and modern, around the world.

The polysemic nature and the seemingly universal feeling of awe that the snake provokes stem from its particular physical characteristics and behaviours, such as its peculiar locomotion and slithering, the shedding of the skin, the unblinking lidless eyes, or its venom, in the case of poisonous snakes. These biological properties bear directly on the type of symbolic expressions and specific beliefs that can be constructed around the animal, i.e., they *afford* a limited number of metaphoric constructions. The notion of 'affordances' originates in the ecological psychology of James Gibson and has been developed and adapted by Maurizio Bettini to the study of cultural behaviour and practice, including the use of animal metaphors.<sup>1</sup> Affordances are 'the possibilities that surrounding people and objects offer to meet our various needs' (Bettini 2013, p. 126). This concept is interesting because, as Bettini showed in his work on the weasel, it lets us integrate biological facts and animal behaviour with cultural preferences and traditions in a compelling way. It also allows for the recognition of similar symbolic functions of a specific animal in markedly different cultures—without resorting to the Jungian idea of a collective unconscious—while at the same time allowing a culture specific understanding of animal symbols.

The snake offers many opportunities—or affordances—to the *homo symbolicus*. The snake's fascinating biological traits make it especially suitable as a symbolic expression for multiple projects, from the exploration of the very concept of life and death to the investigation of questions of identity, ancestry, and otherness, to mention just a few. Using Bettini's terminology, the snake supplies a large number of metaphorical affordances that will be picked up or not depending on the particular human project that wants to make use of the imagery and transform the animal into a symbol. Therefore, a given set of affordances does not inevitably result in a particular symbol as this is always the result of the interaction between the object and a given culture's metaphorical project (Bettini 2013, pp. 127–29). That is why the snake comes to symbolise sometimes radically opposing ideas in the various cultures that make use of it. We will limit our study here to the Greek, and in most cases, Athenian, metaphorical project.

In ancient Greek material culture and literary sources, the snake makes recurring appearances, in particular in narratives that emphasise its protective role. Ancient Greek mythology is rich in accounts of serpents as adversaries of heroes or gods. They may watch over whole cities, as in the case of the sacred snake of the Athenian Acropolis. Snakes are also depicted beside tombs and fountain houses in Athenian vase painting. They moreover safeguard the good health of the devotees of different gods. The recurrent presence of snakes and serpents in ancient Greek myth and art is intriguing to say the least, even more so if we bear in mind that, from a practical point of view, snakes are rather useless animals. They do not serve any of the practical aspects, such as defined by Gilhus (2006, p. 16),

<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'affordances' was latent in my doctoral work, but I failed to formulate it in those terms. I thank the ARTS reviewer who brought Bettini's work to my attention. In material culture studies, the concept of affordances has also exerted influence in the notion that the properties of materials or things afford certain outcomes (e.g., Knappett 2005). It has recently been picked up by Ian Hodder in his work on entanglement (Hodder 2012, pp. 48–49).

in which an animal can be useful to man: the necessities of life and entertainment. Snakes have no economic dimensions associated with them (besides poison, nothing can be taken from them to meet basic life necessities, either as food or clothing), and they play no role in amusing humans. Their role was almost exclusively religious, albeit not unimportant.

Regardless of the particular narrative in which the snake was involved, its role as a mediator between modes of reality rapidly becomes apparent. Snakes are ambiguous, betwixt-and-between beings that escape all attempts at categorisation. Binary categories are of no use because this animal is always on the move, in a perennial moment of transition. The snake belongs in the margins and inhabits multiple interstices and junctions, and as such, it is also a bridge between realms (nature and culture, life and death, chthonian and Olympian, etc.). Therefore, in the background of my interpretation of the snake, both in specific narratives and as a symbol in the ancient Greek world, are Van Gennepe's (1909) and Turner's (1979) theorisations about the rites of passage, and in particular, the concept of liminality. Further, because of the snake's position between realities and the uncertainty that it brings along, especially when associated with anthropomorphic (and therefore rationally comprehensible) figures, Todorov's (1975) concept of the *fantastic* is useful. The *fantastic* is the 'hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event' (Todorov 1975, p. 25) and this concept helps understand both the challenges imposed upon us when approaching the snake from a purely rational way and the role of the snake as a boundary breaker in the ancient world.

This paper aims to elucidate the snake's prominent role and thus its meaning within the cultural context of Archaic and Classical Greece, with a particular focus on Athens. In the following presentation, I will base my argumentations on interpretations of both visual and literary evidence. Scenes on Attic vase paintings offer a rich source of visual material. For a better understanding I will also look beyond ancient Athenian authors to Greek and Latin texts of later date as sources of information. In this analysis, the snake reveals itself as an excellent entry point to Greek ideas on the divine, anthropomorphism, and ancestry, the relationship between humans, nature and the supernatural, or the negotiation of the inevitable—and very Greek—dichotomy of old and new. My particular contribution to a subject of study that has been well surveyed before<sup>2</sup> is the attempt to offer an interpretation of the snake that, whereas initially stemming from structuralist premises, aims to go beyond the recognition of binaries to dwell more on the transformative nature of the animal. My goal has been to both use and see through the binary categories in order to articulate one single unifying idea that accounts for the multiple seemingly disparate aspects in which snake symbolism manifests itself in the ancient Greek world.

## 2. Methodological Notes

One difficult issue regarding this research is the pertinence of the term 'symbolism' in relation not only to the depictions of snakes in Greek material culture but to Greek art more

<sup>2</sup> Despite the abundance of mentions to snakes in modern scholarship, there are not many works exclusively devoted to this animal in the ancient Greek world. The first one was Mähly's *Die Schlange im Mythos und Cultus der classischen Völker* in 1867 (Mähly 1867), followed by Küster's 1913 *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion* (Küster 1913). With a more limited scope but equally comprehensive come Mitropolou's *Deities and Heroes in the Form of Snake* (1977) and Grabow's investigation of the depiction of snakes in Greek black-figure pottery (Grabow 1998). On the linguistic side, Sancassano's contributions on the names of the snakes in ancient Greek (Sancassano 1996, 1997a, 1997b) must be noted as well as Liliane Bodson's studies on ancient snake taxonomy (Bodson 1981) (and also her 1978 on animals in ancient Greek religion, Bodson 1978). Odgen's *Drakon* book, published in 2013 claiming to be 'the first survey in any language of the Graeco-Roman reflex of the dragon or the supernatural serpent' investigates accounts of many dragons of myth and also the association of snakes in the cultic realm. Although not specifically focused in the ancient Greek world, Degli's *Das Schlangensymbol. Geschichte, Märchen, Mythos* is also worth mentioning. On particular snakes' fields of action, see, for example, Fontenrose's *Python* book, on the Delphic myth and other fights against dragons and similar monsters, Trumpf's study on foundational dragon myths (Trumpf 1958), Salapata's contribution on 'tippling snakes' in the art of Lakonia and beyond (Salapata 2006), or Casanova and Larumbe's persuasive gender reading of western snake symbolism in *La serpiente vencida*, in 2005 (Casanova Surroca et al. 2005). There are also a number of studies on deities linked to snakes, such as Trophonios, Asklepios, Meilichios, and Amphiaraios (Bonnechere 2003; Riethmüller 2005; Lalonde 2006; Sineux 2007), or Kekrops (Gourmelon 2004). Finally, I may also note my contributions to the subject, mainly my 2010 PhD *The Snake in the Ancient World: Myth, Rite, and Image*, and the early book on combat myths *Serpientes, dioses y heroes. El combate contra el monstruo en el arte y la literatura griega antiguas* (Rodríguez Pérez 2008), as well as several other related publications (Rodríguez Pérez 2010b, 2011, 2013, 2015).

broadly.<sup>3</sup> In semiotic terms, Greek art is not symbolic. Meaning is not conveyed through evasive artistic devices. Its emphasis on narration and *mimesis* places it very much at the other, literal, end of the spectrum. For, it shows a marked preference for the rational and uses direct references to the meaning and function of objects. Elsner (1995, pp. 159–90) has compared what he calls the ‘literal mode’ of Graeco-Roman art to the ‘symbolic mode’ proper of Christian art. Indeed, Greek and Roman art ‘imitate actuality’ (Elsner 1995, p. 191), and the imagery bears a literal significance, a mimetic relationship to their subject matter. Symbols, for their part, point beyond themselves; their reference lies somewhere else, usually in the Other World.

As far as the snake is concerned, when it appears in the visual arts of the Greeks, very often it does not point to anything external to it (it does not *symbolise* anything else), but has a direct and literal meaning, i.e., it is a particular snake whose story is told in a particular myth, cult, or ritual, or whose function can be inferred from its role in that myth, cult, or ritual. This does not imply, however, either that the snake *only* appears in straightforward narrative scenes or that this is its only mode of representation. As Alastair Harden has rightly observed, animals in general are also used in the visual arts in several other ways, for example, to lend tone, contrast, dynamics, or wildness in order to heighten power or deepen pathos, to invite the viewer to think beyond the dimensions of their own experience, or to project an image of a world in which a human ruler—or a god—is in total control of everything (Harden 2014, p. 26).

Whether animals in art are utilised in a narrative, symbolic, mimetic or decorative manner, they are never meaningless, they will ‘always evoke the specific species’ qualities and the cultural relevance of that animal, and such depictions are a translation of cultural ideas about animal behaviour’ (Harden 2014, p. 30). Indeed, the metaphoric connotations of the serpent were broad in Antiquity and it was used on the religious scene to express complex ideas. In fact, although very seldom do depictions of snakes lose their primary referent in ‘real life’<sup>4</sup>, one is usually left wondering if they are not quite often potentially crossing into the realm of the symbolic, functioning as veritable signifiers in their own right. The only possible, valid approach to the study of animal semiotics is, therefore, holistic, encompassing a wide range of evidence, not exclusively either visual arts or literature. Assessed in their own terms and within their own limitations, the various types of sources available all provide complementary information and add different nuances that help us configure the cultural profile of the animal in question.

