

Katabasis and the Serpent¹

In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, as Dionysus is preparing to make his *katabasis*, 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:

μετὰ τοῦτ' ὄφεις καὶ θηρί' ὄψει μυρία / δεινότατα.

After this you will see snakes and most terrible beasts in myriads.

Aristophanes *Frogs* 142-3

The 'myriads', whilst grammatically associated in the first instance with the 'most terrible beasts,' is presumably to be read with the 'snakes' too. A hundred of these snakes at any rate can be accounted for in the form of the 'hundred-headed' (ἑκατογκέφαλος) 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:

Dextra laevaue cautibus cavatis proserpunt ecce longa colla porrecti saevi dracones inconivae vigiliae luminibus addictis et in perpetuam lucem pupulis excubantibus.

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.

Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 6.14

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.³

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 point is crisply made by the Aesopic tale in which a digging fox uncovers a serpent (*draco*) in its hole, together with its treasure, and asks it what use it has for the treasure it is hoarding: none, it confesses, but it is by all means bound by destiny to do it.⁴ But the relationship between the serpent and the earth was celebrated most vigorously in the tales of the great *drakontes* 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 progenitrix of other dragons, Hesiod tells us, was borne by Ceto in a cave and in

¹ It is a pleasure to write on *katabasis* in the university, Exeter, in which R.J Clark, later of the Memorial University of Newfoundland, penned his most valuable book on the subject (Clark 1979).

² Aristophanes *Frogs* 473.

³ *LIMC* Styx 7 (where, however, the image is labeled 'uncertain'); Vian and Moore 1988:267-8.

⁴ Phaedrus 4.21.

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, much as the Colchis dragon hangs in his tree to guard the golden fleece that similiarly hangs in the branches, 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. 475-50 BC (surviving now only in drawing). Antoninus Liberalis (after Nicander) tells that another Delphic dragon, Lamia-Sybaris, dwelled in a huge cave on Mt Crisa. 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 (*ophis*) to be the child of the earth,’ whilst centuries later Artemidorus was to observe that ‘the *drakōn* itself is of the earth and makes its life within it.’⁶ The great *drakontes* of myth were often projected as the children of Earth. Earth is given as mother to, amongst other great serpents: Ladon;⁷ the (eventually) anguiform ‘earthborn’ (*gēgeneis*) Giants, whom she accompanies in their iconography from the sixth century BC;⁸ Python;⁹ the Serpent of Ares;¹⁰ the Serpent of Nemea;¹¹ and the pet *drakōn* that Heracles deployed against the Nemean Lion.¹²

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 *drakaina*

⁵ Ceto and Echidna: Hesiod *Theogony* 295-305. Ladon: Hesiod *Theogony* 333-6 (for Ladon’s tree, see the images collected at *LIMC* Atlas 13, Herakles 1697-1761, 2676-2787, Hesperides, Hesperie, Ladon I; for the Colchis dragon and its tree, see the images collected at *LIMC* Argonautai 20-1, Iason 22-54, Medeia 2-4). Python: *LIMC* Apollon 993= Leto 29a = Python 3 (ca. 475-50 BC). Lamia-Sybaris: Antoninus Liberalis *Metamorphoses* 8 (her serpentine form is indicated by, inter alia, the congruence of her tale with that of the Dragon of Thespieae at Pausanias 9.26.7-8). Serpent of Ares: Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.28-38.

⁶ Herodotus 1.78.3; Artemidorus *Oneirocritica* 2.13.

⁷ Pisander of Camirus *FGrH* 16 F8; Apollonius *Argonautica* 4.1398. Earth also sent up the apples he famously guards: Pherecydes F16-17 Fowler.

⁸ For the application of the term *gēgeneis* to the Giants, see, e.g., Euripides *Ion* 987, 1529, etc. For the iconography of Earth fighting alongside the Giants see, e.g., *LIMC* Gigantes 2, 105-6, 110 (all vi BC), 24 (the Pergamum frieze, where, as often, Earth emerges from the ground raising her arms in supplication to the gods on her children’s behalf). Giants acquire their serpentine legs in art ca. 400 BC, these being attested first by *LIMC* Gigantes 389.

⁹ Pindar F55 S.-M., Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1247, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.438-40, Hyginus *Fabulae* 140, Isidore of Seville *Etymologies* 8.11.54.

¹⁰ Euripides *Phoenissae* 931.

¹¹ Statius *Thebaid* 5.505.

¹² Photius *Bibliotheca* cod. 190, 147b22-8.

Delphyne. According to Solinus the Corycian cave was actually Typhon's home.¹³ Earth herself is already Typhon's mother in Hesiod, whilst Tartarus, 'Hell', the deepest place within the earth, is his father.¹⁴ 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 glide into.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Manilius makes the nice point that Zeus drove Typhon back into his mother's womb with his thunderbolts.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ A few scattered examples will suffice. First, on a Tyrrhenian amphora of ca. 575-50 BC 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.²⁰ Secondly, a serpent frequently appears in Greek hero-reliefs, where it serves as the symbol or the avatar of the hero. In the earliest and basic variety of these reliefs, originating in Sparta in ca. 540 BC and enduring until the third century BC, the hero or heroine are depicted as feeding the serpent from a *kantharos*, in what must be considered a form of auto-libation.²¹ The very first example, a relief of ca. 540 BC from Laconian Chrysapha, is also the finest: worshippers bear offerings (including a cock and possibly an egg) 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. Though still some way from it, the serpent is presumably heading for a drink from the large *kantharos* the hero holds.²² Thirdly, in Attica, heroes who, beyond this, had an even more particular affinity with the earth and 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

¹³ Fragment of the Eumelian *Titanomachy* at schol. Oppian *Halieutica* 3.16 (if genuine); Pindar *Pythian* 1.17; Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3, Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 1.145-53, 163, 409-26; Solinus 38.7-8.

