
CHAPTER 5

**Alexander, Agathos Daimon,
and Ptolemy: The Alexandrian
Foundation Myth in Dialogue****DANIEL OGDEN**

Most of the contributions to this volume consider the significance of dialogues internal to foundation myths. They exploit the similarities between variants to expose ideologies central to cities' self-images; or they exploit the differences between variants to expose structural tensions within the cities. This chapter looks, by contrast, at a foundation myth that—initially, at any rate—seems to have been quite unitary, as indeed one might have expected from a state created and ruled autocratically. However, it was from the outset engaged in harmonious dialogues with external myths and institutions, and it derived much of its meaning and force from them. The myth in question is that of the foundation of Alexandria and Alexander's slaying of the Agathos Daimon (Agathodaimon) serpent in connection with it. This drew upon the old Greek city foundation myths, with their motifs of animal guides and serpent slayings, to tell the Alexandrians that their city was the equal of the old cities and to confer legitimacy and dignity upon it. It spoke with a range of serpent myths surrounding the figure of Alexander in such a way as to tell the Alexandrians that Ptolemy was the true heir to his city. It spoke with native Egyptian traditions of the god Šai, to tell the city's Egyptian inhabitants that it was, for good or ill, under the protection of one of their own. It spoke—presumably, despite Ptolemy—with the foundation myths of Antioch and Seleuceia in Pieria to confer legitimacy and dignity upon those cities as

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well. And in due course, with light revision, it spoke with Christian tradition, to give the Christians, too, a gratifying and legitimating involvement, of sorts, in the city's creation.¹

The Foundation Myth

The foundation myth is first attested rather late, in the earliest recoverable version of the *Alexander Romance*, c. AD 300.² However, much of the material in this version of the *Romance* is evidently of early Hellenistic vintage, our myth among it. The narrative tells how Alexander's architects had marked out the projected city to extend between the rivers Drakōn ("serpent") and Agathodaimon³ (the latter being the name given to the Canopic branch of the Nile in several inscriptions and in the *Geography* of Claudius Ptolemy).⁴ Then:

They began to build Alexandria from the Middle plain and so the place took on the additional name of "Beginning," on account of the fact that the building of the city had begun from that point. A serpent [*drakōn*] that was in the habit of presenting itself to people in the area kept frightening the workmen, and they would break off their work upon the creature's arrival. News of this was given to Alexander. He gave the order that on the following day the serpent should be killed wherever it was caught. On receipt of this permission, they got the better of the beast when it presented itself at the place now called the Stoa and killed it. Alexander gave the order that it should have a precinct there, and buried the serpent. And he gave the command that the neighborhood should be garlanded in memory of the sighting of Agathos Daimon. He commanded that the soil from the digging of the foundations should all be deposited in one particular place, and even up until this day a large hill is there to be seen, called the "Dung Heap." When he had laid the foundations for most of the city and measured it out, he inscribed five letters, alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon: alpha for "Alexander," beta for "king," gamma for "scion," delta for "of Zeus" and epsilon for "founded this unforgettable city." Beasts of burden and mules were at work. When the foundations of the heroon had been laid down <he set [the stele on which he had inscribed the letters] on a pillar>.⁵ There leaped out from it a

large host <of snakes>, and, crawling off, they ran into the four[?] houses that were already there. Alexander, who was still present, founded the city and the heroon itself on the 25th Tybi. From that point the doorkeepers admitted these snakes to the houses as Agathoi Daimones. These snakes are not venomous, but they do ward off those snakes that do seem to be venomous, and sacrifices are given to the hero himself <, as serpent-born>. They garland their beasts of burden and give them a holiday since they helped in the foundation of the city by carrying loads. Alexander ordered that the guardians of the houses be given wheat. They took it and milled it and made porridge[?] and gave it to the snakes in the houses. The Alexandrians preserve this custom until today. On the 25th Tybi they garland their beasts of burden, make sacrifice to the Agathoi Daimones that look after their houses and make them gifts of porridge.

Alexander Romance 1.32.5–13 A ~ §§ 86–88 Armenian

The public cult of Agathos Daimon described here was almost certainly established during the reign of the first Ptolemy, and we may assume that a mythology, which presumably resembled this one in broad outline, was developed for the serpent at the same time. This is because the Agathos Daimon serpent was integrated into the Alexander Aegiochus statue type that was developed in c. 320–300 BC and (eventually) decorated Alexander's tomb in Alexandria. In this statue, Alexander wore an aegis decorated with a small *gorgoneion*, or Gorgon head; in his right hand, he held a spear; in his left, he held a *palladion*, a small statuette of the goddess Athene. The original statue is attested by eighteen copies in various states of repair—statues, statuettes, and cameos—all, where provenance is known, deriving from Egypt. In two severely damaged copies, one in the Louvre's Collection Lambros-Dattari, the other a cruder one in the new Museo Bíblico y Oriental in León (Spain), Alexander's leg is supported by a tree trunk around which winds a serpent.⁶ Despite its vestigial attestation, the serpent presumably did feature in the original. This is further suggested by the Aegiochustrong allusions to Phidias' famous *chryselephantine* (gold and ivory) Athena Parthenos statue for the Athenian Parthenon, allusions supported by the featured *palladion*. The Parthenos statue, too, wore the aegis and held a spear and a female statuette—in this case, of Nike, Victory. And nestling under the Parthenos' shield was a magnificent protective serpent, be it the anguiform Erichthonius or the *oikouros ophis* ("house-guarding snake") that supposedly lived

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on the acropolis, much as Agathos Daimon was the protective spirit of the city of Alexandria.⁷ As with the heroes of old Greece, so with Agathos Daimon: his death marks the end of his mythical narrative but the commencement and justification of his career as a supernatural protective presence in his land.