In the case of the snake, it is exceedingly difficult indeed, and potentially misleading to fragment the evidence and concentrate on just one specific category of material. Therefore, and because the aim of this paper is to offer a broad-brush summary of a rather complex subject, I will focus on overarching themes and functions, sketching the most salient features that are relevant to disentangle the complex net of metaphoric connotations of the snake in the Greek world. As such, it is an attempt to summarise the much larger research that led to my PhD thesis, many aspects of which have already been published. For the sake of clarity, many important and possibly equally relevant details will be only mentioned in passing but I hope to offer a comprehensive and not oversimplified picture of the subject.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Snakes and the Status Quo

The most abundant and well-known narratives featuring snakes or anguine monsters are the so-called combat myths.<sup>6</sup> These are tales about succession battles between heroes or gods and a chaos-monster, which after many vicissitudes end in triumph for the former.

<sup>3</sup> On animals and plants in Greek vase painting, see Lang-Auinger and Trinkl (2015).

<sup>4</sup> In the sense mentioned above (l. 128–129) of ‘a particular snake whose story is told in a particular myth, cult, or ritual, or whose function can be inferred from its role in that myth, cult, or ritual’.

<sup>5</sup> For a lengthier treatment, see Rodríguez Pérez (2010a).

<sup>6</sup> For combat myths and their classification, see Trumpf (1958); Vian (1963).

For instance, in the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk fights against the primordial Tiamat for supremacy; in Egyptian religion, the giant serpent Apophis, the embodiment of chaos, is the enemy of the solar deity Ra, who in turn is the upholder of *Ma'at* (Truth); or, in the Hindu *Rig Veda*, the new-born Indra slays his adversary, Vritra, the serpentine personification of drought. The antagonist is usually a giant snake or an anguiform creature—if not a composite monster with prominently serpentine features. The monster poses a real threat to the protagonist, often watches over treasures of various sorts, and defends the pre-existing state of affairs.

In Greek cosmology, the combat with the snake does not play such a prominent role as in the Near Eastern tradition, but a fight with a serpentine monster did indeed take place right before the establishment of Zeus as uncontested ruler of the Olympus: the *Typhonomachy*, the battle between Zeus and Typhon (Hes. *Theog.* 820–80). Apart from Zeus, Apollo, Herakles, Jason, and Kadmos also fought giant snakes at some point in their mythic careers. Albeit slightly different in function, all these myths share a same initiatory pattern in which the hero or god must abandon culture and go to a “special place”, usually on the outskirts of the world, to measure himself against a horrendous snake in an exercise of self-assertion. The specific role of the snake as a symbol of liminality in these myths can only fully be gauged if we contrast the *before* and the *after* in the protagonist’s monstrous encounter, his transition from mortality to immortality, and if we consider the ‘token’ protected by the serpent.

A ‘betwixt and between’, liminal stage can be identified in all cases, a transition that was only to be resolved in the most dramatic way: by fighting and defeating an otherworldly serpent in order to take possession of the territory that it protected or to obtain a particular token that it safeguarded. Our heroes—or gods—all reach a turning point in their lives: they are challenged in their bid for power (Zeus); they were sent to the far corners of the earth to carry out impossible tasks (Herakles; Jason); they found themselves homeless in strange lands (Kadmos); or they were new-born to the world (Apollo). That is to say, Typhon was sent to lay siege to Zeus’ supremacy;<sup>7</sup> Herakles had to recover the apples of the Hesperides for king Eurystheus;<sup>8</sup> Jason had to steal the Golden Fleece, which would entitle him for the throne of Iolkos in Thessaly;<sup>9</sup> Kadmos had been away from his homeland in search of his sister Europa for many years,<sup>10</sup> and Apollo had only just been born when he encountered Python.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1. A Topography of the Sacred

The fight with the monster usually takes place in strange lands that stand as symbols of liminality. They are the scenery where the hero/god will see his status transformed. These liminal places are not necessarily situated on the fringes of the known world (actual or imagined), although this can be the case. Rather, my research has brought to light the

<sup>7</sup> Hom. *Il.* 2.780–84; Hes. *Theog.* 836–68; Pind. *Pyth.* 1.29; Aes. *Prom.* 351; SAM inv. no. 596 (Chalcidian black-figure hydria; BAPD no. 1004764; LIMC #2619); Küster (1913, pp. 87–89); Rodríguez Pérez (2008, pp. 23–48); Ogden (2013, pp. 69–79).

<sup>8</sup> Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.1390–421; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.11; SMB inv. no. 3261 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 330543; LIMC #21989); KAM inv. no. 70.8.4 (Athenian red-figure hydria; BAPD no. 5159; LIMC #20839); BM reg. no. 1875,0309.25 (Athenian red-figure hydria; BAPD no. 230491; LIMC #23383); MMA obj. no. 24.97.5 (Athenian red-figure hydria; BAPD no. 9525; LIMC #16820); Küster (1913, p. 93); Rodríguez Pérez (2008, pp. 131–32), 146, figs. 64, 65, 80; *ead.* (2015), p. 149, Figure 3; Ogden (2013, pp. 33–39).

<sup>9</sup> Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.87–88; Hyg. *Fab.* 22; Ov. *Met.* 7.35; Prop. 3.11.9–11; Sen. *Med.* 466; MMA obj. no. 34.11.7 (Athenian red-figure column-krater; BAPD no. 205910; LIMC #24466); MCA inv. no. 190 (Athenian red-figure column-krater; BAPD no. 205909; LIMC #36703); MGEV inv. no. 16545 (Athenian red-figure cup; BAPD no. 205162; LIMC #24439); SAM inv. no. 3268 (Apulian red-figure volute-krater; BAPD no. 9036838); SHM inv. no. 1718 (Apulian red-figure volute-krater); MAN inv. no. 82.126 (Paestan red-figure volute-krater); Rodríguez Pérez (2008, pp. 162, 177, figs. 84–85, 103); Ogden (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Ov. *Met.* 3.26–49; Hyg. *Fab.* 178; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4; Paus. 9.5, 9.10, 9.12; Louvre inv. no. N3325 (M12) (Athenian red-figure hydria; BAPD no. 10851; LIMC #9885); MMA obj. no. 22.139.11 (Athenian red-figure bell-krater; BAPD no. 214545; LIMC #9883); Shapiro (1993, pp. 99–102, Figures 51–54); Rodríguez Pérez (2008, pp. 188–90, figs. 107–11); Ogden (2013, pp. 58–62).

<sup>11</sup> Eur. *Iph. Taur.* 1234–57; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.705–7; Ov. *Met.* 1.434–47; Luc. 5.79–81; Stat. *Theb.* 6.8; Hyg. *Fab.* 140; CdM inv. no. 306 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 330984; LIMC #13587); SMB inv. no. F2212 (Athenian red-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 208984; LIMC #16858); Grabow 1998, pl.18 (K84); Rodríguez Pérez (2008), p. 90, Figure 23; Ogden (2013, pp. 40–48).

convergence of a set of elements that feature almost invariably, either in conjunction or alone, in these myths and that define what I have called a ‘topography of the sacred’: tree/forest/garden, water, and snake (and woman . . . ).

All these elements have powerful metaphorical connotations in pre-modern societies that should alert us to the special character of the place where they converge. Indeed, trees have enormous symbolical power. Their physical characteristics, with the roots reaching deep in the earth and the branches reaching up to the sky affords the use of the tree as a symbol for the *axis mundi*, that is, a centre, a pole that runs through the multiple levels of the Universe, linking heaven, earth and the underworld (Cusack 2011, p. 9; Eliade 1958, pp. 95–124). Likewise, gardens and other natural landscapes such as forests, groves, grottoes and meadows are not short of connotations, usually revolving around the feminine principle and the symbolism of the mother (Vázquez Hoys and Martín 1997, p. 69). Latest research into gardens sees them not as passive sceneries but as powerful agents contributing to human or social action (Conan 2007, p. 7). They can work as anterooms spurring encounters with the netherworld; as journeys through mystical lands; and as a means of establishing a sense of locality. For the Greek world, this agency refers mainly to the ability of such places to facilitate a contact with the afterlife (see Bonnechere’s and Calame’s contributions to Conan 2007).

The symbolism of water, for its part, is very rich and was beautifully summarised by Mircea Eliade, to whom I refer in full here:

water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence. [ . . . ] Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolizes the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return either by their own regression or in a cataclysm. (Eliade 1958, p. 188)

Natural green spaces—either forests or gardens—as well as water and snakes occur together in most of the myths considered for this research and they lend a specific tone and meaning to the action staged in them: the initiation of the hero. The Castalian spring and the laurel tree witnessed baby Apollo’s fight with Python, right in the centre of the Earth.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the snake coiled in the tree or next to the representation of a nymph, maybe Castalia, was a preferred theme of a number 3rd- and 2nd-century BCE coins from Asia Minor.<sup>13</sup> A palm tree features on a well-known black-figure chimney lekythos by the Pholos Group (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup>

Herakles fought Ladon, the snake, in the blissful Garden of the Hesperides, usually imagined in a far western corner of the world. The geographical references are vague and vary in the sources: next to the Okeanos; near Lybia; or near the spot where Atlas was eternally shouldering the heavens.<sup>15</sup> Water, or ambrosia according to some sources,<sup>16</sup> flew through the garden, and three (or four) ‘Western Maidens’ looked after the golden apples that grew in a special tree.<sup>17</sup> Tree/forest, spring and snake also feature prominently in Jason’s and Kadmos’ myths: the first, with or without Medea’s help, faced the snake in an ancient forest sacred to Ares in the Kolchis (Val. Flac. *Argon.* 5.228) and Kadmos’ snake watched over a spring also sacred to Ares (Paus. 9.10.5). For its part, Typhon, the ‘cloud-gatherer,’<sup>18</sup> belongs to a long list of monsters that are conspicuously related to water,

<sup>12</sup> Eur. *Iph. Taur.* 1234–57; Stat. *Theb.* 6.8.