¹⁴ Hesiod *Theogony* 820-2.

¹⁵ Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 2.237-43.

¹⁶ Hesiod *Theogony* 868; Pindar *Pythians* 1.15-28.

¹⁷ Manilius 2.876-80.

¹⁸ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 5.346-58.

¹⁹ Cf. Harrison 1899, 1912:290-1, 1922:232-9, 325-31, Küster 1913:62-72, Mitropoulou 1977:15-18, Ogden 2013:247-70.

²⁰ LIMC Erinys 84 = Alkmaion 3 (where illustrated) = Grabow 1998 K103.

²¹ Partial lists and discussions of the relevant items at Mitropoulou 1977:52-4, 63-6, 82-7, Salapata 1993, 1997, 2006 (with further lists noted at 541 n.1), Schuller 2004.

²² Berlin Pergamon Museum no. 731 = Harrison 1912:309 fig. 88 = Mitropoulou 1977:85 (9) = *ThesCRA* 3.d no. 100 = Salapata 2006 fig. 3, with discussion at 542-7.

first emergence at the beginning of the fifth century BC.²³ And so it was with his partial doublet Ericthonius, sired when Hephaestus' seed fell upon the ground as he pursued Athene unsuccessfully. Ericthonius was sometimes represented as a humanoid baby, but at other times as a serpent or, from the second century AD, an anguipede.²⁴ Fourthly, Diogenes Laertius, citing second- and first-century BC 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 *drakōn* as he was being carried out to burial. The serpent then obligingly crawled out before the assembled mourners.²⁵ 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 *drakontes* signifies heroes, whilst to dream of women turning into *drakontes* signifies heroines.²⁶

Serpents as guards in the underworld

²³ Cecrops' autochthony: e.g. Hermippus of Smyrna F82 Wehrli = *FGrH* 1026 F3 (γηγενής), Lycophron *Alexandra* 111 (γηγενής), Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.14 (αὐτόχθων), Hyginus *Fabulae* 48 (son of Terra), Antoninus Liberalis *Metamorphoses* 6 (αὐτόχθων); cf. Gourmelen 2004: 123-4. Cecrops as an anguipede: *LIMC* Kekrops 6 (= Gourmelen 2004: fig. 9, 490-80 BC – an oddly bifurcated tail), 10 (= Gourmelen 2004: fig. 12; ca. 460 BC), 16 (= Gourmelen 2004: fig. 16; 460-50 BC), 28 (Parthenon: 447-31 BC), 7 (= Gourmelen 2004: fig. 10; 440-30 BC), 1 (= Gourmelen 2004: fig. 15; 430-20 BC), 2 (425-400 BC), 3, 8, 9 (8, 9 = Gourmelen 2004: figs. 11, 14; late v BC), 24-5 (ca. 400 BC), 34 (mid iv BC). For discussions of Cecrops see: Robert 1920-6:i, 137-40, Kron 1976:84-103, Kearns 1989:80-91, 110-12, 175-6, Parker 1990, Kasper-Butz *et al.* 1992, Gourmelen 2004: esp. 24-31, 44-5, 47-8.

²⁴ The most important narratives of Ericthonius' birth are those of Amelesagoras *FGrH* 330 F1 = Antigonos of Carystus *Mirabilia* 12 and Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.14.6; Powell 1906:56-86 offers a convenient repertorium. For Ericthonius' iconography see: *LIMC* Erechtheus, Kron 1976:249-59. Ericthonius as a serpent: *LIMC* Kekrops 13 = Aglauros, Herse, Pandrosos 15 = Erysichthon ii 1 = Gourmelen 2004: fig.5 (an Attic red-figure vase of ca. 480 seemingly portraying Ericthonius himself emerging from his Cecropid basket in the form of a gigantic snake); Euripides *Ion* 1427-31 (golden serpents as Ἐριχθωνίου γε τοῦ πάλαι μιμήματα); Hyginus *Astronomica* 2.13 (*Erichthonius anguis*), Pausanias 1.18.2, 1.24.5-7 (= *LIMC* Erechtheus 46 – the Parthenos' serpent 'could be Ericthonius'), Philostratus *Apollonius* 7.24 (Athene once bore a *drakōn* to the Athenians). Ericthonius as an anguipede: Hyginus *Fabulae* 166 (*inferiorem partem draconis habuit*), *Astronomica* 2.13 Servius on Virgil *Georgics* 3.113 (*puer draconteis pedibus*), Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 41.58-64 ('Erechtheus' described as an anguipede and explicitly paralleled with Cecrops in this), Fulgentius *Mitologiae* 2.11, First Vatican Mythographer 2.26 (*draconteis pedibus*), schol. Plato *Timaeus* 23e (δρακοντόπους), *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v Ἐρεχθεύς (δρακοντόπους). For discussions see: Powell 1906, Cook 1914-40:iii, 181-8, 218-23, 237-61, Fowler 1943, Burkert 1966, 1983:150-4, Kron 1976:32-83, 1981, 1988, Mitropoulou 1977:25-6, Robertson 1983, 1985, Brulé 1987:13-79, Kearns 1989:110-15, 160-1, Parker 1990, Blake Tyrell 1991:133-51, Reeder 1995, Gourmelen 2004 esp. 329-40, Sourvinou-Inwood 2011:24-134.

