Les Études classiques 83 (2015), p. 193-210.

KATÁBASIS AND THE SERPENT *

In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, as Dionysus is preparing to make his *katábasis*, Heracles explains to him what he can expect to encounter as he descends to and then penetrates the Underworld. After Charon and his boat, he tells him: "After this you will see snakes and most terrible beasts in myriads [1]." A hundred of these snakes at any rate can be accounted for in the form of the "hundred-headed Echidna", the "Viper", which, the Underworld warden and keeper of Cerberus, Aeacus, subsequently tells Heracles, will tear at his innards, in punishment for his former theft of the dog [2]. In Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche, Psyche is directed by Venus to the banks of the Styx : "Lo! On the right bank and the left cruel serpents, their necks rampant, crawled forth from the holes in the crags, their eyes devoted to an unblinking vigil, their pupils undertaking a perpetual night-watch [3]." That the waters of the Styx should have been serpent-infested is implied also by a rare illustration of the Styx in humanoid form as she fights amongst the other gods in the north frieze of the Pergamene Gigantomachy: here she carries a hydria of her water around which a serpent coils [4]. What are all these snakes doing in the Underworld?

Broader affinities between serpents and the Underworld

A general explanation of their presence may be found in the fact that serpents were regarded (with some reason) as living in the earth and as being of the earth. The relationship between the serpent and the earth was celebrated most vigorously in the tales of the great δράκοντες or dragons of myth, most of whom had lived in deep caves, which are to be understood as appropriately up-scaled snake-holes. The Echidna herself, the great progen-

*It is a pleasure to be writing on *katábasis* in Exeter, where R. J. Clark, later of the Memorial University of Newfoundland, penned his most valuable book on the subject (1979).

1. Ar., *Frogs*, 142-143.
2. Ar., *Frogs*, 473.
3. Apul., *Met*., 6, 14.
4. *LIMC s.v.* Styx 7 (where, however, the image is labeled "uncertain"); F. VIAN, Mary B. MOORE (1988), p. 267-268.

itrix of other dragons, Hesiod tells us, was borne by Ceto in a cave and in due course came to live in one of her own, perhaps the same one, "under a hollow rock" at the mysterious Arima. Ladon, the serpent of the Hesperides, is known principally for hanging in his tree the better to guard his golden apples, but the earliest literary reference to him comes again in Hesiod, who speaks of him guarding his golden apples "in his lair in the dark earth". Python is found rampant before his cave-home on a pot of *ca.* 475-450 BCE (surviving now only in drawing). Ovid's Serpent of Ares lived in the cave that housed the spring of Dirce it guarded [5].

Indeed, serpents and dragons were regarded as being born of the earth. When interpreting an omen, Herodotus' Telmessians were to declare, "the snake (ὄφις) to be the child of the earth", whilst centuries later Artemidorus was to observe that "the δράκων itself is of the earth and makes its life within it" [6]. The great δράκοντες of myth were often projected as the children of Earth. Earth is given as mother to, amongst other great serpents: Ladon [7], Python [8], the Serpent of Ares [9], the Serpent of Nemea [10], and the pet δράκων that Heracles deployed against the Nemean Lion [11].

The great dragon Typhon's relationship with (the) Earth is celebrated in many ways. He is a vigorous user of caves. In the Eumelian *Titanomachy* it appears that he lurked in a pit. The Typhon of Pindar was reared in the "much named" Cilician cave. The Typhon of Apollodorus and Nonnus used the Corycian Cave in Cilicia and perhaps a number of other caves too as places of concealment, alongside the δράκαινα Delphyne. According to Solinus, the Corycian cave was actually Typhon's home [12]. Earth herself is already Typhon's mother in Hesiod, whilst Tartarus, "Hell", the deepest place within the earth, is his father [13]. Nonnus has a strikingly incestuous vignette of Typhon taking a rest: he lays himself out across his mother Earth, and she opens up her yawning cave-lairs for his viper-heads to glide

5. Ceto and Echidna: Hes., *Th.*, 295-305. Ladon: Hes., *Th.,* 333-336. Python: *LIMC s.v.* Apollon, no. 993 = *s.v.* Leto, no. 29a = *s.v.* Python, no. 3 (*ca*. 475-50 BCE). Serpent of Ares: Ov., *Met*., 3, 28-38.

6. Hdt., 1, 78, 3; Art., *Oneir.*, 2, 13.

7. Pisander of Camirus, *FGrH* 16 F 8; Ap. Rhod., *Arg.*, 4, 1398. Earth also sent up the apples he famously guards: Pherec., F16-17 Fowler.

8. Pind., fr. 55 S.-M.; Eur., *I. T.*, 1247; Ov., *Met*., 1, 438-40; Hyg., *Fab.*, 140; Isid. Sev., *Etym*., 8, 11, 54.

9. Eur., *Phoen.*, 931.

10. Stat., *Theb.*, 5, 505.

11. Phot., *Bibl*., cod. 190, 147b22-148.

12. Fragment of the Eumelian *Titanomachy* at schol. Opp. *Hal*., 3, 16 (if genuine); Pind., *Pyth.*, I, 17; Apoll., *Bibl.*, 1, 6, 3; Nonn., *Dion.*, I, 145-153, 163, 409-426; Solin., 38, 7-8.