Dialogue with the Old Greek Foundation Myths

The tale broadly aligns with a traditional Greek story type in which the founder of a city is somehow guided to its site by an animal. We think of the crows that guided settlers to Cyrene, Magnesia, and (appropriately) Coraces (“crows”); the cow that guided Ilus to Ilium; the mouse that guided settlers to Argilos the fish and the boar that guided settlers to Ephesus; the wolves and the sheep that they were eating that guided Athamas to Athamantia; and the metaphorical “goat,” the fig with hanging vine tendrils, that led settlers to the site of Tarentum.⁸ The motif is also found in some of the multifarious foundation myths of Macedon. According to these, the founder figure, be it Arche-laus, Caranus, or Perdiccas, was led to the site of Aegae by goats (*aiges*).⁹ Indeed, Alexander himself, according to a later version of the *Alexander Romance*, founded Cilician Aegae in the fashion of the Macedonian founder figure, after routing the Persians in a night battle in which he had panicked them by driving goats at them with torches tied to their horns.¹⁰ If it seems odd, in this connection, that the Agathos Daimon serpent should only appear at the site of Alexandria once the Macedonians have already started to build their city, let us not forget that they had first chosen to site it between the rivers named Drakōn and Agathodaimon.

The tale also salutes old Greek traditions that derive foundations of cities from the slaying of a serpent—a serpent that is tightly associated with a water source and that is duly memorialized afterward.¹¹ The prime example is Cadmus’ foundation of Thebes in connection with the slaying of the serpent of Ares. The canonical myth was already established by the fifth century BC. Cadmus was guided to the site of Thebes by another animal guide, a heifer. Wishing then to sacrifice the animal, he sent men to fetch water from an adjacent spring, Dirce. But this was the preserve of the serpent of Ares, which killed the men. Cadmus killed the serpent, in turn, by dashing a rock against its head. According to Euripides, at any rate, some sort of cult was established

in honor of the slain serpent, based in a precinct (*sêkos*). Intriguingly, Cadmus was himself eventually transformed into a serpent in Illyria, alongside his wife Harmonia.¹²

Another example is to be found in the myth that Antoninus Liberalis takes over from Nicander's second-century BC *Heteroioumena* (*Metamorphoses*). This tells how Alcyoneus slew the apparently anguiform (snake-shaped) Sybaris or Lamia at Delphic Crisa on Mount Cirphis by throwing her down the mountainside. As her body dashed against the rocks, it disappeared, and a spring—Sybaris again—appeared in its place. And it was in the name of this spring that the Locrians then founded the city of Sybaris in Italy. The motifs of water source, foundation, and memorialization are explicit, if partly indirect.¹³ The resonances between the Theban foundation myth and the Alexandrian one are several: both foundations are rooted in the killing of a serpent strongly identified with a water source, both result in the foundation of cult for the serpent (*drakôn*), and both founder-slayers are themselves, curiously, ultimately identified with serpents. In the *Romance* narrative, Alexander is described as serpent-born (of which more anon) and confusingly projected as a hero in this regard, alongside the heroized serpent that he has slain. We are inclined to wonder whether Ptolemy was projecting Alexandria as a compensatory foundation for Alexander's destruction of Thebes. For what it is worth, the *Suda* mentions, without elaboration, that Agathos Daimon also had a *heroon* in Thebes.¹⁴ But however outlandish the Macedonian and Greek settlers found their new Egyptian environment, the myth reassured them that their city was born in a similar fashion to those of the old Greek world.

The *Romance* narrative casts Alexander as a dragon slayer, but as a dragon-slaying story fit for Alexander, it is admittedly less than satisfactory: the serpent in question appears to be more of a nuisance than an ultimate peril; the hero of the story does not even encounter it in person but superciliously delegates the task of slaying to a nameless group of builders. Perhaps a more dynamic narrative has been deflated with an element of rationalization in this version of the *Romance*. Alexander had to wait until a later version of the *Romance*, known to us only from the seventh-century AD Syriac translation of the Greek original, to get or to recover the full-blown dragon fight that was his due. This dragon, which he encounters near Indian Prasiace, sucks down oxen whole. Alexander destroys it by feeding it ox hides restuffed with gypsum, pitch, lead, and sulfur.¹⁵ This story was then taken

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up into the c. AD 1000 Persian version of the *Romance* incorporated into Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.¹⁶

Dialogue with the Myths of Alexander's Other Serpents

The Agathos Daimon myth also entered into dialogue with the myths of the other great serpents in the Alexander tradition, almost certainly at Ptolemy's behest.¹⁷ Two of these other serpent myths are, significantly, strongly tied to Ptolemy. First, in a well-known passage, Arrian gives us an intriguing insight into Ptolemy's own account of Alexander's march to Siwah. While all others, he tells us, Aristobulus included, had told that Alexander's army had been rescued from the Western Desert by a pair of crows, Ptolemy had given instead a pair of talking serpents (*drakontes*).¹⁸ Second, Clitarchus, who worked in Ptolemy's own Alexandria and is now believed to have published soon after 310 BC, recorded the tale of the serpent (*drakōn*) that appeared to Alexander in a dream during the siege of Indian Harmatelia and told him how to heal the dying Ptolemy, the favorite for whom the king was deeply grieving, with the help of a local herb.¹⁹

The most striking serpent myth associated with Alexander is that referred to in passing in the *Romance* narrative above and best known from Plutarch, that in accordance with which he was actually sired by a gigantic serpent (*drakōn* again). The cases of the Siwah and Harmatelia serpents invite us to suppose that this myth, too, was sponsored, if not actually invented, by Ptolemy. The earliest direct attestation of the serpent-siring myth comes only with Cicero's *On Divination*, of 45–44 BC, although it is important to note that he here identifies Alexander's siring serpent with the healing serpent of Harmatelia.²⁰ But we probably have an indirect indication of the myth's currency closer to Ptolemy's own age. It was almost certainly the subject of the secret of Alexander's birth that Olympias supposedly entrusted to him only as he set out on campaign and that Plutarch tells us was spoken of by Eratosthenes (c. 285–194 BC).²¹ When the ghost of Silius Italicus' Pomponia tells Scipio that he was serpent-sired, the information is similarly presented as the final revelation from mother to son of a long-kept secret.²²