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius 5.89-90 = Heraclides of Pontus F16 Wehrli, incorporating fragments of Demetrius of Magnesia (i BC) and Hippobotus (ca. 200 BC).

²⁶ Artemidorus *Oneirocritica* 2.13 (list), 4.79 (heroes and heroines).

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 to Euripides Pirithous was bound to a rock seat where he was guarded by 'the gapes of *drakontes*.'

αὐτὸς μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ πέτρας ἀκινήτοι καθέδραι πεδηθεὶς δρακόντων ἐφρουρεῖτο
χάσμασιν

He himself had been chained to an immoveable seat and was being guarded by
the gapes of *drakontes*

Critias *Pirithous* hypothesis at *TrGF* i, 171

In an underworld scene of ca. 325-300 BC 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 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 *drakōn* with reference to *derkomai* (aorist participle: *drakōn*), thereby making the *drakōn* 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 (*adyta*), oracles and treasuries.²⁸ The sacred snake of the Athenian acropolis boasted the epithet 'house-watcher' (*oik-ouros ophis*), whilst Ladon, the Serpent of the Hesperides, rejoiced in the poetic epithets *phr-ouros ophis* ('fore-watcher') and *kēp-ouros* ('garden-watcher').²⁹ In their canonical representations, Ladon and the Colchis *drakōn* resemble each other strongly, as we have already noted, 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.³⁰ in the great *drakōn*-fight narratives of myth the *drakōn* is often cast as a guardian of a spring (a spring which of course itself emanates from the earth). In Euripides' *Phoenissae* of

²⁷ *LIMC* Charu(n) 101 = Erinys 18; cf. also *LIMC* Charu(n) 10 (ii BC).

²⁸ With δράκων, δράκοντος, compare δέρκομαι's zero-grade aorist participle δρακόντων, δράκόντος, though note the difference in accentuation. Ancient scholars on the etymology: Festus *De verborum significatu* 67 M, 110 M, Porphyry *De abstinencia* 3.8, Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.20.1-4, schol. Aristophanes *Wealth* 733, *Etymologicum Gudianum*, *Etymologicum Parvum*, *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v. δράκων; cf. also Cornutus *Theologiae Graecae compendium* 33 and Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica* 3.11.26. The etymology is surely implicit already in Homer *Iliad* 22.93-5 (δράκων... σμερδαλέον δὲ δέδορκεν). The etymology is approved by, inter alios, Chantraine 2009 s.v. δέρκομαι, and Beekes 2010 s.v. δράκων; Frisk 1960-72 s.v. δράκων is sceptical.

²⁹ Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 758-9; Apollonius *Argonautica* 1434; Euphorion F154 Powell = 148 Lightfoot.

³⁰ Pindar *Olympians* 1.1.

409 BC 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 *drakōn* of Ares, watching over the flowing, fertile waters, its glancing pupils roaming in all directions.’³¹ 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 BC indicate that the poet had already told us the same: ‘... a fountain is shaded... a *drakōn* living nearby to it... with fierce gaze... shaking its crest, fear of which... shepherds when quietly in... to do... to a woman everything happens... has come... not... a guard.’³²

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:

... ἀλλὰ νῦν ἔχει μέσος·
τοία Στυγός σε μελανοκάρδιος πέτρα
Ἀχερόντιός τε σκόπελος αίματοσταγῆς
φρουροῦσι, Κωκυτοῦ τε περίδρομοι κύνες,
ἔχιδνά θ’ ἑκατογκέφαλος, ἢ τὰ σπλάγχνα σου
διασπαράξει...

... 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...

Aristophanes *Frogs* 469-73

When Horace’s witches Canidia and Sagana dig a trough in the erstwhile cemetery on the Esquiline in order to call up ghosts, ‘serpents and underworld dogs’ are to be seen wandering about (*serpentes atque videres / infernas errare canes*). 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

³¹ Euripides *Phoenissae* 658-661 (δράκων, φύλαξ, ἐπισκοπῶν), 932 (Δίρκης ναμάτων ἐπίσκοπος), with schol. to 657. Cf., amongst later literature, Hellanicus F51 Fowler, Apollonius *Argonautica* 3.1176-90, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.28-38, [Plutarch] *On Rivers* 2.1 (τὸν κρηνοφύλακα δράκοντα) Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.4.1, Pausanias 9.10.1, 9.10.5, Hyginus *Fabulae* 6, 178, Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 4.398-9 (φυλάκτωρ). For images of the Serpent of Ares with its spring, see *LIMC* Kadmos i 13 (=Archemoros 11 = Hesperie 1), 15, 17, 19-25 (15 = Harmonia 1; 17 = Harmonia 4; 19 = Harmonia 2; 23 = Harmonia 6; 24 = Harmonia 7; 25 = Harmonia 5 = Vian 1963 plate ix, the Paestan vase).