13. Hes., *Th.,* 820-822.

into [14]. And just as Typhon emanates from the earth, so Zeus returns him to it: Hesiod and Pindar tell that Zeus hurled Typhon back into Tartarus, the latter being the first to locate the defeated Typhon beneath Etna [15]. Manilius makes the nice point that Zeus drove Typhon back into his mother's womb with his thunderbolts [16]. If he were able to tear himself up from his grave, tells Ovid, he would leave a broad gape through which daylight would flood in and terrify the shades of the dead [17].

The Greeks' heroes were powerful dead men housed, normally, in the earth, though they yet lived on and on occasion returned to the world of the living and interacted with it. It is not surprising, therefore, that they should often have been held to adopt the form of serpents [18]. A few examples suffice. First, on a Tyrrhenian amphora of *ca*. 575-550 BCE a gigantic bearded serpent rises from the barrow of Amphiaraus and over the dead body of Eriphyle to threaten her son and murderer Alcmaeon with bared fangs, as he departs in a chariot [19]. Secondly, a serpent frequently appears in Greek hero-reliefs, where it serves as the symbol or the avatar of the hero. In the earliest variety of these reliefs, the hero or heroine is depicted as feeding the serpent from a κάνθαρος, in what must be considered a form of auto-libation [20]. The very first example, a relief of *ca.* 540 BCE from Laconian Chrysapha, is also the finest: worshippers bear offerings to a gigantic hero and heroine enthroned together, whilst a commensurately gigantic, bearded and carefully detailed serpent coils from underneath the throne, up over its back and around its top. The serpent is presumably heading for a drink from the large κάνθαρος the hero holds [21]. Thirdly, in Attica, heroes who had an even more particular affinity with the earth and who came to embody the soil of their native land for the Athenians could manifest themselves either as anguipedes or as pure serpents. So it was with Cecrops, the first king of Attica, born of the earth, and often represented as an anguipede from the time of his

14. Nonn., *Dion.*, 2, 237-243.

15. Hes., *Th.*, 868; Pind., *Pyth.*, I, 15-28.

16. Manil., 2, 876-880.

17. Ov., *Met*., 5, 346-358.

18. Cf. Jane HARRISON (1899); ID., (1912), p. 290-291; ID., (1922), p. 232-239, 325-331; E. KÜSTER (1913), p. 62-72; Elpis MITROPOULOU (1977), p. 15-18; D. OGDEN (2013), p. 247-270.

19. *LIMC s.v.* Erinys, no. 84 = *s.v.* Alkmaion, no. 3 (where illustrated) = E. GRABOW (1998), K103.

20. Partial lists and discussions of the relevant items at Elpis MITROPOULOU (1977), p. 52-54, 63-66, 82-87; Gina SALAPATA (1993); EAD. (1997); EAD. (2006, with further lists noted at p. 541, n. 1); W. SCHULLER (2004).

21. Berlin Pergamon Museum, no. 731 = Jane HARRISON (1912, p. 309, fig. 88) = Elpis MITROPOULOU (1977, p. 85 [9]) = *ThesCRA* (3, d, no. 100) = Gina SALAPATA (2006, fig. 3, with discussion at p. 542-547).

first emergence at the beginning of the fifth century BCE [22]. And so it was with his partial doublet Erichthonius, sired when Hephaestus' seed fell upon the ground as he pursued Athene unsuccessfully. Erichthonius was sometimes represented as a humanoid baby, but at other times as a serpent or, from the second century AD, an anguipede [23]. Fourthly, Diogenes Laertius, citing second- and first-century BCE sources, tells how Heraclides of Pontus aspired to be believed to have joined the gods after his death, and so ordered those loyal to him to replace his corpse surreptitiously with his pet δράκων as he was being carried out to burial. The serpent then obligingly crawled out before the assembled mourners [24]. And fifthly, Artemidorus ends his list of the things that snakes can symbolise in dreams with "heroes" and elsewhere tells that to dream of men turning into δράκοντες signifies heroes, whilst to dream of women turning into δράκοντες signifies heroines [25].

Serpents as guards in the Underworld

To return to the generality of serpents found inhabiting the Underworld, they appear, most immediately, to serve as guards, keeping the ghosts in the Underworld, where they should be, but also keeping there the living foolish enough to enter it. This would be the natural role of Apuleius' serpents of the Styx, whose vigilance is so emphatically expressed. Accordingly, in the lost tragedy *Pirithous* variously ascribed to Critias and Euripides, Pirithous was bound to a rock seat where he was guarded by "the gapes of δράκοντες" [26]. In an Underworld scene of *ca*. 325-300 BCE on a vase from Cerveteri Orpheus sits to play his lyre framed by the mirroring figures of an Erinys and the sharp-faced Etruscan death-demon Charun (a reflex of Charon), both of whom menace him with large snakes that wind around

22. Cecrops' autochthony: e.g. Hermippus of Smyrna, F82 Wehrli = *FGrH* 1026 F3 (γηγενής); Apoll., *Bibl*., 3, 14 (αὐτόχθων). Cecrops as an anguipede: see *LIMC s.v.* Kekrops, *passim*. For discussion see, above all, L. GOURMELEN (2004), esp. p. 123-124.

23. The most important narratives of Erichthonius' birth are those of Amelesagoras *FGrH* 330 F1 = Antig. Caryst., *Mirab.*, 12 and Apoll., *Bibl.,* 3, 14, 6; B. E. POWELL (1906). For Ericthonius' iconography see *LIMC s.v.* Erechtheus. For discussions see: B. E. POWELL (1906, with a convenient repertorium of sources at p. 56-86); P. BRULÉ (1987), p. 13-79; L. GOURMELEN (2004), esp. p. 329-340; Christiane SOURVINOU-INWOOD (2011), p. 24-134.