<sup>13</sup> LIMC Apollon 1001 a–c.

<sup>14</sup> CdM inv. no. 306 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 330984; LIMC #13587).

<sup>15</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 216, 274, 334; Ov. *Met.* 4.627; Varro, *Rust.* 2.1; Diod. Sic. 4.26–27; Luc. 9.363; Hyg. *Fab.* 30.12. Atlas also features in scenes of the Garden of the Hesperides in vase painting and relief sculpture: e.g., Getty inv. no. 77.AE.11 (Athenian red-figure volute-krater; BAPD no. 201704); London, Market (Athenian red-figure bell-krater; BAPD 9035686); MAN inv. no. 81934 (Apulian red-figure volute-krater); Louvre inv. no. 716 and Olympia Museum inv. no. 79 (metope with Herakles holding up the sky, Athena, and Atlas with the apples. From the Temple of Zeus in Olympia).

<sup>16</sup> Eur. *Hipp.* 746–750.

<sup>17</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 213–216; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.1427–1428; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5,11.

<sup>18</sup> Nonn. *Dion.* 1.389.

such as Tiamat, Vritra, Apophis, the Hurrite monster Hedammu or the Hitite Illuyanka. These are all snakes or snake-like monsters that retain the primeval waters and whose killing will trigger a new creation, as will be the case of Typhon too (see below, Section 3.2).



**Figure 1.** Baby Apollo, Leto, Artemis and Python. (CdM inv. no. 306; black-figure lekythos; attr. to the Pholos Group; Athens; ca. 500 BCE.) [© Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France and CNRS-Maison Archéologie et Ethnologie].

The space where the combat is staged is therefore not a passive element but presents a very specific agency that turns it into an anteroom to another reality, a liminal place where the different realms of existence are closer together and where life is suspended. It is the *locus* of an initiation, the second stage of van Gennep's three-tiered pattern. Probably the most perfect visual representations of the *axis mundi* come on two Apulian 4th-century volute-kraters with a scene of the Garden of the Hesperides. The first shows a crested snake being tendered by the maidens (Figure 2). One of them feeds the animal with a *phiale*, a shape of especial cultic and liturgical connotations, since it is usually reserved for the gods (Tsingarida 2009a, 2009b). The serpent coils in a blooming tree and at its foot flows the water (or ambrosia?), which the Hesperides fetch in *hydriae*. The second krater, in the Archaeological Museum of Naples,<sup>19</sup> adds the figure of Herakles to the left and that of Atlas shouldering the heavens at the top, marking the path that the hero will follow in his last two canonical labours: from the underworld to the sky through the magical interior of the snake. This was also the road taken by Jason, who, according to one version of the myth only attested by visual sources, was actually swallowed by the snake<sup>20</sup> (see Figure 3, bottom right).

Before moving on, the physical rendering of the snakes involved in the combat myths—as well as other snakes that we will see later on—needs mentioning, since it is suggestive of the special status accorded to the animal, in particular when connected with the other elements referred above. There are two iconographical features that mark these snakes off: the beard and the crest (Figure 3). These are not physiognomic features: snakes are reptiles and their bodies do not have the ability of growing hair, let alone a beard. The same applies to the crest. Further, vase painters never showed any interest in a naturalistic representation of snakes, they concentrate more on the special nature of the animal than on its taxonomic classification. The beard and the crest are the two iconographical attributes chosen by artists to mark these snakes out.<sup>21</sup> By granting the animal a beard and/or a

<sup>19</sup> Apulian red-figure volute-krater (MAN inv. no. 81934).

<sup>20</sup> The motif of the 'swallowing snake' is, according to Propp (1974, pp. 329–57), the oldest form of snake in traditional tales. The motif stands for the complete initiation of the hero, whose travel to the inside of the monster symbolises his stay in the underworld. It is one of the most visually compelling instances of the liminal phase of the initiation ritual.

<sup>21</sup> Boardman (1980, p. 151) argued that the bearded snake entered Greek iconography via Egypt, where there were numerous images of bearded snakes, including some thirty snake gods.

crest, the animal is taken away from the natural world into the realm of the supernatural, its extraordinary nature is highlighted and becomes visually apprehensible. Artists are therefore turning the snake (i.e., *ophis*) into a *drakōn*, in the sense accorded to the term by Riaño (1999, p. 174), that of a *portentosum, sacrum, mirabile, terribile* animal. This is one of the instances mentioned above (l.141) where depictions of snakes are more clearly crossing into the symbolic.



**Figure 2.** The Garden of the Hesperides (Ruvo, Archaeological Museum inv. no. 1097); red-figure volute-krater; attr. to the Lycourgos Painter, Ruvo di Puglia; ca. 360 BCE. [Image creative commons public domain].



**Figure 3.** Clockwise: Detail of snake from red-figure column-krater with the scene of Jason and the Golden Fleece; attr. to the Orchard Painter; Attica; ca. 470 BCE (MMA acc. no. 34.11.7). Detail of snake from red-figure calyx-krater with the scene of Kadmos and the Serpent; attr. to the Spreckels Painter; Attica; ca. 450 BCE (MMA acc. no. 07.286.66). [Images courtesy of the open-access program of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.] Detail of red-figure cup with the scene of Jason swallowed by the snake; signed by Douris; Attica (from Cerveteri); ca. 470 BCE (Rome, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco inv. no. 16545). Detail of snake from black-figure lekythos with the scene of Herakles in the Garden of the Hesperides; attr. to the Cactus Painter; Attica; ca. 500 BCE (Berlin, Antikensammlung inv. no. 3261, lost). [Image after (Rodríguez Pérez 2015)].

Establishing the meaning of the words *ophis* and *drakōn*, which were both used by ancient authors to refer to the ‘snake’, is not easy. On the basis of several *scholia* to Euripides and Aeschylus<sup>22</sup> and of Euripides’ description of the snake of Ares in *Bacchae* 1025, as ‘a snake of the big-eyed type’, the distinction between a *drakōn* and a snake has been traditionally explained as a *species/genus* relationship, i.e., *ophis* would be the *genus* of which *drakōn* is a *species*. Bodson (1981, pp. 63–67) thought that *drakōn* referred to a particular species of snake of the family *Colubridae*, mostly non-venomous animals whose main characteristic is their acute vision and particularly hypnotic and expressive eyes.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Sancassano (1996) and Riaño (1999) have rightly contested this theory. In fact, ancient authors used the word *drakōn* in the same ways that they used *ophis*: to refer to the mythical snakes of the combat myth and to the snakes of their natural surroundings. Riaño has surveyed the occurrences of both terms—285 of *ophis* and 138 of *drakōn*—in ancient literature from Homer to Aristotle, and from his study it emerges that when authors use *drakōn* to refer to a non-mythical snake, the word is used as a synonym of *ophis*.

But, while there is no zoological difference between the animals called *drakōn* and *ophis* in ancient literature, there is indeed a qualitative distinction: *drakōn* is used for snakes regarded as extremely frightening and dangerous, in particular those featured in myths. It refers to the kind of snakes we encounter in the combat myths: extraordinary monsters of great size, frightening look and reputed keen vision, sleepless<sup>24</sup> and old, whose origin was not always clear but which were in a close partnership with the Earth or were the offspring of likewise uncanny creatures born in the earliest stages of development of the Greek cosmos. The term *drakōn* is seldom used in historical works of the period and only rarely do ancient naturalists choose it. Even when *drakōn* rather than *ophis* is used in reference to the non-mythical animal, it usually refers to a snake involved in a somehow extraordinary situation, such as an *omen* or a metamorphosis. The term has also a marked poetic air that makes it appear in poetry without necessarily implying the extraordinary nature of the snake in question.<sup>25</sup> The visual translation of an extraordinary snake of this sort, of a *drakōn*, is the bearded and crested snake.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.2. The Aftermath

It was mentioned above that the specific role of the snake as a symbol of liminality, as the element that both hinders and enables the hero’s initiation, can be best understood when contrasting the *before* and the *after* in the protagonist’s monstrous encounter. Chaos-monsters tend to be primeval and thus age-old, somnolent creatures protecting the state of affairs. They oppose change, movement, and progress. These serpent monsters, therefore, clash with the new, young and energetic generation who disturbs their rest, challenges the *status quo*, and is eager to advance the cosmological creation. They try to preserve a primordial cosmological chaos, or an older order,<sup>27</sup> which privileges the old vs. the new—and, in Greek theology, the chthonic vs. the Olympian order, two opposite yet interconnected spheres of the cosmos (Parker 2011, p. 81). In light of this insight, the significance of the battles come into sharper focus.

<sup>22</sup> Schol. Eur. *Or.* 479; Schol. Aischyl. *Sept.* 291.a; Schol. Aischyl. *Sept.* 381.c.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden (2013, pp. 2–5), for his part, loosely employs ‘*drakōn*’ as synonym with *ophis* and *serpens*, and ultimately does not distinguish ‘snake’, ‘serpent’ or ‘dragon’.

<sup>24</sup> A biological trait of snakes is undoubtedly behind this consideration: their lidless, unblinking eyes, which are protected only by a transparent scale. Either awake or asleep the eyes of the serpents always remain the same, as if in an eternal wakefulness.

<sup>25</sup> Riaño (1999, pp. 179–81).