³² Hyginus *Fabulae* 74; Euripides *Hypsipyle* F754a *TrGF* = F18 Bond; cf. also Tiiia *TrGF*. For illustrations of the serpent with its spring, see *LIMC* Archemoros 8 = *Hypsipyle* 3 = Nemea 14 = Septem 13.

³³ Horace *Satires* 1.8.34-5.

³⁴ The principal texts bearing upon Cerberus: Homer *Iliad* 5.395-7, 8.362-9 (with scholl.), *Odyssey* 11.623-6; Hesiod *Theogony* 306-18, 767-74; Hecataeus *FGrH* 1

underworld dogs, Cerberus too had a serpentine element from the beginning of his iconographic tradition, ca. 590 BC.³⁵ On the tondo of a Laconian cup of ca. 560-50 BC Laconian 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 530-20 BC gives Cerberus a row of tiny snakes coiling the length of his heads back and front paws: it is not completely clear that they are physically attached to him.³⁷ A series of vases of ca. 510-480 BC show a serpentless Cerberus emerging from the palace of Hades to meet Heracles accompanied by a separate large serpent.³⁸ Hecataeus, who was active during the Ionian Revolt of 500-494 BC, rationalised Cerberus into a giant venomous serpent (*ophis*, *drakōn*) 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 Heracleia Pontica.⁴⁰

F27; Pindar FF249a-b, 346 S.-M.; Bacchylides 5.56-62; Sophocles *Trachiniae* 1089-1100; Euripides *Heracles* 23-25, 610-19, 1276-8, 1386-7; Critias *TrGF* 43 F1; Aristophanes *Frogs* 142 (with Tzetzes), 465-78; Acusilaus of Argos F13 Fowler; Xenophon *Anabasis* 6.2.2; Philochorus *FGrH* 323 F18a-b; Callimachus F515 Pf.; Euphorion 24 Powell = 28 Lightfoot, F37 P = 41a L, F51 P = 71 L; Diodorus 4.25.1, 4.26.1, 14.31.3; Horace *Odes* 2.13.33-5, 2.19.29-32, 3.11.15-20; Virgil *Georgics* 4.483, *Aeneid* 6.417-25; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.449-51, 7.404-19; Pomponius Mela 1.92; Seneca *Agamemnon* 859-62, *Hercules Furens* 46-62, 662-96, 782-829; Plutarch *Theseus* 31.4; Heraclitus *De incredibilibus* 27, 33; Hyginus *Fabulae* 30.13, 151; Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.12; Pausanias 2.31.2, 2.35.10, 3.18.13, 3.25.5-6, 5.26.7, 8.18.3, 9.34.5; Arrian *FGrH* 156 F76a; Lucian *Cataplus* 28, *Menippus* 10, 14, *Dialogues of the Dead* 4, *Podagra* 302; Dionysius Periegetes 787-92 (with schol. and Eustathius); Quintus Smyrnaeus 6.261-8; Nonnus Abbas *Scholia Mythologica* 4.51 Nimmo Smith; Tzetzes schol. on Lycophron 699, *Chiliades* 2.36.391-413; Pediasimus 12; schol. Hesiod *Theogony* 311; First Vatican Mythographer 1.91, Third 6.22. For Cerberus' iconography see: *LIMC* Herakles 1697-1761 (Herakles Dodekathlos), 2553-2675 (Herakles and Kerberos [Labour xi]). For discussion see: Robert 1920-6:ii, 483-8, Eitrem 1921, Robertson 1980, Smallwood 1990.

³⁵ *LIMC* Herakles 2553 (ca. ca. 590-80 BC).

³⁶ *LIMC* Herakles 2605 = Pipili 1987 fig. 8. For the serpent-tail see also *LIMC* Herakles 2554, 2560, 2571, 2579, 2588, 2595, 2600, 2603, 2604 (ca. 530-25 BC), 2605, 2614, 2628.

³⁷ *LIMC* Herakles 2616.

³⁸ *LIMC* Herakles 2562, 2563, 2565.

³⁹ Hecataeus *FGrH* 1 F27 *apud* Pausanias 3.25; cf. also schol. Hesiod *Theogony* 311: 'Some said that Cerberus was a *drakōn*, others a dog.' After Hecataeus, a partially serpentine Cerberus is given us by: Euphorion F51 Powell = 71 Lightfoot, Virgil *Georgics* 4.483, *Aeneid* 6.417-25, Horace *Odes* 2.13.33-5, 2.19.29-32, 3.11.15-20, Seneca *Hercules Furens* 782-829; Lucan 6.664-5, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.12. Hecataeus in the Ionian Revolt: Herodotus 5.36, 125.