It seems that Ptolemy or his agents contrived to develop a network of striking serpent-themed myths around Alexander, to the greater glory of Ptolemy himself, his land of Egypt, and his city of Alexandria. The Harmatelia myth advertised Alexander's great affection for Ptolemy. In combination with the

siring myth, it presented Ptolemy as quasi-brother to Alexander: as the marvelous serpent had given life to Alexander, so it had given new life to Ptolemy. Given that marvelous serpents, too, had manifested themselves to save Alexander and his army in the Western Desert and so celebrate his bond with the land of Egypt, and that another again, our own Agathos Daimon, had manifested itself at his foundation of Alexandria to celebrate his bond with the city, who could doubt that Ptolemy was the rightful heir to Alexander's splendid Egyptian patrimony?²³

Dialogue with Native Egyptian Gods

It has been contended that the myth of Agathos Daimon's killing also saluted Egyptian prototypes, and so spoke equally to native Egyptians from the first. It has, for example, been argued that it salutes the type of Egyptian myths of dynastic establishment, as instantiated in the tale of the victory of Ammon-Ra over the Apophis serpent or in that of Horus over Seth-Typhon.²⁴ Unfortunately, the comparanda seem too vague to be immediately compelling.

But that the figure of Agathos Daimon did speak to native Egyptians from an early stage is demonstrated by their ready embrace of him in his identification with their own serpent deity Šai, god of destiny. Manetho, the native Egyptian priest of Heliopolis under the second Ptolemy (r. 282–246 BC), undertook to explain Egypt's history in Greek for the benefit of its new masters. The relevant fragment of his *History of Egypt* incorporates the principal Egyptian gods, some under their *interpretatio Graeca* (Hellenized) names, into a mythical first dynasty of pharaohs, and Agathos Daimon is already among them, in second place, no less: Hephaestus, Agathos Daimon, Helios, Cronus, Osiris and Isis, Typhon, Horus, Ares, Anubis, Heracles, Apollo, Ammon, Tithoes, Sosos, Zeus. By this stage, accordingly, Agathos Daimon had been identified with Šai, and an admittedly philhellene Egyptian was happy to embrace the identification.²⁵ Rather more striking is the message conveyed by the famous *Oracle of the Potter*. This text, probably third-century BC in origin, perhaps second, is a unique piece of native Egyptian-derived propaganda against the Ptolemies' Macedonian regime, originally composed in Demotic but, ironically, surviving only in Greek. This oracle, which imagines itself to have been issued at the time of Alexandria's foundation, prophesies that Agathos Daimon will abandon the city that is currently being built for the native Egyptian city of Memphis. In other words, it seems, Alexandria will be

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deprived of its protecting deity. So by this stage, rather less philhellene Egyptians were also accepting the identification of Agathos Daimon with Šai̇, and more particularly accepting his role as patron and protector of Alexandria and seemingly seeking to appropriate him in this role for their own Memphis.²⁶ This sort of thinking seems to have inspired a tale reported by Cassius Dio, according to which the portents that followed the fall of Alexandria to Octavian included the manifestation of a huge serpent with a loud hiss: Agathos Daimon on his way out, or perhaps threatening to leave.²⁷

Given the success of the identification of Agathos Daimon with Šai̇, we may wonder about his origins. Was he essentially a Greek god offered to (among others) the Egyptians, or was he essentially an Egyptian god appropriated by the Greeks and Macedonians? The answer turns upon the thorny issue of whether the Greek Agathos Daimon, whom the classical comic poets had known chiefly as a protector of domestic stores and sponsor of their enjoyment, and to whom Timoleon had dedicated his house, had an anguiform identity before he came to Alexandria, or acquired it only upon his arrival.²⁸ If he did already have such an identity, it would seem that his identification with Šai̇ was convenient and compelling, and an opportunity seized. If he did not, it would seem that the Agathos Daimon of the myth was rooted in Šai̇ in the first instance, who was then made accessible for Greek and Macedonian consumers by a less compelling identification with their own hitherto humanoid-only Agathos Daimon.

It must be admitted from the first that there is no certain evidence of a direct nature for Agathos Daimon's conceptualization as an anguiform prior to his arrival in Alexandria. Some hold that we find Agathos Daimon represented as a serpent in a single pre-Ptolemaic (or effectively pre-Ptolemaic) image, the relief dated to the fourth century from Boeotian Eteonos, now in Berlin: a man leading a small boy by the hand offers a cake to a large bearded serpent that emerges from a cave.²⁹ But the image does not carry the god's name, and the serpent could as well be Zeus Meilichios or another anguiform manifestation of Zeus.³⁰ A unique votive relief dated to the fourth century from Mytilene (now in the Samos Museum) is perhaps the best candidate for a pre-Ptolemaic image of Agathos Daimon in serpent form, though the case is far from secure. A rampant snake coils upon a rock and is approached by three adoring male worshipers. Against the rock lies a caduceus, with its own entwining-snakes motif. The caduceus, which properly belongs to Hermes, is one of a range of attributes given to the serpentine Agathos Daimon on the coinage of Roman Egypt from the reign of Nero onward.³¹ The earliest certain representation of Agathos Daimon as a serpent from the old Greek world

is, alas, post-Ptolemaic in date and conception. It is also the finest extant image of him to survive from antiquity. It is found in a Hellenistic relief from a private house on Delos. A huge bearded serpent coils over a draped altar flanked by two cornucopia-holding humanoid figures who wear calathos head-dresses and who seemingly merge Isis and Agathe Tyche (Good Fortune), on the one hand, and Sarapis and Agathos Daimon, on the other. In other words, Agathos Daimon appears simultaneously in two guises (as Asclepius and Hygieia regularly do in their iconography).³²

There are, in fact, only two certainly pre-Ptolemaic images of Agathos Daimon, and both represent him in humanoid form. First, a relief of the late fourth century BC found to the east of the Parthenon is dedicated to “Agathos Daimon and Agathe Tyche.” Below the inscription, a male bearded figure holds a cornucopia and is accompanied by two female figures.³³ Second, a broken relief from Thespieae of the last quarter of the fourth century BC carries the dedication “Hagestrotos, Timokrateia, Ptoilleia, Empedonika, to Agathos Daimon” and shows a bearded, avuncular, seated figure being approached by two worshipers. He holds a cornucopia, and an eagle sits beneath his throne.³⁴