24. Diog. Laert., V, 89-90 = Her. Pont., F16 Wehrli, incorporating fragments of Demetrius of Magnesia (1st BCE) and Hippobotus (*ca*. 200 BCE).

25. Artem., *Oneir.*, II, 13 (list), IV, 79 (heroes and heroines).

26. Critias, *Pirithous*, hypothesis at *TrGF* I, 171.

their upraised arms. They are determined, it seems, that he should not leave [27].

Guarding was an appropriate job for a serpent, especially supernatural ones, as is clear from their guarding roles elsewhere in the Greek imaginaire. Late antique scholars etymologised the word δράκων with reference to δέρκομαι (aorist participle: δρακών), thereby making the δράκων a "starer" in origin and by definition. Festus accordingly explained that serpents were great guardians of things, including treasure, because constantly watchful and awake, whilst Macrobius told that the serpent "was continuously watchful like the sun, which was why they were entrusted with the guarding of inner sancta (ἄδυτα), oracles and treasuries" [28]. The sacred snake of the Athenian acropolis boasted the epithet "house-watcher" (οἰκ-ουρὸς ὄφις), whilst Ladon, the Serpent of the Hesperides, rejoiced in the poetic epithets φρ-ουρὸς ὄφις ("fore-watcher") and κηπ-ουρός ("garden-watcher") [29]. In their canonical representations, Ladon and the Colchis δράκων resemble each other strongly in that they are both seen to hang in a tree to guard a golden treasure that is also lodged in the branches. But ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ: in the great δράκων-fight narratives of myth the δράκων is often cast as a guardian of a spring (a spring which of course itself emanates from the earth). In Euripides' *Phoenissae* of 409 BCE Tiresias describes the Serpent of Ares as "overseer to the spring of Dirce", whilst the Chorus observes, "There was the guardian, the bloody, savage-minded δράκων of Ares, watching over the flowing, fertile waters, its glancing pupils roaming in all directions" [30]. Hyginus eventually tells us that the Serpent of Nemea was guardian (*custos*) to the spring of Langia; the closely associated phrases of a discontinuous fragment of Euripides' *Hypsipyle* of *ca.* 410-407 BCE indicate that the poet had already told us the same: "[…] a fountain is shaded […] a δράκων living nearby to it […] with fierce gaze […] shaking

27. *LIMC s.v.* Charu(n), no. 101 = *s.v.* Erinys, no. 18; cf. also *LIMC s.v.* Charu(n), no. 10 (2nd BCE).

28. With δράκων, δράκοντος, compare δέρκομαι's zero-grade aorist participle δρακών, δρακόντος, though note the difference in accentuation. Ancient scholars on the etymology: Festus, *De verb. signif.*, 67 M, 110 M; Porph., *De abst.*, 3, 8; Macrob., *Saturn.*, I, 20, 1-4; schol. Ar., *Wealth*, 733; *Etym. Gud.*, *Etym. Parv., Etym. Magn. s.v.* δράκων. The etymology is approved by, *inter alios*, P. CHANTRAINE (2009, *s.v.* δέρκομαι) and R. BEEKES (2010, *s.v.* Δράκων); H. FRISK (1960-1972, *s.v.* δράκων) is sceptical.

29. Ar., *Lys.*, 758-759; Ap. Rhod., *Arg*., 1434; Euphorion, F148 Lightfoot.

30. Eur., *Phoen*., 658-661 (δράκων, φύλαξ, ἐπισκοπῶν), 932 (Δίρκης ναμάτων ἐπίσκοπος), with schol. *ad* 657; cf. [Plutarch], *On Rivers*, II, 1 (τὸν κρηνοφύλακα δράκοντα). For images of the Serpent of Ares with its spring, see *LIMC s.v.* Kadmos I, nos. 13, 15, 17, 19-25.

its crest, fear of which […] shepherds when quietly in […] to do […] to a woman everything happens […] has come […] not […] a guard" [31].

If serpents were fabled for their guarding ability, so too, of course, were dogs, and we often find the two associated in this guarding role in the Underworld. In the *Frogs* again Aeacus exultantly declares to Heracles that he is securely confined:

> […] but now you are gripped about the middle. Such are the things that hold you under guard: the black-hearted rock of the Styx and the crag of the Acheron, dripping with blood, the dogs of the Cocytus that course in circles, the hundred-headed Echidna, that will tear at your innards […] [32].

When Horace's witches Canidia and Sagana dig a trough in the erstwhile cemetery on the Esquiline in order to call up ghosts through it, "serpents and Underworld dogs" are to be seen wandering about. It is unclear from the allusive context whether these are espied down below as Priapus peers through the hole (as Lucian's Eucrates does in the case of the hole created by Hecate, discussed below), or whether we are to imagine that the creatures have emerged – presumably up through the hole – to wander about in the surface world [33].