⁴⁰ Xenophon *Anabasis* 6.2.2, Theophrastus *Historia Plantarum* 9.16.4-7 (cf. Strabo C543, Arrian *FGrH* 156 F76a); Herodotus of Heracleia *FGrH* 31 F31; Euphorion *Xenios* F37 Powell = 41a Lightfoot; Nicander *Alexipharmaca* 13-15 (with schol. 13b:

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' *drakōn* 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 *drakontes*: 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 are misunderstood by Graf and 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 Dova in this volume that Heracles' battle against Geryon should be seen as a metaphorical *katabasis*, 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 the 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 Nekyia. Here Odysseus finally abandons his consultation of the ghosts, which has mutated in mid course into a *katabasis* as he wanders around within it to see its notable sights, when he is overtaken by a sudden fear:

... ἐμὲ δὲ χλωρὸν δέος ἦρει,
μή μοι Γοργεῖην κεφαλὴν δεινοῖο πελώρου

vomit); Diodorus 14.31.3; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7.404-19; Pomponius Mela 1.92; Seneca *Agamemnon* 859-6, *Hercules Furens* 46-62, 807-291; Dionysius Periegetes 787-92 (with schol. and Eustathius *ad loc.*; slaver in all, from the snake-heads in the last), First Vatican Mythographer 1.57.

⁴¹ Hesiod *Theogony* 767-74, recycled at Tzetzes schol. on Lycophron *Alexandra* 699; Seneca *Hercules Furens* 782-829; Quintus Smyrnaeus 6.261-8. Cf. also Euripides *Alcestis* 360-2 and Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1568-73.

⁴² Virgil *Aeneid* 6.417-25.

⁴³ Graf and Johnston 2007:112.

⁴⁴ For Orthus see in particular Hesiod *Theogony* 287-94, 306-9, 326-7; Stesichorus S7-87 SLG/Campbell (with Page 1973), Pindar *Isthmian* 1.13-15, with schol.; Palaephatus 39, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.10, Quintus Smyrnaeus 6.252-4, Servius on Virgil *Aeneid* 7.662, 8.300, schol. Plato *Timaeus* 24e, Pediasimus 10, 26. For ancient images of him see *LIMC* Orthros I, Geryoneus 8, 16.

ἐξ Ἅϊδος πέμψειεν ἀγανὴ Περσεφόνηα.

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.

Homer *Odyssey* 11.633-5

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. Gorgon-heads first appear in the artistic record from ca. 675 BC, whereupon they soon evolve into a canonical ‘lion mask type’: these are full-face images, and they typically have bulging, staring eyes. Their mouths form rictus grins with fangs and tusks projecting up and down, and a lolling tongue protrudes from them. Their hair forms serpentine curls, but actual snakes only become apparent by the end of the seventh century, which is a little late for the *Odyssey*, whatever we are to guess its date of effective composition to be.⁴⁵ However, one of the two earliest representations of full-bodied Gorgons, a Proto-Attic amphora of ca. 675-50 BC, gives its curiously wasp-bodied Gorgons front-facing cauldron-like heads, seemingly inspired by *gorgoneia*, and from these we find that heads snake-heads already sprout; the date of this vase better suits later estimates for the date of the poem’s effective composition, but, more the point, leaves open the possibility that full-bodied Gorgons and *gorgoneia* alike might have been imagined – optionally – to incorporate serpents from the point of their genesis.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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:

... *damnatus est ut rotam serpentibus innexam semper contra montem apud inferos volvat.*

He was condemned ever to roll a wheel entwined with serpents up a mountain in the underworld.

⁴⁵ LIMC Gorgo nos.1-79. For gorgoneion and Gorgon iconography in general see, *inter multos alios*, Furtwängler 1886-90 (a classic article), Krauskopf and Dahlinger 1988 (esp. 316-19 for the earliest material), Jameson 1990, Ogden 2008:24-66.

⁴⁶ LIMC Perseus no. 151.

⁴⁷ The Ixion myth: Pindar *Pythians* 2.21 (with schol.), Diodorus 4.769, Apollorus *Epitome* 1.20, Hyginus *Fabulae* 62, Servius on Virgil *Aeneid* 6.286, Lactantius Placidus on Statius *Thebaid* 4.539, schol. Euripides *Phoenissae* 1185 (NB for the fire), schol. Homer *Odyssey* 21.303, Schol. Apollonius *Argonautica* 3.62.

First Vatican Mythographer 1.14

One might dismiss the reference to snakes as a late fantasy, were it not for the fact that the ‘Ixion vase’ of ca. 330-10 BC shows Ixion bound to the spokes and (in the case of one hand) to the rim of fiery wheel by snakes; interestingly, 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.⁴⁸

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 a marvellously eloquent one. It appears on a black-figure lekythos of ca. 470 BC. 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 ghost between them, each pulling on an arm.⁴⁹ 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. In her left hand she held a torch and in her right a sword twenty cubits long. Below the waist she had 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.⁵⁰ In this form of Hecate we note again the emphatic association between serpents and dogs in the context of the underworld. Hecate could also torment the living: in an early reference to this notion, Hippocrates knew that the ‘magicians’ regarded the terrors of the night as ‘the attacks of Hecate and the onslaughts of heroes.’⁵¹

For both Aeschylus and Euripides, the underworld-dwelling Erinyes are strongly serpent-associated or are indeed actually she-serpents in themselves.⁵² As

⁴⁸ LIMC Ixion 15 (ca. 330-10 BC); cf. 18. See Simon 1955, Lochin 1990.