<sup>26</sup> Pieraccini (2016) briefly reviewed the role of bearded snakes in Etruria and thinks that the beard signifies special underworld powers in that context, especially when in the hands of winged figures or guardians of the Underworld, whereas in ancient Greece the bearded snake would function predominantly in the world of myth, especially representing “monsters that are slain by a hero” (p. 94). While this is broadly true, there are many instances of bearded snakes in Etruscan context outside the realm of death. Likewise, bearded snakes appear in many other situations in Greek visual culture outside the realm of the combat myth, including in funerary contexts, in association with eagles, on fountain houses, or in connection with healing and chthonian deities. Probably, what joins all of these snakes is their fantastic nature and guardian role, and I believe this is where we should look at to fully understand the image of the bearded snake.

<sup>27</sup> On the role of monsters, and in particular, of mixed creatures, as standing in for an older order, see (Aston 2011, pp. 339–44).

Our hero's/god's status transformed essentially after the battle. Apollo took possession of the oracle of Delphi, the most important prophetic site in Greece (*Hom. Hymn 3 Apollo*, ll. 287–300). The Golden Apples of the Hesperides granted Herakles immortality, as is so beautifully rendered on a stamnos of ca. 470 BCE that depicts the hero arriving on Olympus and holding out an apple towards Zeus, his 'passport' to the world of immortals.<sup>28</sup> The Golden Fleece, a metaphor of authority and kingship, functioned as a *palladium* (a protective artefact) linked to the survival of the kingdom of Aiëtes in Kolchis, on the easternmost shore of the Euxine Sea (Val. Flac. *Argon.* 5.228). If it was not for the overpowering Medea, the fleece would have entitled Jason to the throne of Iolkos in Thessaly.<sup>29</sup>

Kadmos, in turn, becomes the *archēgetēs*, the founder of a city, though the most tragic dynasty, the House of Thebes (on Thebes and its origins, see [Vian 1963](#)). For their propitiatory libation before the foundation of the city Thebes, Kadmos and his companions had to fetch water from a spring sacred to Ares protected by a serpent (*drakōn*) (Figure 4).<sup>30</sup> In a motif familiar from several combat myths, the Theban snake can be interpreted as retaining the waters and thus preventing the foundation of the city. The woman depicted on vase paintings of this scene may be understood either as a nymph or the personification of Thebes.<sup>31</sup> The sacred spring stands for the future city of Thebes, whose 'essence' is comprised in the waters. Zeus for his part ascends as the supreme deity and his rule will never be challenged again. The only other attempt to overthrow the Olympian order, the *Gigantomachy*, similarly remained ineffective. Since neither Homer nor Hesiod refer explicitly to this clash with the Giants, however, it is difficult to establish where in the course of mythic events Zeus' battle with Typhon was thought to have taken place.



**Figure 4.** Kadmos and the Serpent (MMA acc. no. 07.286.66); red-figure calyx-krater; attr. to the Spreckels Painter; Attica; ca. 450 BCE. [Image courtesy of the open-access program of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York].

<sup>28</sup> SHM inv. no. Gr-4488 (Athenian red-figure stamnos; BAPD no. 207407; LIMC#20120); [Rodríguez Pérez \(2008, p. 147, figs. 81–82\)](#).

<sup>29</sup> For Jason as the paradigm of a hero who lost his happy ending, see [García Gual \(1981\)](#).

<sup>30</sup> MMA acc. no. 07.286.66 (Athenian red-figure calyx-krater; BAPD no. 207136; LIMC#9882); *supra* n. 10.

<sup>31</sup> NAM inv. no. 1281 (Athenian red-figure lekythos, BAPD no. 2569); MMA acc. no. 1922.139.11 (Athenian red-figure bell-krater, BAPD no. 214545); Louvre inv. no. M12 (Athenian red-figure hydria, BAPD no. 10851).

### 3.3. Destruction and Integration

It is my contention that primeval snakes can never be fully destroyed. While Zeus smote Typhon with thunderbolts and lightning flashes, the giant storm-serpent is cast into Tartaros—according to some accounts below Mount Etna—rather than actually killed.<sup>32</sup> With the monster's danger overcome, it becomes part of the new order, now issuing forth volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and tempests: the 'boisterous winds which blow damply' and those who 'wreak great havoc among men' (Hes. *Theog.* 869, 874). Typhon's newfound meteorological role—though not a blessing like Notus, Boreas and Zephyr—nevertheless is essential for the cycle of life and death. For his part, Kadmos must 'plant' the serpent's teeth in the soil, from which the first inhabitants of Thebes, the so-called 'sown men', are born.<sup>33</sup> Ladon, the snake in the Garden of the Hesperides, enjoyed an illustrious celestial existence after its defeat by Herakles, for it was granted a place in the northern sky as the circumpolar constellation Draco lying between the two Bears.<sup>34</sup> It is important to draw attention to this incorporation of the anguine monsters after their defeat, as they thus become part of the new order established as the outcome of the combat.<sup>35</sup>

The renewed significance of the monstrous snakes, the reason they cannot be entirely destroyed, may perhaps be due to their affiliation with the primeval earth-goddess Gaia. Bearing in mind the often-conflicting accounts of their parentage, the chaos serpents in the combat myths are often considered the direct offspring of Gaia—fathered by Tartaros.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in the battles the serpents represent the chthonic order, everything related to the earth, both good and bad: fertility, regeneration, healing and immortality; as well as chaos, excess, death and destruction. In the clash, it is the task of the hero or god to preserve the good and restrain the bad. The evils of the Earth—volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, cataclysmic floods and scorching draughts, tempestuous hurricanes and thunderous storms—need to be curtailed or controlled, even silenced.<sup>37</sup> They cannot be annihilated. The mythic, even cosmic combats represent the conversion of destructive powers into constructive forces (Wakeman 1973, p. 49). The old order is not removed; the new order is placed atop. A relief from Miletos, now in Delos, visually illustrates this notion, as it depicts Apollo—the founder of the Delphic oracle, seated atop the *omphalos* (lit. 'navel', viz., the centre of the earth), while the Pythian serpent still coils beneath, reluctant to leave.<sup>38</sup> The chaos monster is the source of creative power, stands for a *status quo* which is about to be replaced but which, muted and sublimated, will survive in the new order that emerges after the battle, even if only as a warning for future generations.<sup>39</sup>

One last aspect is worth mentioning: the need for purification and atonement on the part of the god or hero after the event. Apollo, perhaps the brightest of the Olympian gods, had to purify himself for killing the monster and had to go into exile. According to Pausanias,

when Apollo and Artemis had killed Python, they came to Aigialeia to obtain purification. Dread coming upon them at the place now named Fear, they turned

<sup>32</sup> Pind. *Pyth.* 1.28–29; Aesch. *Prom.* 351; Ov. *Ep.* 15.11, *Fast.* 4.491.

<sup>33</sup> Eur. *Phoen.* 818; Sen. *Oed.* 739; Ov. *Met.* 26–138.

<sup>34</sup> Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 2.3; Arat. *Phaen.* 45. Ladon is depicted in this manner on a Graeco-Persian chalcidony *intaglio*, ca. 425–400 BCE, today in the Cabinet des Medailles, Paris (inv. no. 58.1903).

<sup>35</sup> In the Babylonian creation myth, Marduk sliced Tiamat in two, thus creating heaven and earth, the monster's weeping eyes producing the streams of the Euphrates and the Tigris, its tail becoming the Milky Way; *Enuma Elish* 4.136–40 (ed. Lambert 2013).

<sup>36</sup> For Ladon, e.g., see Hes. *Theog.* 333; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.1394–98; Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* 2.6. For Python, e.g., see: Ov. *Met.* 1.434–51; Hyg. *Fab.* 140. For Typhon, e.g., see: Hes. *Theog.* 820–22; Aesch. *Prom.* 353; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.1209–12; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.39.

<sup>37</sup> For this fascinating sonic dimensions of the cosmogonic combats, e.g., see Golsin (2010).

<sup>38</sup> DAM inv. no. 189.

<sup>39</sup> After the Gigantomachy, Themis displayed to dumbfounded Earth, mother of the Giants, the spoils of the Giant destroyed, an awful warning for the future, and hung them up high in the vestibule of Olympus' (Nonn. *Dion.* 710). Typhon, in turn, was buried inside his mother, under Mount Etna, making periodical appearances in the form of volcanic eruptions (Pind. *Pyth.* 1, 15; Aesch. *Prom.* 350).

aside to Karmanor in Krete, and the people of Aigialeia were smitten by a plague. (Paus. 2.7.7)

What Apollo and Artemis experienced is, in the words of [Detienne \(1998, p. 200\)](#), ‘une vision d’effroi ou un signe effrayant comme il en surgit en cas de souillure majeure et des profondeurs de la nuit’.<sup>40</sup> They suffered a *deima* (dread, terror, plague, curse), not unlike Orestes, another murderer.