The ultimate Underworld guard, warder of the ghosts, was of course the dog Cerberus [34]. Interestingly, in view of the associations between Underworld serpents and Underworld dogs, Cerberus too had a serpentine element from the beginning of his iconographic tradition, *ca.* 590 BCE [35]. On the tondo of a Laconian cup of *ca.* 560-550 BCE we find a Cerberus with three rows of serpents sprouting up and down along the length of his body, whilst others fringe his heads, and grow from the top of his heads too; his tail too consists, Chimaera-like, of a snake, in a motif that was to prove particularly successful in his subsequent tradition [36]. The Caeretan Eurystheus vase of 530-520 BCE gives Cerberus a row of tiny snakes coiling the length of his heads, necks and front paws [37]. A series of vases of *ca*. 510-480 BCE show a serpentless Cerberus emerging from the palace of Hades to meet Heracles

31. Hyg., *Fab.*, 74; Eur., *Hyps*., F754a *TrGF* = F18 Bond; cf. also Tiiia *TrGF.* For illustrations of the serpent with its spring, see *LIMC s.v.* Archemoros, no. 8 = *s.v.* Hypsipyle, no. 3 = *s.v.* Nemea , no. 14 = *s.v.* Septem, no. 13.

32. Ar., *Frogs*, 469-473.

33. Hor., *Sat.,* 1, 8, 34-35.

34. For Cerberus in general see: C. ROBERT (1920-1926, II, p. 483-488), S. EITREM (1921), N. ROBERTSON (1980), Valerie SMALLWOOD (1990).

35. *LIMC s.v.* Herakles, no. 2553 (*ca*. 590-580 BCE).

36. *LIMC s.v.* Herakles, no. 2605 = Maria PIPILI (1987, fig. 8). For the serpent-tail see also *LIMC s.v.* Herakles, no. 2554, 2560, 2571, 2579, 2588, 2595, 2600, 2603, 2604 (*ca*. 530-25 BCE), 2605, 2614, 2628.

37. *LIMC s.v.* Herakles, no. 2616.

accompanied by a separate large serpent [38]. Hecataeus, active during the Ionian Revolt of 500-494 BCE, rationalised Cerberus into a giant venomous serpent (ὄφις, δράκων) reared at Tainaron [39]. The notion that Cerberus had an anguiform nature is integral to the myth that made him the creator of the poisonous aconite, when he slavered or vomited in terror over the formerly harmless local flora upon being dragged into the daylight for the first time by Heracles at the site of the future Heraclea Pontica [40].

Hesiod gives a clear statement of Cerberus' role in containing the ghosts inside the Underworld: "He fawns and wags his tail and waggles both ears at those who are coming in, but he does not allow them to come out again, rather he keeps watch and he eats whomever he catches going outside the gates of strong Hades and dread Persephone". Similarly, Seneca's Cerberus is possessed of ears so keen that he can even hear the silent ghosts as they try to flee. And Quintus Smyrnaeus' Cerberus is said to pen back the crowd of the dead in the murky pit [41]. Virgil's *Aeneid*, anomalously within the tradition, gives us a Cerberus who guards the Underworld against intrusion from without. As Aeneas and the Sibyl pass before his cave on their way into Underworld, the Sibyl feeds Cerberus a pellet made of honey and drugged meal. The principal explanation of for this oddity is again to be found in Cerberus' δράκων nature, for the scene-type in which a wise woman drugs a fierce bestial guard is derived not from Cerberus' own repertoire, but from those of other δράκοντες: it derives principally from Medea's drugging of the Dragon of Colchis so that Aeneas can steal the golden fleece it guards, and also from a less well-known tradition, reconstructable from vase images and from a passing reference by Virgil himself elsewhere in the *Aeneid*, that the Hesperides had drugged their dragon, Ladon, so that Heracles could steal his golden apples [42]. The contrarian nature of Virgil's words here is misunderstood by F. Graf and

38. *LIMC s.v.* Herakles, no. 2562, 2563, 2565.

39. Hecat., *FGrH* 1 F27 *apud* Paus., 3, 25; cf. also schol. Hes., *Th.*, 311: "Some said that Cerberus was a δράκων, others a dog". After Hecataeus, a partially serpentine Cerberus is given by: Euphorion, F51 Powell = 71 Lightfoot; Verg., *Georg.*, IV, 483 and *Aen.*, 6, 417-425; Hor., *Od*., II, 13, 33-35; II, 19, 29-32; III, 11, 15-20; Sen., *Herc. fur.*, 782-829; Lucan, VI, 664-665; Apoll., *Bibl*., II, 5, 12.

40. Xen., *Anab.,* 6, 2, 2; Thphr., *HP*, 9, 16, 4-7 (cf. Strab. C543, Arrian, *FGrH* 156 F76a); Herodotus of Heraclea, *FGrH* 31 F31; Euphorion, *Xenios*, F37 Powell = 41a Lightfoot; Nic., *Alex.*, 13-15 (with schol. 13b); Diod. Sic., 14, 31, 3; Ov., *Met.*, VII, 404-419; Pomp. Mel., I, 92; Sen., *Ag.*, 859-860; *Herc. fur.*, 46-62, 807-29l; Dion. Per., 787-792 (with schol. and Eustathius *ad loc.*); First Vatican Mythographer, I, 57.

41. Hes., *Th.,* 767-774, recycled at Tzetzes on Lycophr., *Alex.*, 699; Sen., *Herc. fur.*, 782-829; Quint. Smyr., VI, 261-268. Cf. also Eur., *Alc.*, 360-362 and Soph. *OC*, 1568-1573.