⁴⁹ LIMC Erinyes 7 = Hecate 95. For early literary references to Hecate in anguiform aspect see Aristophanes F515 K-A (χθονία θ’ Ἐκάτη / σπείρας ὄφεων εἰλιξαμένη, ‘Hecate of the earth rolling coils of snakes’) and Sophocles F535 *TrGF* (στεφανωσαμένη δρυὶ καὶ πλεκταῖς ὤμων σπείραισι δρακόντων, ‘garlanded with oak and the twisted coils of savage *drakontes*’). For Hecate in general see Heckenbach 1912, Nouveau-Piobb 1961, Boedeker 1983, Johnston 1990 (with care), Sarian 1992, Lautwein 2009.

⁵⁰ Lucian *Philopseudes* 22, 24, with discussion at Ogden 2007:161-70.

⁵¹ Hippocrates *On the Sacred Disease* 1.38: Ἐκάτης φασὶν εἶναι ἐπιβολὰς καὶ ἡρώων ἐφόδους.

⁵² On the Erinyes in general see Harrison 1899, 1922:213-56, Mitropoulou 1977:43-4, Junge 1983, Brown 1984, Sarian 1986, Henrichs 1994, Lloyd-Jones 1990, Sancassano

to the latter, Aeschylus applies the word *drakainē*, ‘she-serpent’, directly to them,⁵³ Euripides the phrase ‘she-serpent of Hades’ (*Haidou drakaina*) to an individual Erinys that is also said to possess plural mouths of terrible vipers (*echidnai*) that breathe both fire and murder-blood:⁵⁴ Euripides also describes them as a group as *drakontōdeis korai*, ‘serpent-like maidens’.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ On the second image of the Erinyes to survive, another Attic lekythos, this one dated to ca. 460-50 BC, 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 *estheton* and construed as a dual imperative addressed by the humanoid maiden to the pair of serpents she holds out before her, ‘Devour!’⁵⁷ 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’.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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. Harrison indeed saw them as evolving out of tomb-serpents. She surely has a case to answer, but her view has not found favour with more recent scholars.⁶⁰

Trophonius

The notion that one should expect to encounter snakes above all as one descended into the underworld is perhaps encapsulated in two lines of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. As Strepsiades is being pushed into Socrates’ *phrontisterion*, he exclaims:

δός μοι μελιτοῦτταν πρότερον, ὡς δέδοικ’ ἐγὼ
εἴσω καταβαίνων ὥσπερ εἰς Τροφωνίου.

1997:159-86. The Erinyes’ connection with the underworld: Homer *Iliad* 19.259-60; cf. Aeschylus *Eumenides* 264-8.

⁵³ Aeschylus *Eumenides* 128.

⁵⁴ Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris* 285-90

⁵⁵ Euripides *Orestes* 256.

⁵⁶ Serpents both in the hair and in the hand/around the arm: *LIMC* Erinys 1 (460-50 BC), 11, 12, 27, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 50, 52, 55, 58, 64, 69, 70, 74, 97, 105, 107, 108. Serpents in hair: *LIMC* Erinys 4, 9, 20, 21, 43 (440-30 BC), 45, 49, 57, 59, 61, 63, 85, 86, 90, 99, 104. Serpents in hand or around arm: *LIMC* Erinys 6 (an impressive Campanian bronze, ca. 400 BC), 18, 28-9, 30, 34, 35, 36, 48, 51, 67, 68, 73, 80, 96, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119.

⁵⁷ *LIMC* Erinys 1; discussion at Sarian 1986:841. One might rather have expected ἐσθίετον.

⁵⁸ Aeschylus *Choephoroe* 924, Euripides *Orestes* 260.

⁵⁹ For the Erinyes as pursuers of family vengeance see Homer *Iliad* 9.453-6, 571-2, 15.204, 21.412-14, Hesiod *Theogony* 183-5, 472.

⁶⁰ Harrison 1899:214-17, who is followed by Küster 1913: 62-72, but opposed by Sarian 1986:840-1 (who regards the Erinyes’ serpents more loosely as symbolic of the chthonic and, like their branches, of fertility) and Gantz 1993:526, 679. Note Aeschylus *Seven* 978-9, where ‘shade of Oedipus’ is in direct apposition to ‘black Erinys’: πότνια τ’ Οἰδίπου σκιά,/ μέλαιν’ Ἐρινύς.

Give me a honeycake first, as I'm as terrified as if descending into Trophonius' hole.