In pairing Agathos Daimon with Agathe Tyche, these images seemingly bestow upon the god a wider province—namely, that of good fortune in general—than is evident from the literary sources of the same age, a province that prepares him well for the role he is to undertake in Alexandria.³⁵ Despite the absence of serpent imagery, these two humanoid reliefs paradoxically constitute the strongest indication we have that Agathos Daimon was, on occasion, conceptualized as a serpent in the pre-Ptolemaic Greek world. This is because the syndrome of these humanoid reliefs corresponds closely with those of the later fourth-century BC humanoid reliefs of Zeus Meilichios, Zeus Ktesios, and, above all, Zeus Philios, all of whom enjoyed parallel iconographic careers as serpents. Two images of Zeus Philios are of particular interest: the c. 347 BC Aristomache relief in which Zeus Philios is given both Agathos Daimon’s traditional cornucopia and his traditional consort Agathe Tyche;³⁶ and the 324–322 BC *Eranistai* relief, the remains of which preserve an eagle sitting beneath the throne, which coincides so well in this respect with the Thespian relief of Agathos Daimon.³⁷ Given the tight similarities between the representation-syndromes of these gods, a never-anguiform Agathos Daimon is rather harder to account for than a sometime-anguiform one.

A thought game also suggests that Agathos Daimon was an anguiform before he came to Egypt. If the origin of the Alexandrian god was indeed in Šai, why was a never-hitherto-anguiform Agathos Daimon chosen to serve as

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his *interpretatio Graeca*, in preference to the Greek anguiform sponsors of good luck and household prosperity that were thriving in this age, not least Zeus Meilichios himself? So Agathos Daimon was, we conclude, in origin essentially a Greek god offered to the Egyptians, but one taken up by them with striking alacrity.

Dialogue with the Foundation Myths of Antioch and Seleuceia in Pieria

At a later stage, as we shall see, the Agathos Daimon myth, duly modified, was to speak to another constituency in Alexandria: its Christians. But let us first consider its possible impact upon a pair of external—and strongly rival—cities: the two great Seleucid capitals of Antioch and Seleuceia in Pieria. As we have seen, Ptolemy seems to have constructed his foundation myth for Alexandria around the Agathos Daimon serpent and its rivers before 300 BC. This was the year in which Seleucus founded Antioch and Seleuceia. For these cities, too the Seleucids in their turn developed foundation myths that were similarly built around the motifs of river and serpent (*drakōn*), albeit in a more elaborate, symbolically and typologically complex, fashion.³⁸ It is hard to believe that these myths did not constitute, at least in part, a response to the Ptolemaic myth.

It is now held that the myth of Zeus' battle with the primeval serpent (*drakōn*) Typhon, in which the god destroyed him with his thunderbolts, effectively originated in an *interpretatio Graeca* of a mythical battle between a storm god and a sea serpent that had been located since the age of the Hurrians on ancient Syria's (modern Turkey's) towering Mount Kasios, now the Jebel Aqra. For the Hurrians, who had known the mountain as Hazzi (probably the origin of the Greek name Kasios), the storm god in question had been Teshub, and the dragon Hedammu. For the Hittites, he had been Tarhunna, and the dragon Illuyankas. For the Canaanites, for whom the mountain was Sapuna, the storm god in question had been Baal-Sapon, and he had been victorious over Yam and Lotan (the biblical Leviathan), the sea serpents that were embodiments of chaos.³⁹

At some point—presumably, early in the Seleucid era—the river Orontes, the great waterway that flowed beneath Kasios and linked, more or less, the two new cities of Antioch and Seleuceia in Pieria, was identified with the serpent.

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The Augustan Strabo preserves the tale that the Orontes' riverbed was created when Zeus hurled his thunderbolts down on Typhon. As Typhon fled, he cut the highly serpentine riverbed with his writhing coils, before releasing its source into it as he finally dived down into the earth. The river initially took Typhon's name for its own. The Christian chronographer John Malalas, writing in the fifth or sixth century AD, was to say that the river actually had four names in all: Orontes, Drakōn ("Serpent"), Typhon, and Ophites ("Snake River").⁴⁰

The fourth-century AD Pausanias of Antioch records a tale about Perseus and the Orontes in which the hero typologically reenacts his father Zeus' battle against Typhon. The river Orontes, at this point called the Drakōn, flooded disastrously, and Perseus advised the local Iopolitans to pray. In answer to their prayers, a ball of fire came down from heaven and dried up the flood. Like his father Zeus before him, Perseus, famous destroyer of anguiform monsters (the Gorgons, the sea monster sent against Andromeda), fought the dragon river with fire from the sky. Perseus then founded a sanctuary "Of the Immortal Fire" for the Iopolitans, and took some of the heavenly fire back to Persia, the land named after him, and there taught the Persians to revere it, appointing trustworthy men to tend the flame, to whom he gave the name "magi." In other words, he founded the Zoroastrian religion.⁴¹

The foundations of Antioch and Seleucia in Pieria were associated—indirectly, at least—with these great dragon slayings by a myth fashioned to identify Seleucus typologically with Zeus and Perseus in his acts of foundation. John Malalas tells how, as Seleucus was sacrificing to Zeus on Mount Kasios and asking where he should found his city, the god's own eagle seized part of the sacrifice and dropped it in Pieria, where Seleucus accordingly went on to found the first of the two cities. He gave thanks for the foundation by sacrificing to Zeus Keraunios ("of the Thunderbolt") in the sanctuary founded by Perseus. He then sacrificed to Zeus again at nearby Antigoneia to ask whether he should adopt Antigonus' city and rename it or found a new one elsewhere. Again, an eagle seized meat from the altar and dropped it on Mount Silpios, so signifying that a new city should be built there. As Malalas tells us, Seleucus chose the exact site for the new city, Antioch, beside the great Drakōn river, now the Orontes, in such a way as to avoid the torrents that came down from the mountain.⁴² The fourth-century AD Libanius had already made it clear that the meat seized by the Antioch eagle took the specific form of flaming ox thighs.⁴³ The symbolic equivalence of the flaming ox thigh and the thunderbolt is made clear in Syrian coinage of the imperial