42. Virg., *Aen.*, VI, 417-425.

Sarah Iles Johnston, who take the defence of the Underworld from intrusion from outside to have been Cerberus' primary function [43]. (If one accepts the contention of Stamatia Dova in this volume that Heracles' battle against Geryon should be seen as a metaphorical *katábasis*, with his cattle serving as metaphorical souls, then we must salute Geryon's dog, killed by Heracles in the fight, as a metaphorical guardian of souls in turn. He is none other than Cerberus' brother Orth(r)us; as the lesser brother he usually sports just two dog-heads in his iconographic tradition, whilst his serpentine element is confined to his Chimaera-like tail) [44].

It is possible that the earliest serpentine guard of the Underworld is to be found at the end of the *Odyssey*'s *Nékyia*. Here Odysseus finally abandons his consultation of the ghosts, which has mutated in mid course into a *katábasis* as he wanders around within the Underworld to see its notable sights, when he is overtaken by a sudden fear: "The pallor-inducing fear began to seize me, that dread Persephone might send for me a head of a Gorgon, a terrible monster, up out of Hades" [45]. In some ways these lines are mystifying, but context at least demands that the arrival of the Gorgon-head would kill, or effectively kill, Odysseus and therefore retain him in Hades forever, for all that, as the expression indicates, he is currently on the living-side of its threshold. In this way, the Gorgon-head might be construed as performing a function closely akin to that of guarding Hades, and ensuring that none escape from it. So far so good, though there might be a slight uncertainty here as to whether, for the author of these lines, the Gorgon-head was already a snaky one. The detached Gorgon-heads of the artistic record, found from *ca*. 675 BCE, only turn their hair to snakes by the end of the seventh century, which is a little late for the *Odyssey* [46]. However, one of the two earliest representations of full-bodied Gorgons, a Proto-Attic amphora of *ca*. 675-650 BCE, gives its curiously wasp-bodied Gorgons front-facing cauldron-like heads, seemingly inspired by γοργόνεια, and from these we find snake-heads already sprouting. The date of this vase better suits later estimates for the poem's effective date of composition, but,

43. F. GRAF, Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2007), p. 112.

44. For Orthus, see Hes., *Th*., 287-294, 306-309, 326-327; Stes., S7-87 *SLG* / Campbell (with Page [1973]); Pind., *Isth.*, I, 13-15, with schol.; Palaeph., 39; Apoll., *Bibl.*, 2, 5, 10; Quint. Smyr., VI, 252-254; Serv. on Virg., *Aen*., VII, 662; VIII, 300; schol. Plat., *Tim.*, 24e. For images of him with snake tail see *LIMC s.v.* Orthros I, *s.v.* Geryoneus, no. 8, 16.

45. Hom., *Od*., XI, 633-635.

46. *LIMC s.v.* Gorgo, no. 1-79. For γοργόνειον and Gorgon iconography in general see, *inter multos alios*, A. FURTWÄNGLER (1886-1890), Ingrid KRAUSKOPF, S.-C. DAHLINGER (1988, esp. p. 316-319 for the earliest material), M. H. JAMESON (1990), D. OGDEN (2008), p. 24-66.

more the point, leaves open the possibility that full-bodied Gorgons and γοργόνεια alike might have been imagined – optionally – to incorporate serpents from the point of their genesis [47].

Serpents as tormentors in the Underworld

Also, as Aeacus implies of the Echidna, Underworld serpents participate more actively in the punishment of the wicked. We find another example in the case of Ixion, one of the *grands criminels* subject to eternal punishment in the Underworld (he falsely boasted that he had slept with Hera). Canonically, he was punished by being tied to a fiery wheel [48]. The First Vatican Mythographer, writing as late, alas, as the ninth to the eleventh centuries AD, offers a garbled account of his punishment, one clearly influenced by the more famous punishment of Sisiphus, but the account contains an interesting detail: "He was condemned ever to roll a wheel entwined with serpents up a mountain in the Underworld" [49]. One might dismiss the reference to snakes as a late fantasy, were it not for the fact that the "Ixion vase" of *ca*. 330-310 BCE shows Ixion bound to the spokes and the rim of fiery wheel by snakes; furthermore, the tongues of flame that lick at Ixion from around the wheel are clearly drawn in such a way as to resemble snake-heads. Here the snakes seem to be concerned with guarding and punishing alike [50].

In their role as tormentors, the serpents align nicely with two related semi-anguiform, Underworld-based entities, Hecate and the Erinyes. The earliest identifiable image of Hecate, which is also the earliest identifiable image of the Erinyes, is an eloquent one. It appears on a black-figure lekythos of *ca*. 470 BCE. Here, in what is evidently an Underworld scene, Hecate consists of a pair of dog-heads in front, a maiden in the middle and a massive coiling serpent in the rear (the overall configuration is similar to Scylla's canonical form). Her dogs are devouring a tiny dead man, soul or

47. *LIMC s.v.* Perseus, no. 151.

48. The Ixion myth: Pind., *Pyth*., II, 21 (with schol.); Diod. Sic., IV, 769; Apoll., *Epit.*, I, 20; Hyg., *Fab.*, 62; Serv. on Virg., *Aen.*, VI, 286; Lact. Plac. on Stat., *Theb*., IV, 539; schol. Eur., *Phoen.*, 1185 (NB for the fire); schol. Hom. *Od.*, XXI, 303; schol. Ap. Rhod., *Arg.*, III, 62.