Kadmos was similarly exiled and had ‘to atone for the slaughter,’ as he ‘served Ares for an eternal year; and the year was then equivalent to eight years of our reckoning’ (Apollod. *Bibl. Epit* 3.4.2). The Roman poet Ovid envisioned the hero, at the end of his life, wondering about the origin of all his misfortunes, crying out,

was that a sacred snake that my spear impaled when on the way from Sidon’s gates I planted in the earth those viper-teeth, those unheard-of seeds?’. (Ov. *Met.* 4.571–74)

Kadmos and his wife Harmonia were immediately afterwards transformed into gentle, harmless snakes themselves.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, according to Philostratos the Younger, Kadmos remained on the acropolis of Thebes in the role of a guardian serpent (*oikouros ophis*) of the city that he had founded.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. A Snake on the Acropolis

From Kadmos’ misfortunes we transition to the ancient autochthonous people *par excellence*: the Athenians, who had a very special holy snake of their own. For, the *oikouros ophis* of Athens lived on the Acropolis. Its role was to protect the precinct of the patron goddess Athena and, by extension, the city of Athens and its inhabitants. The snake first appears in the literary sources when it is said to have disappeared from the city in the *prolegomena* to the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. It is introduced by Herodotus as part of Themistocles’ ruse to convince the Athenians to evacuate the city:

They were anxious to get everything out safely because they wished to obey the oracle, and also not least because of this: the Athenians say that a great snake lives in the sacred precinct guarding the Acropolis. They say this and even put out monthly offerings for it as if it really existed. The monthly offering is a honey-cake. In all the time before this the honey-cake had been consumed, but this time it was untouched. When the priestess interpreted the significance of this, the Athenians were all the more eager to abandon the city since the goddess had deserted the Acropolis. (Hdt. 8.41.2–3)

In some accounts, the sacred snake of the Acropolis was associated with Erichthonios or Erechtheus (the two are not always distinguished).<sup>43</sup> Many modern historians follow the identification of Erichthonios with the serpent of the chryselephantine statue of Athena Parthenos, as supposed by Pausanias (1.24.7).<sup>44</sup> We should, however, understand this interpretation as a 5th-century BCE development connected with the revision or outright invention of Athens’ mythology and history with the construction of the discourse of the Athenians’ supposed autochthony that peaks in Euripides’ *Ion*.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it is precisely in the early 5th century BCE that representations of the birth of Erichthonios from the Earth and his adoption by Athena first make their appearance in the visual arts of Athens. In the black-figure technique the subject appears once on a lekythos by the Emporion Painter

<sup>40</sup> I thank Vasso Zachari for checking this reference for me.

<sup>41</sup> In Eur. *Bacch.* 1330–31 this transformation was the punishment of Dionysos.

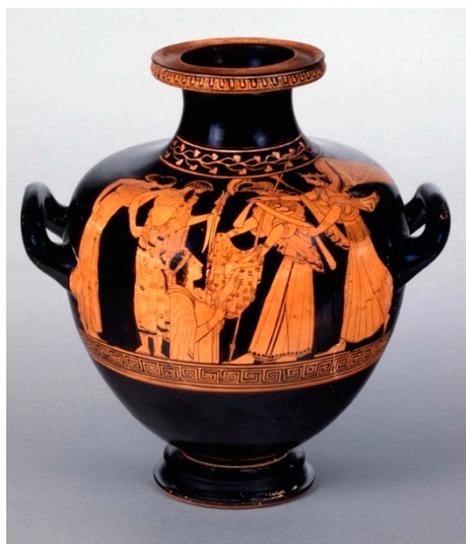
<sup>42</sup> Philostr. *Imag.* 1.18.4; cf. [Ogden \(2013, pp. 49–53\)](#).

<sup>43</sup> For the role of the snake in the Erichthonios myth as well as other Greek infant heroes, see ([Rodríguez Pérez 2010a](#), pp. 293–313); cf. [Küster \(1913, pp. 98–100\)](#).

<sup>44</sup> E.g., [Brulé \(1987, p. 25\)](#); cf. [Ogden \(2013, pp. 264–67\)](#).

<sup>45</sup> On the Athenian discourse of autochthony, see, e.g., [Loraux \(1990, 1993\)](#), [Brulé \(1987\)](#), and [Gourmelen \(2004\)](#). In addition, [Aston \(2011, pp. 91–132\)](#). On the Athenian sacred snake, see lengthier treatment in [Rodríguez Pérez 2010b](#).

found in Sicily.<sup>46</sup> It depicts Gaia emerging from the ground, handing Erichthonios over to Athena while Kekrops and, possibly, Hephaistos, witness the scene. This iconography will be recurrent in the central years of the 5th century, with the most noticeable change being the figure of Athena, who abandons the *promachos* pose to adopt a motherly attitude (Figure 5).<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 5.** The Birth of Erichthonios (BM acc. no. 1837,0609.54); red-figure hydria; attr. to the Oinante Painter; Attica (from Chiusi); ca. 460 BCE. [© The Trustees of the British Museum, image made available through a CC BY-NS-SA 4.0 license].

Besides the scenes of the birth, there are a number of depictions of the later stage where Erichthonios is hidden in a box. He was placed in there by Athena, together with one or two snakes, with the desire to ‘make him immortal’<sup>48</sup> and is entrusted to Kekrops’ daughters to raise him secretly. The vases show the moment when the daughters opened the chest and found either a snake or the baby Erichthonios coiled by snakes and, according to some sources, driven mad by reason of the anger of Athena, they threw themselves down the Acropolis. This story is the *aition* for the rite of the Athenian festival of the Arrhephoras.<sup>49</sup> A good example is a red-figure cup from Vulci signed by Brygos (Figure 6).<sup>50</sup> It shows a large menacing bearded snake chasing Herse and Aglauros on side B—no trace of a human baby Erichthonios is to be seen. Similarly, a red-figure lekythos by the Phiale Painter of slightly later date (ca. 440–430 BCE) shows the empty box from where a snake springs in the presence of Athena and Aglauros, who is fleeing in terror.<sup>51</sup> Ancient sculptors also took up the motif of the snake and the cist. The sculpture of ‘Athena with the cist’ from the Louvre shows Athena in a motherly attitude holding the cist towards her chest. From the cist emerges the snake.<sup>52</sup> It is not clear whether this piece, a 1st- or 2nd- century CE Roman copy of a Greek original, would be copying the Athena Hephaisteia by Alkamenes that was part of the cult group of the Hephaisteion in the Agora of Athens, set up in 421/0

<sup>46</sup> Palermo, Mormino Collection inv. no. 769; BAPD no 270; LIMC#19723.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., SAM inv. no. J345 (Athenian red-figure stamnos; BAPD no. 205571); Louvre inv. no. CA 681 (Athenian red-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 265); SMB inv. no. F5237 (Athenian red-figure cup; BAPD no. 217211); MFA inv. no. 81.70 (Athenian red-figure calyx-krater; BAPD no. 10158).

<sup>48</sup> Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.6.

<sup>49</sup> On this festival, see Mommsen (1898); Harrison (1903, p. 131); Deubner (1932, pp. 9–7); Parke (1977); Burkert (1972, p. 171); Simon (1983, pp. 39–46).

<sup>50</sup> Frankfurt, Liebieghaus inv. no. STV7, BAPD no. 204131.

<sup>51</sup> ASL inv. no. BS404, BAPD no. 376.

<sup>52</sup> Louvre inv. no. MA 847.

BCE (Cic. *Nat. D.* 1. 83), or is a rendition of a later, 4th-century BCE, work in the style of Kephisodotus.



**Figure 6.** Discovery of Erichthonios. Snake and Aglaurids (Frankfurt, Liebieghaus inv. no. STV7); red-figure cup; signed by Brygos; Attica (from Vulci); ca. 460 BCE. [© The author].

The identification of the snake of Athens with Erichthonios crystallises in the chryselephantine sculpture of Athena Parthenos, of which Pausanias (1.24.5–7) says: ‘[ . . . ] at her feet is placed a shield, and near the shield is a serpent. This serpent would be Erichthonios’. But as we advanced before, this is a 5th-century BCE development linked to Athens’ extensive propaganda of autochthony following the Persian Wars. The myth of the earth-born Erichthonios, the Athenian king-to-be risen from the very soil of his polis, was one of the constructions used to ground Athens’ aspirations to autochthony.<sup>53</sup> As a good *gēgenēs*, Erichthonios, as Kekrops before him, had a complex relationship with the snake. Either he himself a snake, a *mixanthropos* (half-snake, half-human), or trusted to snakes to make him immortal, it was only natural that when later authors tried to explain the sacred snake of the Acropolis, it was identified with the autochthonous hero. But the snake of the Acropolis, deeply entangled with the goddess Athena, is of an older ancestry. Sam Wider rightly noted that this animal had ‘nothing to do with Erichthonios’ (Wide 1901, p. 252) and Jane Harrison suspected that this guardian snake was ‘primarily the guardian genius and fate of the city, before that genius or fate emerged to the status of godhead’ (Harrison 1903, p. 305).

This guardian snake, I would contend, has a much richer and deeper history that can be traced back to the Bronze Age. Indeed, I would argue that the figure of Athena derives from the widespread ancient cult of the house snake and the—admittedly controversial—household goddess of the Minoans and Mycenaean.<sup>54</sup> Snakes were—and are (beyond modern urban centres)—common occurrences in houses where they are attracted by the warmth of the hearth. Comparative anthropology offers evidence that the observation of harmless snakes in the house is usually understood as a hierophany (‘sacred manifestation’) and thus prompts a religious response in the inhabitants, which leads them to pet the animal in the belief that it would protect the household (e.g., Egli 1982, pp. 21, 113–18). Whenever Theophrastus’ *Superstitious Character* indeed ‘sees a snake in his house, if it

<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, as Hurwitt (1999, p. 70) rightly emphasises: ‘despite their extensive propaganda of autochthony, historical Athenians were not indigenous or aboriginal after all: they simply forgot (or repressed the memory of) their ancient arrival’.