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period, long after the disappearance of the Seleucids, where highly similar series of reverses issued under Marcus Aurelius show eagles bearing either lightning bolts or ox thighs in parallel configurations.⁴⁴ In his founding of Seleuceia and Antioch, therefore, Seleucus is projected as a third conqueror of the Drakōn river. He metaphorically masters it with his pair of city foundations but also gets the better of it by avoiding the paths of its torrents. Though he does not deploy thunderbolts or heavenly balls of fire directly against the river, he is guided to his mastering foundations by Zeus, who drops thunderbolt-like flaming ox thighs down from the sky, reminiscent of the weapons he had used in his primeval battle.

It is curious that the Seleucids should have calqued Ptolemaic imagery in developing a serpent-river myth for themselves, for all that they were able to connect that myth with indigenous myths of great antiquity from their own realm. That they chose to do so in preference to developing a wholly independent imagery must say something of the compelling and immediate power of Ptolemy's myth. In this respect, as in others, the Seleucids seem to have been playing catch-up with the Ptolemies.

A Later Dialogue with Christians, and Perhaps Something Earlier

And so to the Christians. The latter part of the *Romance's* Agathos Daimon narrative constitutes an etiology of the private cult practice of (supposedly) feeding friendly "Agathos Daimon" house snakes. The practice is first attested in a fragment of Phylarchus, whose history finished in 219 BC with the death of Cleomenes II of Sparta. He speaks of the Egyptians keeping asps in their houses: these come when called by a snap of the fingers to receive gifts of barley in wine and honey, retreating at a second snap (Phylarchus' designation of the Agathos Daimon snakes as asps, as opposed to anti-asps, is unique).⁴⁵ Plutarch subsequently gives us a vignette of two Egyptian neighbors fighting for possession of a luck-bringing Agathos Daimon snake that they find in the road.⁴⁶

Christian tradition preserves a tale related to this latter part of the *Romance's* story, in that it also has Alexander presiding over the introduction into Alexandria of good snakes that attack bad snakes. A third-century AD pseudo-Epiphonian narrative survives in two versions of its own and is reflected in better, though not perfect, condition in the seventh-century AD *Chronicon Paschale*. The three texts differ from one another only by variation in what

they—quite confusingly—omit. The following translation merges them to produce an almost fully intelligible story:

Jeremiah was of Anathoth, and he died in Daphnae in Egypt when he was stoned to death by the local people. He was laid to rest in the region of the Pharaoh's palace, because the Egyptians held him in honor, since he had done them good service. For he prayed for them, and the asps left them alone, as did the creatures of the waters, which the Egyptians call *menephōth* and the Greeks call crocodiles, which were killing them.⁴⁷ The prophet prayed and the race of asps was averted from that land, as were the attacks of the creatures from the river. Even to this day the faithful pray in the place he lay, and by taking earth from the site of his tumulus they heal bites inflicted upon people, and many avert even the creatures in the water. We heard from some old men, descendants of Antigonus and Ptolemy, that Alexander the Macedonian visited the tomb of the prophet and learned the mysteries pertaining to him. He transferred his remains to Alexandria, and arranged them, with all due honor, in a circle. The race of asps was thus averted from that land, as similarly were the creatures from the river. And thus he threw in [sc. inside the circle] the snakes called *argolaoi*, that is “snake-fighters” [*ophiomachoi*], which he had brought from Peloponnesian Argos, whence they are called *argolaoi*, that is, “right-hand-men [*dexioi*] of Argos.” The sound they make is very sweet and of all good omen.

[Epiphanius] *De prophetarum et obitu*

- first recension, p. 9, Schermann

- second recension, pp. 61–62, Schermann

- *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 293, Dindorf⁴⁸

The final sentences remain slightly enigmatic but appear to mean that Alexander took Jeremiah's deterrent remains from Daphnae and arranged them in a circle around the city of Alexandria, presumably by distributing the limbs or, more probably, by sprinkling a fine line of cremation ash: the latter would recall the tradition found first in Strabo that Alexander had first marked out the circle of Alexandria for his architects by sprinkling a line of barley meal (which was then devoured by birds—more animal guides—in an act of good omen).⁴⁹ Snakes (and crocodiles) outside the circle were thus prevented from entering it. He then threw his other snake-fighting *argolaoi* snakes inside the

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circle (evidently, they could not pass through it any more than any other snakes could), where they will have destroyed the bad snakes marooned inside it, and taken their place. Jeremiah was evidently a Saint Patrick avant la lettre and is associated with the phenomenon known to folklorists (in consequence of Saint Patrick) as “Irish earth,” that of the soil of certain places being repellent to certain venomous creatures and an antidote to their venoms, which is well attested elsewhere in Graeco-Roman culture, at least from the age of the elder Pliny in the first century AD onward.⁵⁰ The Jeremiah tale also salutes a familiar motif of ancient snake-control stories, that of the deployment of a “magic circle” against them, as in the tale of a Thessalian witch’s battle against the *hieros ophis* (“sacred snake”) attributed to Aristotle.⁵¹