49. First Vatican Mythographer, I, 14.

50. *LIMC s.v.* Ixion, no. 15 (*ca*. 330-310 BCE); cf. no. 18. See Erika SIMON (1955), Catherine LOCHIN (1990).

ghost between them, each pulling on an arm [51]. She can find the same form still at the other end of antiquity, in Lucian's late second-century AD *Philopseudes*. Here Eucrates tells how he encountered Hecate one day in the woods:

> I saw a fearsome woman approaching me, almost half a stadium's length high […] Below the waist she had a snake-foot; above it she resembled a Gorgon, so far as concerns the look in her eyes and her terrible appearance, I mean. Instead of hair, writhing snakes fell down in curls around her neck, and some of them coiled over her shoulders.

He goes on to explain that the goddess' dogs, by whose barking her arrival was anticipated, were "taller than Indian elephants […] similarly black and shaggy, with dirty, matted hair". Eucrates was able to avert the visitation with a magic ring. As he activated it, "Hecate stamped on the ground with her snake-foot and created a huge chasm, as deep as Tartarus. Presently, she jumped into it and was gone". Eucrates was then able to peer into the Underworld before the chasm closed behind her [52]. In this form of Hecate we note again the emphatic bond between serpents and dogs in the context of the Underworld.

For both Aeschylus and Euripides, the Underworld-dwelling Erinyes are strongly serpent-associated or are indeed are actually she-serpents in themselves [53]. As to the latter, Aeschylus applies the word δράκαινα, "she-serpent", directly to them [54]. Euripides applies the phrase "she-serpent of Hades" (Ἅιδου δράκαινα) to an individual Erinys that is also said to possess plural mouths of terrible vipers (ἔχιδναι) that breathe both fire and murder-blood [55]; Euripides also describes them as a group as δρακοντώδεις κόραι, "serpent-like maidens" [56]. In art the Erinyes are typically depicted as maidens running in pursuit, winged, with a serpent at each hand (gripped in it or coiling around the forearm), or coiling around their head, or both [57]. On

51. *LIMC s.v.* Erinys, no. 7 = *s.v.* Hekate, no. 95. For early literary references to Hecate in anguiform aspect see Ar., F515 K-A ("Hecate of the earth rolling coils of snakes") and Soph. F535 *TrGF* ("garlanded with oak and the twisted coils of savage δράκοντες"). For Hecate in general see J. HECKENBACH (1912), M. F. NOUVEAU-PIOBB (1961), Deborah BOEDEKER (1983), Haiganuch SARIAN (1992), T. LAUTWEIN (2009).

52. Luc., *Philops.*, 22, 24, with discussion at D. OGDEN (2007), p. 161-170.

53. On the Erinyes in general see Jane HARRISON (1899) and (1922, p. 213-256); Elpis MITROPOULOU (1977), p. 43-44; M. JUNGE (1983); Haiganuch SARIAN (1986); A. HENRICHS (1994); H. LLOYD-JONES (1990); Maria Lucia SANCASSANO (1997), p. 159-186. The Erinyes' connection with the Underworld: Hom., *Il.*, XIX, 259-260; cf. Aesch., *Eum.*, 264-268.

54. Aesch., *Eum.*, 128.

55. Eur., *I. T.*, 285-290.

56. Eur., *Or.*, 256.

57. See *LIMC s.v.* Erinys, *passim*.

the second image of the Erinyes to survive, another Attic lekythos, this one dated to *ca.* 460-50 BCE, an elegant winged Erinys runs, holding her serpent-entwined arms out in front of her, with a third serpent coiling around her head. The vase's legend has been read as ἔσθετον and construed as a dual imperative addressed by the humanoid maiden to the pair of serpents she holds out before her, "Devour!" [58]. And, like Hecate, the Erinyes too have canine affinities alongside their serpentine ones: Aeschylus calls them "dogs like Hecate" and Euripides calls them "dog-faced" [59]. In the *Iliad* and Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the Erinyes are already enactors of vengeance, particularly that of the dead, and particularly that of those killed by kin [60]. Accordingly they exhibit a close affinity with the dead heroes that manifest themselves in the form of serpents, although the precise nature of this relationship is controversial. Jane Harrison indeed saw them as evolving out of tomb-serpents. She surely offers a case to answer, but her view has not found favour with more recent scholars [61].

Trophonius

The notion that one should expect to encounter snakes above all as one descended into the Underworld is best encapsulated in two lines of Aristophanes' *Clouds*. As Strepsiades is being pushed into Socrates' φροντιστήριον, he exclaims: "Give me a honeycake first, as I'm as terrified as if descending into Trophonius' hole" [62]. The honeycake, as we learn from many subsequent sources, is to be given to the serpents that one could expect to encounter in Trophonius' hole, whatever their existential status (real

58. *LIMC s.v.* Erinys I; discussion at Haiganuch SARIAN (1986), p. 841.

59. Aesch., *Choeph*., 924; Eur., *Or.*, 260.

60. For the Erinyes as pursuers of family vengeance see Hom., *Il.*, IX, 453-456, 571-572; XV, 204; XXI, 412-414; Hes., *Th.*, 183-185, 472.

61. Jane HARRISON (1899, p. 214-217), who is followed by E. KÜSTER (1913, p. 62-72), but opposed by Haiganuch SARIAN (1986, p. 840-841) who regards the Erinyes' serpents more loosely as symbolic of the chthonic and, like their branches, of fertility and T. GANTZ (1993), p. 526, 679. Note Aesch., *Sev.*, 978-979, where "shade of Oedipus" is in direct apposition to "black Erinys": πότνιά τ' Οἰδίπου σκιά, / μέλαιν' Ἐρινύς.