<sup>54</sup> The supporting evidence for this is, admittedly, scarce and problematic: the study of the Minoan Snake Goddess has been heavily influenced by Arthur Evans’ emphasis on the domestic cult practiced in houses and palaces, and there is much confusion about the identity of the images of the Minoan goddess; it is also not clear to what extent the Mistress of Animals-type goddess can be considered a precursor to Athena, and the differences in religious practices and beliefs of Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece have been emphasised to the detriment of the unity vision of the past; cf. Küster (1913, pp. 28–34); Nilsson (1950); Whittaker (1997).

is a reddish-brown snake, he will invoke Sabazius, and if it is a sacred snake, he will immediately set up a hero-shrine on the spot' (Theophr. *Char.* 16.4–5).<sup>55</sup>

A type of domestic cult with a focus on the hearth purportedly enjoyed great popularity among the Minoans<sup>56</sup> and a related role for the snake can also be proposed for Mycenaean times as the archaeology of the Citadel House complex at the foot of the acropolis of Mycenae seems to suggest (Taylour 1971, pp. 266–68). There is some dispute as to whether the *a-ta-na po-ti-ni-ja* of the Linear B tablets can be matched with the later (Potnia) Athena (Hurwitt 1999, p. 14), but it is suggestive to think of a powerful warrior goddess with a household aspect protecting the king and his palace from the *megaron* of the Mycenaean fortress on the Athenian Acropolis (Nilsson 1950, pp. 498–501). At the end of the Mycenaean era, Athena remained on the Acropolis and became the protective deity of the city, now ruled by aristocrats instead of kings. Two well-known Homeric passages attest to an important shift: if in the past the goddess had an abode in the 'well-built' house of Erechtheus (Hom. *Od.* 7.79–81), the mythical king of Mycenaean times, later on it is the king who would 'dwell in Athens, in her [Athena's] own rich sanctuary' (Hom. *Il.* 2.547–49). In Classical times the sacred snake lived in the old temple of Athena Polias (the *Archaïos Neos*), which sits on the site of that hypothetical palace (Immerwahr 1971, p. 165; Hurwitt 1999, p. 73). Later, it was accommodated in the so-called 'Erechtheion'.

Athena's association with snakes is emphatically expressed in the visual arts and is nicely epitomised by the passage from Herodotus mentioned at the beginning of this section. The disappearance of the snake from the Acropolis is understood as a sign that the goddess had left the city. Perhaps in certain now-lost recollections or ritual ceremonies Athena manifested herself as a snake.<sup>57</sup> She entrusted the baby hero Erichonios with one or two snakes in the hopes of immortalising him. In short, the *oikouros ophis* of the Acropolis is a veritable 'living *palladium*' on which the safety and very existence of Athens depended.<sup>58</sup>

## 5. Snakes on the Threshold

The role of snakes in the ancient Greek world as protector *cum* facilitator not only explains their prominence in the realm of death in the Greek world, but also in other liminal spaces between civilisation and 'otherness', such as fountain houses.<sup>59</sup> They are often depicted on or next to tombs in Attic vase painting, where they should be understood variously as signalling the inviolability of the grave, as alluding to the avengers of an untimely or improper death, or more generally as a convenient marker of the funerary character of the *tumulus* (burial mound).

In this context, the appearance of sinuous snakes as appliques on the handles and bodies of Geometric amphorae is of interest, where they emphasise the artefacts' funerary function (Figure 7).<sup>60</sup> Snakes should not be understood, however, as symbols of the soul of the deceased—as has, e.g., been proposed for the snakes depicted inside the tomb on

<sup>55</sup> The most famous and iconic representations of snakes around house altars and hearths are those from the *lararia* and altars in Pompeii and Herculaneum, which have received a great deal of attention by scholars since the early 20th century AD. Cf. Boyce (1937); Orr (1978); Fröhlich (1991); Foss (1997); Giacobello (2008).

<sup>56</sup> Evans (1935, p. 140) mentioned a number of objects from a private house at Knossos as evidence for such a cult. The material includes what he called 'snake vessels', a 'snake table', and a 'portable hearth'.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison (1899, p. 221) suggested that Athena anthropomorphised *oikouros ophis* (guardian serpent) and *moira* (fate) of her city.

<sup>58</sup> Apollod. *Bibl. Epit.* 3.14.6; Keller (1909, p. 288): 'lebendiges Palladium'.

<sup>59</sup> For examples of snakes as decorative elements of fountain houses in Athenian vase painting, see BM reg. no. 1836.0224.169 (Athenian black-figure hydria; BAPD no. 320163); Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, inv. no. PC 63 (Attic black-figure hydria; BAPD no. 320011); Agora Museum, Athens, inv. no. P2642 (BAPD no. 31131); Archaeological Museum, Florence, inv. no. 94754 (BAPD no. 8099); MGEV inv. no. 417 (BAPD no. 302871); SMB inv. no. F 4027 (BAPD no. 206280).

<sup>60</sup> E.g., MMA obj. no. 10.210.7 (Attic Geometric amphora); CUAM inv. no. 2006.36.T (Boiotian Geometric amphora); MFA acc. no. 92.2736 (Boiotian Geometric oinochoe); WAM acc. no. 48.2231 (Athenian Geometric amphora); for the interpretation that these anguiform appliques designating the soul of the deceased, already see Küster (1913, pp. 35–47); Nilsson (1950, p. 198, pl. 52, Figure 1).

the black-figure loutrophoros by the Sappho Painter decorated with a mourning scene.<sup>61</sup> Despite the incessance in modern scholarship there is simply no evidence for interpreting the snake as a ‘soul animal’ in the Greek world.<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 7.** Funerary vase with martial scenes and snake appliques (MMA acc. no. 10.210.7); neck-amphora, ceramic; Attica; Geometric, ca. 725–700 BCE. [Image courtesy of the open-access program of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York].

Half a dozen Attic black-figure vases (dated ca. 550–450 BCE) depict Achilles’ dragging of Hektor’s body around the city of Troy (Figure 8).<sup>63</sup> They show Patroklos’ funerary *tumulus*, usually painted white, with a snake on or near it, and the *eidōlon*<sup>64</sup> flying around. Eva Grabow (1998, p. 156) puts the snake on these vases in relation to hypothetical real statues that would have been placed next to the tomb, but this interpretation is problematic. While lions and other animals have been attested atop funerary *tumuli*, there is no evidence that the snake was used in this way (Kurtz and Boardman 1971, pp. 79–82). Another hypothesis Grabow notes (Grabow 1998, p. 156) is more likely, though, namely that snakes could have been painted on the protective plaster of the mound or on the plaques that many of these *tumuli* seem to have received. As protector of the sacred space, the serpent would signal the inviolability of the site.

<sup>61</sup> NAM inv. no. CC688 (Athenian black-figure loutrophoros; BAPD no. 480; LIMC #4149); Harrison (1899, p. 219); Haspels (1936, pp. 115, 229 n. 59); Peifer (1989, p. 158, pl. 6, Figure 13, no. 76).

<sup>62</sup> See discussion in (Rodríguez Pérez 2013).

<sup>63</sup> MMA acc. no. 25.70.2 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 390342; LIMC #29345); Haspels (1936, p. 233, no. 15); cf. Louvre inv. no. CA601 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 11079; LIMC #32299); SAM inv. no. 1719 (Athenian black-figure hydria; BAPD no. 302008; LIMC #21483); BM reg. no. 1899,0721.3 (Athenian black-figure amphora; BAPD no. 301780; LIMC #4150); DAM inv. no. B6137.546 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 302338; LIMC #20103); MFA acc. no. 63.473 (Athenian black-figure hydria; BAPD no. 351200; LIMC #311537).

<sup>64</sup> The Greek εἶδωλον (*eidolon*, lit. “image, likeness”) is notoriously difficult to translate, ranging from ‘unsubstantiated form’ via ‘spiritual entity’ and ‘ghost, phantom’ to ‘statue.’



**Figure 8.** Dragging of Hektor's body (MMA acc. no. 25.70.2); black-figure lekythos; attr. to the Diosphos Painter; Attica; ca. 510–490 BCE. [Image courtesy of the open-access program of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York].

The snake at the tomb can also be understood as the zoomorphic Erinys or Fury.<sup>65</sup> For, most plausibly that was the very shape in which the goddess of curses and vengeance was imagined, before Aeschylus set their number at three and defined their physical—anthropomorphic—appearance in the *Oresteia* in 458 BCE (Eum. 49–56, Cho. 1047–50). Vase painters at the time devised the classical image of the chasing women with snakes in their hands and/or around their heads (e.g., BAPD no. 214834). Before that time, it was likely imagined as a snake. A good example of the anguiform Erinys is seen on a now-lost Tyrrhenian black-figured neck amphora of ca. 550 BCE from Orvieto (Figure 9).<sup>66</sup> The subject of the scene had been understood by Hauser (1893, pp. 93–103) as Neoptolemos' sacrifice of Polyxene, but the presence of the snake would then be difficult to explain.<sup>67</sup> The subject is therefore better interpreted as Alkmaion's murder of his mother Eriphyle in revenge for the death of his father Amphiaros in the doomed expedition of the Seven against Thebes, interpretation taken up by Heide Mommsen in the *CVA* (Berlin, Antikensammlung 14, 2013, pp. 54–58).

The bearded snake that springs forcefully from the mound behind Eriphyle, understood as the funerary tumulus, has been interpreted by Harrison (1903, p. 237) and Radermacher (1903, p. 127) as the raging soul of the murdered mother of Amphiaraos crying out for vengeance, establishing an identification between the soul of the dead and the Erinys. Nevertheless, as Iles Johnston (1999, p. 274) has conscientiously analysed, there is no good indication to believe that such identification, i.e., soul of dead and Erinys, existed. Furthermore, as mentioned above, I do not find evidence, either in the iconographical sources or in Greek literature to argue for the representation of the soul of the dead in the shape of a snake (the soul was imagined as a small flying human shape and not as a snake). Therefore, I take this instance as an example of the zoomorphic goddess of curses. To my mind, an angry snake arising from a tomb in the context of a treacherous murder, namely that of a mother at the hands of her son, cannot be anything but an Erinys.

<sup>65</sup> Ogden (2013, pp. 254–58).