Like the *Romance*’s myth, this one accounts for the arrival, alongside Alexander, of a host of good snakes in Alexandria, which we may assume were to be identified with those that became the object of private cult: we note the *Romance*’s contention that its Agathoi Daimones “are not poisonous, but they do ward off those snakes that do seem to be poisonous”: these, clearly, are “snake-fighters,” too. The tale also efficiently salutes the Argeads’ and thereby the Ptolemies’ claim to derive their stock ultimately from Argos.⁵² The motif of Alexander’s physical transporting of the *argolaoi* serpents from Argos further salutes the Greek traditions of cult transfer associated with the greatest anguiform god of the all, Asclepius. Numerous glorious accounts, inscriptional and literary, survive from the later fourth century BC onward describing this god’s journey to a new cult site in the form of a massive, benign serpent (*drakōn*, *draco*). The particularly splendid accounts of Asclepius’ passage from Epidaurus to Rome describe a journey that supposedly took place in 292 BC, shortly after, as it would seem, the development of the notion of Alexander’s encounter with Agathos Daimon.⁵³ It is noteworthy too that the ancient variety of snakes particularly associated with the sanctuaries of Asclepius, the kindly and healing *pareias* (probably *Elaphe quatuorlineata*, the four-lined snake), had a reputation for attacking vipers.⁵⁴

It is hard to believe that the Jeremiah material as we have it, with its motif of martyrdom, antedates the Christian era (nice as it would have been to imagine that this was a variant of the foundation legend designed at an early stage to engage and include Hellenistic Alexandria’s large Jewish population). The story’s function, in the form we have it, is no doubt to install a figure of Christian interest at the heart of the foundation of Alexandria for the gratification and validation of its Christian inhabitants. However, it is possible that the basic tale is older and that Jeremiah has supplanted another marvelous

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figure. The motif of the transfer of a great man's remains from the land of Egypt proper to Alexandria is strikingly reminiscent of Ptolemy's historical transfer of Alexander's own body from Memphis to Alexandria.⁵⁵ On this basis, it may be that the tale was developed as a typological justification for Ptolemy's transfer and therefore, presumably, developed by or for the Ptolemaic dynasty. Another possibility is that the story originated actually as a more direct reimagining of Ptolemy's historical transfer of Alexander's body, with Alexander accordingly in Jeremiah's role and Ptolemy himself in Alexander's. It is unlikely, however, that any original story relating to Alexander's body subjected it to dispersal in the fashion of Jeremiah's, given that it famously lay intact inside his Alexandrian tomb, up until the point at which Octavian broke off its nose.⁵⁶ Either way, the original tale would, gratifyingly, have found a way, directly or indirectly, of bringing Ptolemy where he must have aspired to be and indeed where he frankly deserved to be: close to the heart of an Alexandrian foundation myth.

The Alexandrian foundation myth spoke to the new city's Greek and Macedonian settlers and to native Egyptians alike. If it did not immediately speak to the city's third great constituency, the Jews, it did eventually speak, with Jewish imagery, to its subsequent Christian inhabitants. The serpent imagery that it invoked embraced together the figure of Alexander with that of Ptolemy, the city of Alexandria with Egypt, and the men with the land. The myth's immediate and compelling impact is best demonstrated by the Seleucids' adoption and adaptation of its imagery for the mythical underpinning of their rival capitals.

NOTES

1. For Agathos Daimon in general, see Harrison 1912: 277–316; Cook 1914–40: vol. 2, part 2: 1125–29; Ganschietz/Ganszyniec 1918, 1919; Jakobsson 1925: esp. 151–75; Rohde 1925: 207–8 n. 133; Tarn 1928; Taylor 1930; Dunand 1969, 1981, with bibliography; Fraser 1972: 1:209–11, with associated notes; Quaegebeur 1975: 170–76 and passim; Mitropoulou 1977: 155–68; Pietrzykowski 1978; Sfameni Gasparro 1997; Jouanno 2002: 75–76, 105–8; Stoneman 2007: 532–34; Stoneman 2008: 56–58.

2. This earliest extant recension of the *Alexander Romance*, α , is recovered from a single Greek MS ("A"), reporting a badly corrupt and lacunary account of it, and an Armenian translation of a rather better account of it.

3. *Alexander Romance* 1.31.7 (A).

4. See *OGI* no. 672, with further references ad loc.; Claudius Ptolemy *Geography* 4.5.

5. This and other angle-bracketed portions are supplied for the corrupt and lacunary A MS from the Armenian translation; for a full English translation, see Wolohojan 1969. The β recension has a slightly more elaborate tale: when the gatehouse to the shrine was being built, a huge, ancient tablet full of letters fell out of it, and it was out of this that the snakes emerged. Presumably, the notion was that a piece of ancient Egyptian masonry was being reused. But this tablet full of letters would seem to be a doublet of the tablet that Alexander has just inscribed with his own five letters.

6. For the Louvre copy, see Schwarzenberg 1976: 235 with fig. 8; Stewart 1993: 247; Stoneman 2007: 533. I thank Prof. Victor Alonso Troncoso for drawing the León statuette to my attention.

7. See Stewart 1993: 248–50 for the Athena Parthenos comparison. Paus. 1.24.5 speculated that her snake was Ericthonius. The *oikouros ophis*: Hdt 8.41; Ar. *Lys.* 758–59 with schol.; Phylarchus *FGrH* 81 F72 = Photius *Lexicon* s.v. οἰκουρὸν ὄφις; Plut. *Themistocles* 10; *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v. Ἐρεχθεύς. Gourmelen 2004: 346–47 contends that the Parthenos' snake actually represented both of these.

8. Cyrene: Callimachus *Hymn* 2.65–66. Magnesia: *I. Magnesia* 46 = *FGrH* 482 F3. Coraces: Demon *FGrH* 327 F7; Aristotle F496 Rose. Ilium: Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.12.3. Argilos: Heraclides of Pontus *FHG* ii p. 224 F42; Stephanus of Byzantium s.v. Ἀργίλος. Ephesus: Creophylus *FGrH* 417 F1 at Athenaeus 361d–e. Athamantia: Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.9.2. Tarentum: Dionysius of Halicarnassus 19.1–2. For animal guides in general, see Schmid 1947: 94–101.

9. Archelaus: Hyginus *Fabulae* 219 (summarizing Euripides *Archelaus*); Dio Chrysostom 4.70–72. Caranus: Justin 7.1.7–7.2.1 (from Trogus; perhaps ultimately from Theopompus); schol. Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 2.11, incorporating Euphorion FF38a–b + 1182 Powell = F35 Lightfoot. Perdiccas: Diod. Sic. 7.16.