Aristophanes *Clouds* 507-8⁶¹

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 snakes at any rate could not eat honey cakes) and whatever their relationship to Trophonius himself.⁶² The comparison of Socrates' school to Trophonius' hole probably felt uncontrived at this point in the play. For one thing, Socrates probably already bore in the popular imagination or at any rate in the world of comedic fantasy the underworld and necromantic associations that were to manifest themselves so strikingly in the *Birds* of 414 BC, where he contrives to call up his associate Chaerephon 'the bat' as if a ghost at a lakeside *nekyomanteion*.⁶³ For another, Aristophanes had already introduced Socrates' school, now famously so, as a '*phrontisterion* of wise souls' (ψυχῶν σοφῶν τοῦτ' ἐστὶ φροντιστήριον).⁶⁴ We owe to Philostratus the information that the shrine of Amphiaraus at Oropus, in so many ways parallel in its operation and indeed its deity to that of Trophonius, boasted a *phrontisterion* that consisted of a 'sacred and divine fissure' and was associated with a 'gate of dreams.'⁶⁵ Something akin to Trophonius' inner hole, in which consultants encountered the god, perhaps in hallucinations brought about by sensory deprivation (as Ustinova would now contend), is evidently envisaged.⁶⁶ For all the trickery of the Second Sophistic, it seems unlikely that Philostratus should seek to redeploy a joking coinage of Aristophanes in a serious sense. It seems rather more likely that sanctuaries of this sort were already deploying the term *phrontisterion* for their holes in the ground in which underworld entities could be encountered in 423 BC, and that in using the term Aristophanes is making another joke on the same theme as his

⁶¹ Prior (probably) to the *Clouds* was Cratinus' *Trophonius*, a fragment of which refers to '*pareias* snakes' (παρεΐαι ὄφεις), F241 K-A; Cratinus died between 423 and 421 BC.

⁶² Large questions, which cannot be addressed here. For the honey-cakes given to the snakes of Trophonius' hole, see: Hesychius s.v. μαγίδες: ... καὶ μᾶζαι, ἃς καταφέρουσιν οἱ εἰς Τροφωνίου κατιόντες; *Etymologicum Magnum* s.v. μαγίς: μᾶζαι, τουτέστιν ἄρτοι οὓς καταφέρουσιν οἱ εἰς Τροφωνίου κατιόντες; *Etymologicum magnum* s.v. βοῦν: Ἔστι βοῦς καὶ εἶδος πλακοῦντος διδομένου τοῖς εἰς Τροφωνίου καταβαίνουσι, διότι οἱ καταβαίνοντες εἰς τὸ ἄδυτον μυκηθμῶν αἰσθάνονται. Schol. Aristophanes *Clouds* 508a has the aetiological tale of Saon of Acraephnum'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 exhaustively at Schachter 1981-94:iii 66-89, but his interpretation of the material is often eccentric. For discussion see above all Bonnechère 2003; note also Schachter 1967 and 1981-94:iii 66-89, Clark 1968, Bonnechère and Bonnechère 1989, Ogden 2001:80-6, 2013:321-5, Ustinova 2009:90-6, and the commentaries on Pausanias 9.39 by Frazer 1898, Papachatzis 1963-74 and Moggi and Ossana 2010.

⁶³ Aristophanes *Birds* 1553-64.

⁶⁴ Aristophanes *Clouds* 94.

⁶⁵ Philostratus *Imagines* 16 (Amphiaraus). For discussion of Amphiaraus see Petrakos 1968, Schachter 1981-94:i, 19-26, Ogden 2001:85-91, 2013:321-5, Sineux 2007

⁶⁶ Ustinova 2009:90-6.

subsequent reference to Trophonius. (Whether the term *phrontisterion* was being used in connection actually with Amphiaraus in 423 BC is less clear, and the question is complicated by the consideration that it was in the 420s BC that his shrine was in the process of being transferred from its original home at the unidentifiable Cnopia near Thebes to the green-field site at Oropus.⁶⁷ But we can at least note that by 414 BC Aristophanes was interested in him. This was the date at which he composed his *Amphiaraus*. Only meagre fragments remain, but they do include, intriguingly, a reference to this healing god or one of his representatives applying drugs and snakes to patients.⁶⁸)

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' (σχίσαις τε καὶ τριόδους πολλάς).⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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, and presumably this had nothing to do with their own designs. 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.⁷¹ Travelling in the other direction, Lucian tells us how Menippus contrived to emerge from Trophonius' hole after penetrating the underworld that same day at Babylon.⁷² 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.⁷³ 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 paths of the underworld.

Blowing out and sucking in: *drakontes* and *aornoi*

Drakontes 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.'⁷⁴ Aeschylus uses Typhon's name as a poetic means of denoting destructive hurricanes – 'typhoons'.⁷⁵ Hyginus' Lernean Hydra, 'had such power in her poison that she could kill men just by breathing on them. And if anyone passed by her whilst she was asleep, he would breathe in her tracks and perish in an even greater torment.'⁷⁶ Horace's Cerberus has a 'three-tongued mouth that emits a foul breath and

⁶⁷ Cnopia: Strabo C414.

⁶⁸ Aristophanes *Amphiaraus* F28 K-A.

⁶⁹ Plato *Phaedo* 108a.

⁷⁰ Bernabé and Jiménez 2008. For the importance of turning right, cf. Ogden 2010a.

⁷¹ Apollonius: Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 8.19.

⁷² Lucian *Menippus* 9 and 22.

⁷³ For a more expansive development of this idea, see Ogden 2010b.

⁷⁴ Hesiod *Theogony* 861-2, 869-71.