<sup>66</sup> SMB inv. no. 4841 (BAPD no. 310022; LIMC #32582). Another example is one of the metopes of Orestes from Foce del Sele (Junge 1983, pp. 15–16). A 4th-century black-glazed *guttus* in the British Museum (reg. no. 1836, 0224.396) shows Orestes at Delphi pursued by an anguiform Erinys.

<sup>67</sup> For the sacrifice of Polyxene, see BM reg. no. 1897,0727.2 (Attic black-figure amphora).



**Figure 9.** Drawing of scene of the murder of Eriphyle and a battle scene from a Tyrrenian black-figure amphora (formerly SMB inv. no. 4841); attr. to the Tyrrenian Group; Attica (from Orvieto); ca. 550 BCE. [Drawing from (Hauser 1893), pl. 1. Image © Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/jdi1893/0262>].

The role of the snake more generally—i.e., not understood as an Erinyes—as a marker of boundaries and a guardian of liminal spaces is nicely rendered on a late 6th-century lekythos by the Cactus Painter from a private collection formerly in Athens (Figure 10).<sup>68</sup> The vase shows a youth running away from a funerary mound from which two menacing bearded snakes arise as if to scare him off as he has come too close. The vase has been linked with Orestes and the Erinyes (Brückner 1891), but it is more likely a popular, generic scene to warn the passers-by not to desecrate tombs. I choose to interpret it in generic terms and not as a representation of an Erinyes as in the previous vase because of the rather different character of the scene and its disconnection with any mythical narratives that could offer the parameters to identify an Erinyes (e.g., treacherous, untimely murder). But I do think that the depiction of snake *qua* Erinyes undoubtedly informed this type of more generic depictions.<sup>69</sup> This interpretation also best fits a Corinthian alabastron depicting a man fleeing from raging snakes, and another lekythos attributed to the same Cactus Painter with a youth pursued by two menacing serpents.<sup>70</sup> The last two scenes do not include the funerary mound, but it is suggestive to think that, in particular in the case of the Athenian lekythos, the actual tomb next to which the lekythos might have been placed would act as a substitute for the painted one. The image would then become a general warning to potential tomb-attackers, a sort of ancient counterpart to the modern white on red ‘no entry’ sign and a perfect reminder of the perils of trespassing.

<sup>68</sup> BAPD no. 14851 (Athenian black-figure lekythos); Haspels (1936, p. 198, no. 5); Grabow (1998), pl. 22 (K104).

<sup>69</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer for prompting me to articulate this assumption more explicitly.

<sup>70</sup> Louvre inv. no. CA1739 (Corinthian black-figure alabastron; BAPD no. 9013950); NAM inv. no. 12.821 (Athenian black-figure lekythos; BAPD no. 370005); Haspels (1936, p. 198, no. 6, pl. 18, Figure 5).



**Figure 10.** Two Bearded Snakes Pursuing Youth; black-figure lekythos; attr. to the Cactus Painter; Athens; ca. 500 BCE. [Image after (Brückner 1891, pl. 4)].

Finally, a remarkable drinking cup signed by Sotades offers a beautiful testimony to the paramount role of snakes at the transitional moments of a human's life (Figure 11).<sup>71</sup> For the delicate white-ground kylix with wishbone handles (ca. 460–450 BCE) offers the only preserved instance of the myth of Glaukos and Polyeidis in ancient art.<sup>72</sup> The cup's interior depicts the two figures inside a tomb (a conical *tumulus* shown in cross-section), at the very moment when the seer Polyeidis strikes a snake (appearing at the bottom of the scene on the rim of the cup) with his spear to prevent it from harming the young Glaukos—evidently crouching, but in the tale very much deceased. A second snake is moving towards the first, its body contorted as if already dead. In the story, the snake revives its mate with a leaf that the seer will later use to restore Glaukos to life. The Sotades cup thus offers a fascinating glimpse into an incomparable moment of revelation in the liminal realm of the tomb that precedes Glaukos' miraculous resurrection with the snake as its main agent. It may be noted that Sophokles composed a play on the myth, to which the Sotades cup may well be a reference.<sup>73</sup>



**Figure 11.** Glaukos and Polyeidis in the Tomb (BM reg. no. 1892,0718.2); white-ground kylix; signed by Sotades; Athens; ca. 460–450 bce. [Image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London].

<sup>71</sup> BM reg. no. 1892,0718.2 (Athenian white-ground kylix; BAPD no. 209459); (Hoffmann 1997, pp. 120–26).

<sup>72</sup> For the myth of Glaukos and Polyeidis, see: Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.3; Hyg. *Fab.* 136.

<sup>73</sup> Soph. *TrGF*<sup>2</sup> 4, frgs. 390–399; Pearson (1917, pp. 56–64).

The motif of the snake and the plant of immortality is old. It goes back to the *Poem of Gilgamesh* and although not common in ancient Greek literary sources, it is attested occasionally.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps we could consider the admittedly esoteric, social anthropological approach to ancient Greek vases of Herbert Hoffmann. In his work on the objects from the Sotades Tomb (so-called for the artist of the cups, not its inhabitant), Hoffmann (1997, p. 126) interprets three cups as representing different stages of the initiation of the soul (separation, transition, reintegration). The interpretation is as much inspired by Turner's (1979) theory of rites of passage as it is by the Dionysian mystery cult. Hoffmann here understands the snake as the guardian of *aletheia*, or mystic knowledge, which will be instrumental for the resurrection of the young Glaukos.

Despite the difficulty posed by the looseness of the associations that Hoffmann draws between the materials that he studies in the book, this idea is nevertheless suggestive and fully in line with our previous observations about the guardian snake. The plant of life, the promise of a quantitative longevity, is a metaphor for mediating the idea of a different life from a *qualitative* point of view. This life awaits those who are brave and patient enough to see and understand, who embrace complexity and change, and those who persevere. Only those who, like our heroes, are able to face the snake and learn this lesson will be rewarded and will lead fuller lives after the encounter.

## 6. Snakes and Divine Healers

On a more immediate level, the belief in the immortality of the snake as expressed in the metaphor of the plant of life lies behind the recurrent association of the animal with medicine and the healing practice. This idea derives from the observation of the actual behaviour of snakes, namely the periodical shedding of their skin, and is further related to biological traits such as the venom of some species, their *pharmakon*.

In the realm of healing, the snake is closely associated with the god Asklepios and thus offers an advantageous case study for assessing the role of mediators granted to some animals in Antiquity. Gilhus (2006, p. 106) proposes four types of associations between the divine and the bestial: (1) animals partaking in the divine; (2) as symbols; (3) attributes of divinities; or (4) instruments, being the attributive mode the most characteristic among ancient Greeks and Romans. The ancient Greek conception of the snake, however, refuses to fall neatly into one category as it rather appears to fall in all four modes. As Gilhus (2006, p. 108) recognises, it can be an attribute, a symbol, an instrument, or a partaker in the divine. This fourfold association of the snake is especially true in the case of Asklepios, but—although there is no leeway here to dwell on this here—equally applies to other deities Zeus Meilichios or Zeus Ktesios.<sup>75</sup>

Literary and visual sources present the snake variously in these four typological modes. In the cultic sphere, it is usually the epiphany of Asklepios, the vehicle through which the god becomes visible. That is how his devotees imagined the deity revealed himself to those who spent the night in his sanctuaries seeking cures for the most varied illnesses. This much can be judged from the *iamata* (the inscribed records of the miracle cures) that they left behind in the sanctuary of Epidauros and the highly popular votive reliefs of the 4th century BCE.<sup>76</sup> It is also as a snake that Asklepios was believed to have spread his cult in Greece and beyond.<sup>77</sup> Sikyon, Epidauros Limera, or more famously Rome in 293 BCE are examples of cities setting up sanctuaries to the god upon his distinguished visit in serpentine form.<sup>78</sup>

Snakes are also instruments of the healing deity Asklepios and his companion Amphiaraos. As embodiments of the *vis medica*, snakes accompany the divine and perform the

<sup>74</sup> Nic. Ther. 340; Ael. Nat. Anim. 6.51; Davies (1987).

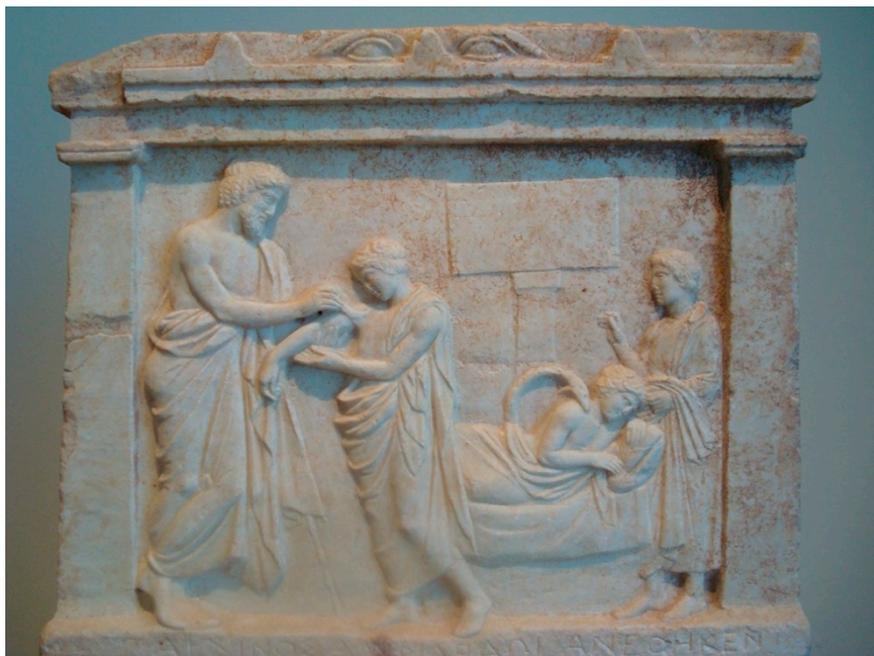
<sup>75</sup> Jannoray (1940), Mitropoulou (1977), Jameson et al. (1993, pp. 81–103), Lalonde (2006); (Rodríguez Pérez 2010a, pp. 429–70; 2011).