62. Ar., *Cl.*, 507-508. Prior, probably, to the *Clouds* was Cratinus' *Trophonius*, of which F241 K-A refers to "*pareias* snakes". Cratinus died between 423 and 421 BCE.

snakes at any rate could not eat honey cakes) and whatever their relationship to Trophonius himself [63].

Trophonius' hole suggests another possible affinity between serpents and the Underworld. For Plato the Underworld was a desperately confusing place to negotiate, its darkness aside: it was latticed by "many forks and crossroads" [64]. The principal group of Orphic gold leaves (L1-8 in the Bernabé - Jiménez edition) implies the same, with their hectoring instructions to their initiate-bearers always to turn right as they enter the Underworld [65]. Now Philostratus tells that those who descended into Trophonius' hole were sent up again by it onto the surface at different points, some nearby, others far away. Although most emerged at least within the borders of Boeotia, some emerged beyond Locri and Phocis. Apollonius of Tyana emerged with his companions at Aulis [66]. Travelling in the other direction, Lucian tells us how Menippus contrived to emerge out of Trophonius' hole after penetrating the Underworld that same day in Babylon [67]. One is given the idea that the Underworld's internal pathways have an ever-shifting and spatially unstable relationship with each other, like the staircases in Hogwart's [68]. So the suggestion I would like to make, albeit one that confessedly lies far beyond the possibility of proof, is that there subsisted a significant affinity between the snakes and their ambiguous, switch-back style of travel on the one hand and the labyrinthine, deceptive and possibly even mobile paths of the Underworld.

Blowing out and sucking in: δράκοντες and ὄορνοι

Δράκοντες and other serpents famously pumped out a noxious breath into the air (this in addition to their ability to breathe forth fire). Hesiod tells of Typhon, even after his confinement back in the ground: "From Typhon is the wet might of the blowing winds" [69]**.** Hyginus' Lernean Hydra "had such power in her poison that she could kill men just by breathing on them. And

63. Large questions, which cannot be addressed here. For the honey-cakes given to the snakes of Trophonius' hole, see: Hsch. *s.v.* μαγίδες; *Etym. Magn. s.v.* βοῦν, μαγίς. Schol. Ar., *Cl.*, 508a has the aetiological tale of Saon of Acraephnium's discovery of the hole, in which he encounters its snakes and gives them honey-cakes. Texts and inscriptions bearing upon the oracle of Trophonius and its cult are catalogued at A. SCHACHTER (1981-1994, III, p. 66-89), but his interpretation of the material is often eccentric. For discussion see above all P. BONNECHÈRE (2003).

64. Plat., *Phd.*, 108a.

65. A. BERNABÉ, Ana Isabel JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL (2008). For the importance of turning right, cf. D. OGDEN (2010a).

66. Apollonius: Philostr., *Life of Apollonius*, VIII, 19.

67. Luc., *Menip*., IX and XXII.

68. For a more expansive development of this idea, see D. OGDEN (2010b).

69. Hes., *Th.*, 861-862, 869-871; cf. Aesch., *Ag.*, 656.

if anyone passed by her whilst she was asleep, he would breathe in her tracks and perish in an even greater torment" [70]. Horace's Cerberus has a "three-tongued mouth that emits a foul breath and swims in gore": the three tongues salute at once Cerberus' three dog heads and also his serpentine nature, the triple tongue being a commonplace of the ancient serpent [71].

This striking capacity invited comparison with ἄορνοι, the supposedly "birdless" entrances to the Underworld, in the forms of both lakes and caves, that emitted such noxious mephitic gases that they killed the birds that flew over, or deterred them from doing so. The term and the concept of the ἄορνος originated in a folk etymology of Ἄορνος, the Hellenised version of the name of Lake Avernus in Campania, the Underworld entrance and oracle of the dead at which Virgil's Aeneas famously descends: ἀ-, "without", and ὄρνις, "bird" [72]. The sulphurous fumaroles of the Phlegraean ('Fiery') Fields that surrounded the lake then offered a convenient explanation as to how it could deter birds or kill those that overflew it. Hence Virgil's description of the Underworld entrance there:

> There was a cave, deep and huge with yawning gape, rocky, protected by a black lake and the darkness of woods, over which no birds could make journey on the wing without harm. Such was the exhalation that poured forth from the black jaws (*fauces*) and was borne to the curving heavens above [73].

From Avernus the term ἄορνος was extended to other lake-entrances to the Underworld, and thence again to cave-entrances to the Underworld, mephitic or otherwise [74].

In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid draws a direct analogy between the Serpent of Ares' maw and an Underworld entrance belching out its fatal fumes: it has a "breath of poison fatal with the corruption" which, "emanating black from its Stygian mouth, infects the corrupted airs" [75]. In light of this, we can

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70. Hyg., *Fab.*, XXX, 3.

71. Hor., *Od.*, III, 11, 15-20. For the triple tongue, see, e.g., Ov., *Met.*, III, 34 (Serpent of Ares); Stat., *Theb*., I, 565 (Python).

72. Virg., *Aen.*, VI (*passim*).

73. Virg., *Aen.*, VI, 237-241. This etymology is probably already implicit in Soph., F748 *TrGF* / Pearson, which describes an Italian oracle of the dead (νεκυομαντεῖον) as "birdless" (ἄορνος). See D. OGDEN (2001), p. 25-28, 61-74.