10. *Alexander Romance* 2.23 (β).

11. For dragon-slaying traditions at foundation sites in the Greek world, see Trumpf 1958.

12. Pherecydes F22ab, 88 Fowler; Eur. *Phoen.* 238, 638–48, 657–75, 818–21, 931–41, 1006–12 (for the cult), 1060–66, 1315 (all with schol.), *Bacchae* 1330–39, 1355–60; Hellenicus FF1a, 51, 96, 98; Fowler; Palaephatus 3–4; Apollonius *Argonautica* 3.1176–90; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.28–98 (the most expansive account); Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.4.1–2, 3.5.4; Hyginus *Fabulae* 6, 148, 178, 274.4; Paus. 9.10.5; Philostratus *Imagines* 1.18; etc. For the iconography of the episode, see *LIMC* Harmonia 1–7, Hesperie 1(?), Kadmos i 7–47.

13. Antoninus Liberalis *Metamorphoses* 8. Although the monster's form is not explicitly described, other lamia monsters in Greek literature are described as part anguiform, e.g., Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 4.25; Dio Chrys. *Orations* 5 (where comparanda tell us that the monster in question is a lamia, even though the term is withheld). For *lamiai* in general, see Rohde 1925: 590–95; Fontenrose 1959: 44–45, 100–104, 119–20; Scobie 1983: 25–29; Boardman 1992; Burkert 1992: 82–87; Johnston 1999: 161–202 (the last with care). Furthermore, up until the fight itself, the distinctive Alyconeus tale is the close doublet of

the tale of Menestratus of Thespieae at Paus. 9.26.7–8, where the monstrous opponent is explicitly stated to be a serpent (*drakōn*).

14. *Suda* s.v. Ἀγαθοῦ Δαίμονος.

15. *Syriac Alexander Romance* 3.7 (recension δ). For text and translation, see Budge 1889, with the relevant portion at 102–3. It is possible that this dragon fight is ultimately derivative of the Agathos Daimon narrative: Ogden 2012.

16. Ferdowsi *Shahnameh* C1331–34. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988– will be the standard edition of the text when complete. Tr. Davis 2006: 506–8; Warner and Warner 1912: 6:148–53.

17. For more comprehensive arguments and evidence on this subject, see Ogden 2009a, 2009b, 2011: 7–56.

18. Arrian *Anabasis* 3.3.4–6, incorporating Ptolemy *FGrH* 138 F8. It is usually believed that Ptolemy compiled his history toward the end of his reign: See Roisman 1984. Arrian's observation is borne out by the remnants of it that survive. All other sources give us crows, with the serpents being preferred only here, in association with Ptolemy's version. Strabo C814 = Callisthenes *FGrH* 124 F14, Diod. Sic. 17.49.5, Curtius 4.7.15, Plut. *Alexander* 27, *Itinerarium* 21 (crows, but acknowledging the variant of serpents).

19. Diod. Sic. 17.103.4–8; Curtius 9.8.22–28: coincidence between these authors normally entails that Clitarchus is their ultimate source.

20. Cicero *On Divination* 2.135, Livy 26.19.7–8, Trogus as reflected in Justin 11.11.2–5, Plut. *Alexander* 2–3, Ptolemy son of Hephaistion at Photius *Library* no. 190 (148a; Ptolemy wrote either in the Neronian-Flavian or the Trajanic-Hadrianic one: *Suda* s.v. Ἐπαφρόδιτος and Πτολεμαῖος, respectively).

21. Eratosthenes *FGrH* 241 F28 *apud* Plut. *Alexander* 2–3.

22. Silius Italicus *Punica* 13.636: *quando aperire datur nobis, nunc denique disce*, “Learn it at last, now that I am permitted to reveal it.”

23. However, other gigantic serpents found their way into the early Alexander tradition, seemingly without help from Ptolemy. Writing by 309 BC at the latest, Alexander's “chief helmsman of the fantastic,” Onesicritus of Astypalaea, told that the Indian king Abisares had regaled Alexander with tales of a pair of gigantic serpents (*drakontes*), one 140 cubits, the other eighty cubits in length: *FGrH* 134 16a–c.

24. The case is made by Merkelbach 1977: 36–38. Apophis: *P. Bremner-Rhind*, reproduced in photographs at Budge 1910 pl. i–xix; tr. *ANET* 6–7. Nigidius Figulus p. 123, 8 Swoboda records that Seth-Typhon was killed in the Memphite temple in which the pharaohs were crowned.

25. Manetho *FGrH* 609 F3; cf. Quaegebeur 1975: 174–75; Dunand 1969: 37; Dunand 1981: 277.

26. *P.Oxy.* 2332 lines 51–53: κατὰ τε ὁ ἀγαθὸς / δαίμων καταλείψει τὴν κτιζομένην πόλιν καὶ ἀπελεύσεται εἰς τὴν θεοτόκον Μέμφειν καὶ ἐξηρημώσεται. For this text, see Tarn 1928: 215; Fraser 1972: 1:683–84.

27. Cassius Dio 51.17.4–5: καὶ τις δράκων ὑπερμεγέθης ἐξαιφνης σφίσιον ὀφθεις ἀμήχανον ὅσον ἐξεσύρισε.

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28. The comic fragments are collected at Athenaeus 692f–693e. Timoleon: Plut. *Moralia* 542e, καὶ τὴν οἰκίαν Ἀγαθῶ Δαίμονι καθιερώσας.

29. *LIMC* Agathodaimon no. 6. Harrison 1912: 283; Dunand 1981 ad loc. take this to be an image of Agathos Daimon. Cook 1914–40: vol. 2, part 2: 1151–52 and Mitropoulou 1977: 135 take it to be Zeus Meilichios, and the superficial resemblance of this relief to the fourth-century Attic Zeus Meilichios reliefs is indeed strong.