<sup>76</sup> E.g., NAM inv. nos. 1338, 1352 and 1407; LiDonnici (1995).

<sup>77</sup> See discussion of the introduction of Asklepios' cult in Athens, including the Telemachos monument and the snake, in Parker (1996, pp. 175–87).

<sup>78</sup> Livy, Per. 9.3; Ov. Met. 15.622–744; Val. Max 1.8.2; Paus. 2.10.2–3, 3.23.7.

actual healing treatment.<sup>79</sup> The Archinos relief from the Amphiareion at Oropos, Attica, masterly combines diverse modes of representation to convey the dedicant's experience (Figure 12).<sup>80</sup> The experience Archinos underwent, to be sure, was a ritual incubation, in which he spent the night in the sanctuary of Amphiaraos—the god then manifested himself in the dreams of the worshipper to foretell the cure.<sup>81</sup> The relief's suggestive imagery is indeed open to interpretation depending on how the presence of the snake and the narrative strategies of the artist are understood. It gravitates between the literal and symbolic modes in its presentation of the epiphanic experience, a strategy common to most votive reliefs (see Platt 2011, pp. 31–50).



**Figure 12.** Archinos relief from the Amphiareion at Oropos (NAM inv. no. 3369); marble; Attica; ca. 400–380 BCE. [Photo by the author].

The scene is inserted in what looks like a pillared colonnade, probably in reference to the stoa-*abaton* (the dormitory of the sanctuary) where the incubation took place. Reading from (the viewer's) left to right, in my mind, the relief portrays three distinct but inter-related moments of Archinos' experience in the *abaton*.<sup>82</sup> On the left, (1) the ontological, epiphanic experience—the oneiric manifestation which for the devotee has *really* taken place, what he sees in his dream, i.e., Amphiaraos himself healed Archinos' shoulder. The importance of this moment is emphasised by the scale of the scene and the depth of the relief. (2) The phenomenological, immediate experience—that which in the physical world actually took place, i.e., a snake has bitten Archinos in his shoulder. This interpretation is reinforced by the data provided by the *iamata*, which record various instances of simultaneous snake-healing and anthropomorphic dream vision.<sup>83</sup> This moment of incubation, in which a 'bestial syringe' of sorts inoculates the healing venom, is tucked between the

<sup>79</sup> *Iamata* 37, 42 (ed. LiDonnici 1995); Ar. *Plut.* 653–748; Paus. 1.34.5; Küster (1913, pp. 107, 121–22); Lupu (2003); Gil (2004, p. 354).

<sup>80</sup> Boardman (1995, p. 132, Figure 142); Lupu (2003, p. 325, Figure 2); Platt (2011, pp. 44–46) (with further lit.), Figure 1.6.

<sup>81</sup> For the oracular incubation ritual, e.g., see Oberhelman (2013); von Ehrenheim (2015).

<sup>82</sup> For the possibility, that the relief might not represent the experience of a single individual but the various ways in which encounters with Amphiaraos, by one or many individuals, might occur, see Platt (2011, p. 46).

<sup>83</sup> E.g., inscriptions A17, B19, B22, C15. Cf. LiDonnici (1995).

two others.<sup>84</sup> And lastly, (3) the erection of the votive relief, the *sēma* (lit. ‘mark, sign’; here commemorative ‘token’) of the successful healing. Here we see the dedicant giving thanks to the god, standing in the same clothing as in the first scene.

This *sēma* is noteworthy, because—if understood as a representation or anticipation of the scene we are looking at—it creates the illusion of an ‘image in the image’. Framed within a pillared colonnade alluding to the architectural setting of the Amphiareion, the illusionary scene thus produces a temporal confusion (perhaps deliberate) between Archinos’ experience, the sculptor’s creation, and our own observation. The confusion of time and space is further enhanced by the *pinax* (painting) in shallow relief at the back of the scene, which at once alludes to the hero-shrine and to the dedication of this very relief stele.<sup>85</sup> Add to this the staring eyes in the middle of the cornice, it introduces us—and the ancient spectator alike—to the dreamlike experience of the incubation and prompts us to *see* and thus to believe. The eyes are often understood as an apotropaic device, but Sineux’ proposal (Sineux 2007, p. 204, n. 57) is much more suggestive, linking the eyes with the vision that Archinos has experienced in the *abaton*. The Epidaurian *iamata* equally emphasise the visual aspect of the experience. In fact, the healing and prophetic practices do not differ greatly in essence, and healing and initiation might be regarded as two sides of a same coin.<sup>86</sup> Like Glaukos, the god’s devotee has seen, he has experienced the *epopteia* (highest level of initiation), and turns towards a better life. Once more, the snake has enabled that process.

## 7. Conclusions

Albeit in a, perhaps, convoluted way—not dissimilar to the very nature of the snake itself—this summary has hopefully served to highlight that the traditional binary categories of good/bad, beneficent/maleficent, and similar dichotomies are insufficient and inadequate to assess the highly polysemic figure of the snake in the ancient Greek world. In fact, to my mind, the common polarisation of the serpent symbol into opposed images (e.g., fertility/death, creation/destruction) applies artificial rational boundaries to a far more complex subject.

It is true that those dualistic contradictions were inherent to the Greek ‘spirit’, always gravitating between two opposing poles, confidence and doubt, order and disorder, which were by nature in conflict, as Pollitt showed in his seminal *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Pollitt 1972). Surely enough, the meaning of the snake moves within opposites, too. If we focus only on the opposing terms which define it, however, we might lose sight of the common nature and similar origin of those seemingly contradictory forces. In my view, a possible way out is to lend more emphasis to the *function* of the snake in the narratives in which it is involved, and this will take us beyond the point of merely listing a set of contradictory meanings. It enables us to look beyond its seemingly chaotic or negative character and go deeper to its roots. Likewise, tilting the discussion towards the function of the animal leads to a better understanding of what the snake ultimately ‘means’.

In the previous pages, I have tried to highlight a function which looks to me ubiquitous in relation with the snake, that of a guardian animal broadly understood. An animal which becomes a facilitator upon interaction with able human or divine agents in moments of transition. Snakes in ancient Greece guard the sacred and its access points, whether trees in misty lands, oracles in the centre of the earth, the acropolis, streams of water, or the plant of immortality. The sacredness that it protects and to which it gives access is one of a chthonic type. All what the snake stands for and the source of its power revolves around primordial

<sup>84</sup> It is not clear to me whether we are before an image of a bearded snake licking Archinos’ shoulder or rather a snake with the mouth full open *biting* him, as first-hand observation of the relief in Athens led me to think.

<sup>85</sup> On the sometimes-puzzling interplay between epiphany, the act of dedication, and the ritual action/response see Platt (2011, p. 39). As she notes, the reflexive reference to the own material presence of the dedication created by the presence of the *pinax* in the relief emphasises the object’s role in transforming the ephemeral experience of divinity into a *permanent, visible memorial of the god’s impact upon the physical world* (p. 45).

<sup>86</sup> While transmitting their cure through biting, snakes convey their prophecies by licking the ears; such as, Melampus, Teiresias, Helenos and Cassandra, or the Arabians from whom Apollonius of Tyana learnt the language of birds (Philostr. *Vit. Apol.* 1.20); Küster (1913, pp. 124–26).

Gaia, the first which came to existence after Chaos in Hesiod's imagery. The earth and the snake are linked at the most fundamental behavioural level: the snake lives on and in the earth, it slithers on the ground and hides in crevices, being in permanent physical contact with it. It is no wonder that the series of symbolic associations at work for the earth were also transferred to the snake. But falling completely within the chthonic realm, with what is old and immobile, the snake is also a bridge forward. While embodying all the contradictions of the chthonic beings, the snake also facilitates a way out: even when slain in combat, it contributes to the new world order.

The snake is also involved with a number of deities, functioning variously as an attribute or a theophany but, to my mind, it does not in itself symbolise any one god. That is to say, particular divine spheres of influence were conveyed by means of figurative analogies in the shape of a snake, such as in the case of Athena or Asklepios. The animal helps root and ground the divinity and it completes the divine profile in a way that an anthropomorphic figure alone cannot. But this does not come without tension.

The snake belongs to a different and older *status quo*, the pre-Olympian order, and mediates a sacredness that concerns life in its crudest aspect, the power to create and to destroy, a transformative power usually aligned to the feminine side of things. I believe that ancient Greeks perceived the existence of a special primordial force living within, emanating from or signified by the snake—a vital force, brutal, wild and raw, which in excess produces monsters and events such as those narrated in the *Oresteia*. The snake is a force that must be tamed, refined, and assimilated but never annihilated. The snake is the irrational excess that must be put down and controlled; it is pure life, with all its confounding paradoxes and beautiful complexities.

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## Abbreviations

ASL	Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, Basel.
BAPD	Beazley Archive Pottery Database; avail online: <a href="http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/default.asp">http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/default.asp</a> .
BM	The British Museum, London.
CdM	Cabinet des Medailles, Paris.
CUAM	Colorado University Art Museum, Boulder.
CVA	Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum.
DAM	Delos Archaeological Museum, Delos.

Getty	J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
KAM	Krannert Art Museum, Champaign-Urbana.
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> .
Louvre	Musée du Louvre, Paris.
MAN	Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.
MCA	Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna.
MFA	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
MFAR	Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.
MGEV	Museo Gregoriano Etrusco Vaticano.
MMA	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
NAM	National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
SAM	Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.
SHM	State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
SMB	Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
WAM	The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

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