74. Ἄορνος lakes: Ampsanctus (Cic., *On Div*., I, 36; Pliny, *NH*, II, 208; Serv. on *Aen.*, VII, 563), the Acherusian lake (Pliny, *NH*, IV, 1; Paus., IX, 30, 6; Hyg., *Fab.*, 88), Tartessos (schol. Ar., *Fr.*, 475), Babylon (Python, *TrGF* 91 F1, *Agen;* cf. Luc., *Menip*., IX), Sarmatians (Her. Ponti., F128ab Wehrli). Ἄορνος caves: Thymbria (Strab., C636), Hierapolis (Strab., C629-30, Cass. Dio, 68, 27; Damasc., *Life of Isidore* at Phot., *Bibl.*, cod. 242 §13), Potniai (Paus., IX, 8, 3; Stat., *Theb.*, II, 32-57), Indian Aornos (Phil., *Life of Apoll.*, II, 10). For these and further examples, see D. OGDEN (2001), p. 25-27, 45, 62 and (2010), esp. p. 104-117.

75. Ov., *Met*., III, 28-98, with 49 and 75-76 for the poisonous breath.

see that Virgil's description of Avernus with its "black jaws" had already saluted the affinity between the δράκων and the ἄορνος from the other side.

Of particular interest here is Silius Italicus' exuberant retelling of the battle of Atilius Regulus and his troops against the massive 120-foot serpent of the river Bagrada (Medjerda) in Africa during the First Punic War. They overcome it with the latest military hardware: ballistas, torsion catapults and falarica-missiles (one thinks of B-movies in which the USA defeats invading aliens from outer space with nuclear missiles). This tale is the one striking exception to the rule that the Romans loved to retell Greek dragon-slaying stories, but were disinclined to develop new ones of their own [76]. The dismally dark cave in which Silius' Bagrada serpent lives is explicitly compared to an Underworld entrance. It twists below the earth from a Styx-like grove unpenetrated by the sun (shades here also of Lucan's description of the cave in which Erictho performs her necromantic reanimation). As the serpent breathes forth its terrible blasts from the cave, the sound of Cerberus' howling can be heard within it, and the shades seem to be coming out of the Underworld [77].

And just as birds could fall victim to the noxious fumes of the ἄορνος, so they could to the noxious fumes of the serpent. Silius' Bagrada serpent emits pungent exhalations that suffocate birds in the sky that then drop for it to devour [78]. Such a motif was presumably already old by the age of Lucan, who varies it by having Medusa drops birds out of the sky by petrifying them [79].

Serpents could also deploy their devastating breath in reverse: that is, they could suck down prodigiously, a notion no doubt justified by observation of the way in which snakes swallow down their prey whole. Pliny mentions massive Indian serpents that can suck down deer and bulls whole. But the motif is most often associated with the devouring of birds, which brings us back again to the realm of the ἄορνος. Pliny again knows of the terrible serpents around the river Rhyndacus in Pontus that can suck birds out of the air, however high and fast they are flying [80]. The poet Lucan describes his African *dracones* as constrictors that suck down air and take in birds with it [81]. Aelian speaks of an interesting variation on this technique in his own

76. Sil. Ital., VI, 140-293.

77. Sil. Ital., VI, 146-150, 174-180. On the Silius text generally see E. L. BASSET (1955) and F. SPALTENSTEIN (1986, *ad loc.*).

78. Sil. Ital., VI, 157-159; the connection is noted by F. SPALTENSTEIN (1986, on VI, 146).

79. Lucan, IX, 649-653.

80. Pliny, *NH*, VIII, 36-37. Megasthenes is cited for India, Metrodorus for the Rhyndacus.

81. Lucan, IX, 727-733.

account of the δράκοντες of the river Rhyndacus. They support themselves on their coils, raise their necks aloft into the sky, and breathe out a breath that actively attracts birds into their mouths and which is said to operate like the *iynx*-wheel used in the magic of erotic attraction [82].

In this respect too we find another striking parallel in the actions of Underworld entrances and *aornoi*. Most germanely, Philostratus' description of the workings of the cleft on the Indian Aornos mountain suggests a similar mode of action: it "draws" birds into itself (ἐπισπώμενον) [83]. Other Underworld entrances could suck people into themselves. Seneca tells of a downward wind that draws people into the cave mouth at Tainaron, a wind that resembles the remorseless waves of the sea that drive ships on [84]. Pausanias tells of a wind or torrent that sucks consulters into the inner cave of Trophonius [85]. Plutarch's mysterious story of Strato and Callisthenes, the competing suitors for the hand of Aristoclea, seems to imply that Trophonius' cave sucked Callisthenes into itself so that he could be with his dead beloved in the Underworld [86]. The drawing-power of Underworld entrance and serpent are seemingly assimilated in Aelian's description of the sacred δράκων of Juno Sospita at Lanuvium. By the power of its breath this serpent drew through its grove and into its deep underground lair the blindfolded virgins that carried offerings for it [87].

Conclusion

The ancient Underworld was infested with serpents. Their primary functions were to be symbolic of the depths of the earth, to guard the ghosts and keep them penned in, and, where appropriate, to torment them. But in some contexts and in some ways, the Underworld was, metaphorically at any rate, a serpent in itself.

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82. Ael., *NA*, II, 21.
83. Phlstr., *Life of Apollonius*, II, 10.
84. Sen., *Her. fur.*, 662-696.
85. Paus., IX, 39.
86. Plut., *Mor.*, 771e-772c.
87. Ael., *NA*, XI, 16.

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