30. For Zeus Meilichios, see the testimonia and discussion at Jameson et al. 1993: 81–103, 132–41; Lalonde 2006: 103–20. For his iconography, see Cook 1914–40: vol., part 2: 1091–1160; Mitropoulou 1977: 112–55.

31. Mytilene relief: Mitropoulou 1977: 178–80 (with fig. 92). Coins: *LIMC* Agathodaimon nos. 31, 35. See Dunand 1969: 36; Dunand 1981: 281.

32. *LIMC* Agathodaimon no. 3; cf. Fraser 1972: 2:356–57 n. 164; Mitropoulou 1977: 164–65; Dunand 1981: 278, 280.

33. *LIMC* Agathodaimon 4; cf. Mitropoulou 1977: 159–60 no. 1 (with fig. 79). There is insufficient evidence to associate Mitropoulou 1977: 159–61 no. 2 (fig. 80) with Agathos Daimon.

34. *IG* vii 1815 = *LIMC* Agathodaimon 2; cf. Mitropoulou 1977: 161–62 no. 3 (with fig. 81).

35. For the pairing, see Bonnechere 2003: 234 n. 42.

36. Copenhagen Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek 1558 = *IG* ii² 4627 = Harrison 1912: 312, fig. 90, Harrison 1922: 355, fig. 106; Cook 1914–40: vol. 2, part 2: 1162, fig. 970 = Mitropoulou 1977: 102–3 no. 6 and fig. 42.

37. Athens National Museum no. 8738 = *IG* ii² 2935 = Mitropoulou 1977: 99–100 no. 1 (with fig. 39). For the particular relevance of the iconography of Zeus Philios to Agathos Daimon, see Dunand 1981: 280.

38. In biblical and classical contexts, the term “typology” is used to denote the study of prefigurative myths.

39. The case laid out here is adumbrated at West 1997: 303–4 and argued in expansive detail by Lane Fox 2008: 255–73. Teshub against Hedammu: text at Siegelova 1971; tr. Haas 2006: 153–56 (German). Tarhunna against Illuyankas: texts at Beckman 1982; tr. Hoffner 1998: 10–14. Baal-Sapon against Yam and Lotan: text at Smith 1994, at KTU 1.1–3 = CTA 1–3; tr. Caquot et al. 1974 (French). Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3 (c. AD 100) is the earliest extant Greek source actually to locate the battle between Zeus and Typhon on Mount Kasios, although Pindar *Pythians* 1.15–28, 8.15–16, F92 Snell-Maehler locates it in the adjacent Cilicia, just across the gulf of Issus from Mount Kasios.

40. Strabo C750–51; cf. Paus. (*Periegetes*) 8.29, John Malalas *Chronicle* 197 Dindorf.

41. Pausanias of Antioch *FHG* 4:467–68, F3 = John Malalas *Chronicle* 37–38 Dindorf. In other contexts, we may wish to note, the Greeks deployed Agathos Daimon as the *interpretatio Graeca* of the Zoroastrian “Good Principle,” Spenta Mainyu/ Ahura Mazda: Diod. Sic. 1.94; cf. Ganschietz 1918: 39.

42. John Malalas *Chronicle* 198–200 Dindorf.

43. Libanius *Orations* 11.85–88 (Förster edition, vol. I. Oration 2, pp. 464–65).

44. Dieudonné 1929 with plate ii (iv). Note, esp., 16 (eagle with thigh) and 18 (eagle with thunderbolt).

45. Phylarchus *FGrH* 81 F27 = Aelian *Nature of Animals* 17.5.

46. Plut. *Moralia* 755c.

47. Perhaps the starting point for the attribution such powers to Jeremiah is Jer. 8:17, where God, speaking through the prophet, threatens plagues of venomous, biting serpents resistant to charming.

48. For the Epiphanius recensions, see Schermann 1907. Brief discussion at Stoneman 1994, 2007: 533; Stoneman 2008: 57. A yet more confusingly contracted version of the narrative is found at *Suda* s.v. ἀργόλαι and [Zonaras] *Lexicon* s.v. ἀργόλαι; note also *Suda* s.vv. Ἱερεμίας, Ὅστ᾽ Ἰγάντων, Ὅφις.

49. Strabo C792, Plut. *Alexander* 26.

50. Pliny *Natural History* 3.11 (Ebesus; so, too, Pomponius Mela 2.7), 5.7 (Galata), 37.54 (Sicily, including the *achate*), Dioscorides 5.113 (Lemnian earth an emetic for poisons), Galen *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus* xii.169 Kühn (Lemnian earth cures poisonous snakebites in general), Philostratus *Heroicus* 6.2 (Lemnian earth cures Philoctetes), Aelian *Nature of Animals* 5.2 (Crete), 5.8 (Astypalaea). See Hasluck 1909–10 for the Greek material; Krappe 1941, 1947, with a great many parallels, for the wider folkloristic belief.

51. [Aristotle] *Mirabilia* 845b; cf. Lucan 9.915–37, Lucian *Philopseudes* 11–13.

52. Curtius 9.8.22; Paus. 1.6.2, 1.6.8; *Alexander Romance* 3.32 (A); unpublished Ptolemaic inscription at Errington 1990: 265 n. 6 (Ἡρακλείδης Ἀργεάδας).

53. Livy 29.11.1 and *Periocha* 11; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.622–744; Valerius Maximus 1.8.2; Pliny *Natural History* 29.72; Arnobius *Against the Gentiles* 7.44–48; Augustine *City of God* 3.17; Claudian *On the Consulship of Stilicho* 3.171–73; [Aurelius Victor] *De viris illustribus* 22.1–3; Latin *Anthology* 1.2.719e.1–7; Q. Serenus Salmonicus *Liber medicinalis prooemium* 1–10.

54. Harpocration s.v. Παρεΐαι ὄφεις, incorporating Hyperides F80 Jensen.

55. Diod. Sic. 18.28; Strabo C794; Curtius 10.10.20. However, Paus. 1.7.1 attributes the transfer to Philadelphus. Discussion at Saunders 2006: 49–62.

56. Suetonius *Octavianus* 2.18; Cassius Dio 21.16.

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