⁷⁵ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 656.

⁷⁶ Hyginus *Fabulae* 30.3.

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.⁷⁷

This striking capacity invited comparison with *aornoi*, 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 *aornos* originated in a folk etymology of 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.⁷⁸ *Aornos* was held to derive from an alpha-privative and *ornis*, 'bird', and so read to signify 'birdless.' 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. [Whence the Greeks called the place *Aornos*.]'⁷⁹ From Avernus the term *aornos* was extended to other lake-entrances to the underworld, and thence again to cave-entrances to the underworld, mephitic or otherwise.⁸⁰

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' (*adflatu funesti tabe veneni*) which, 'emanating black from its Stygian mouth, infects the corrupted airs' (*quique halitus exit/ ore niger Stygio, vitiatas inficit auras*).⁸¹ In the light of this, we can see that Virgil's description of Avernus with its 'black jaws' had already saluted the affinity between the *drakōn* and the *aornos* from the other side.

But 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

⁷⁷ Horace *Odes* 3.11.15-20. For the triple tongue, see, e.g., Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.34 (Serpent of Ares), Statius *Thebaid* 1.565 (Python).

⁷⁸ Virgil *Aeneid* 6 *passim*.

⁷⁹ Virgil *Aeneid* 6.237-42. The square-bracketed text may be an interpolation. This etymology is probably already implicit in Sophocles F748 *TrGF*/Pearson, which describes an Italian oracle of the dead (*nekuomanteion*) as 'birdless' (*aornos*). See Ogden 2001:25-8, 61-74.

⁸⁰ *Aornos* lakes: Ampsanctus (Cicero *On Divination* 1.36, Pliny *Natural history* 2.208, Servius on *Aeneid* 7.563), the Acherusian lake (Pliny *Natural History* 4.1, Pausanias 9.30.6, Hyginus *Fabulae* 88), Tartessos (Scholiast Aristophanes *Frogs* 475), Babylon (Python *TrGF* 91 F1, *Agen*, with Snell 1976:99-117; cf. Lucian *Menippus* 9), Sarmatians (Heraclides Ponticus F128ab Wehrli). *Aornos* caves: Thymbria (Strabo C636), Hierapolis (Strabo C629-30, Cassius Dio 68.27, Damascius *Life of Isidore* at Photius *Bibliotheca* cod. 242 §13), Potniai (Pausanias 9.8.3, Statius *Thebaid* 2.32-57), Indian *Aornos* (Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 2.10). For these and further examples, see Ogden 2001: 25-7, 45, 62, 2010 esp. 104-17.

⁸¹ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.28-98, with 49 and 75-6 for the poisonous breath.

retell Greek dragon-slaying stories, but were disinclined to develop new ones of their own.⁸² The dimly dark cave in which Silius' Bagra 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.⁸³ After Virgil and Lucan, it is wholly appropriate that such underworld imagery should appear in the sixth book.

And just as birds could fall victim to the noxious fumes of the *aornos*, so they could to the noxious fumes of the serpent. Silius' Bagra serpent emits pungent exhalations that suffocate birds in the sky that then drop for it to devour.⁸⁴ Such a motif was presumably already old by the age of Lucan, who varies it by having Medusa drop birds out of the sky by petrifying them.⁸⁵ And it was perhaps the ability of *drakontes* to suffocate birds that explains a curious story Pliny tells of the Triumvir Lepidus. Whilst being lodged in a house in a wooded grove by the local magistrates of an unnamed place, he was kept awake at night by the birds. So to give him peace in the following nights they surrounded the wood with a long parchment upon which they had drawn a *draco*.⁸⁶

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. The elder 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 *aornos*. 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.⁸⁷ The poet Lucan describes his African *dracones* as constrictors that suck down air and take in birds with it.⁸⁸ Aelian speaks of an interesting variation on this technique in his own account of the *drakontes* 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 *inyx*-wheel used in the magic of erotic attraction.⁸⁹

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

⁸² Silius Italicus 6.140-293. The tale is told or otherwise noted by: Q. Aelius Tubero *HRR* F8 (at i, 308-12; = Aulus Gellius 7.3; Tubero wrote in the mid first century BC), Livy *Periocha* 18, Valerius Maximus 1.8 ext 19, Seneca *Letters* 82.24, Pliny *Natural History* 8.36-7, Florus 1.18, Cassius Dio F42.23 = Zonaras ii p.209 Dindorf (*drakōn*), Arnobius *Adversus nationes* 7.46, Orosius 4.8.10-15. There are no ancient illustrations of the episode.

⁸³ Silius Italicus 6.146-50, 174-80. On the Silius text generally see Basset 1955 and Spaltenstein 1986 *ad loc*.

⁸⁴ Silius Italicus 6.157-9; the connection is noted by Spaltenstein 1986 on 6.146.

⁸⁵ Lucan 9.649-53

⁸⁶ Pliny *Natural History* 38.121.

⁸⁷ Pliny *Natural History* 8.36-7. Megasthenes is cited for India, Metrodorus for the Rhyndacus.

⁸⁸ Lucan 9.727-733.

⁸⁹ Aelian *Nature of Animals* 2.21.

action: it ‘draws’ birds into itself (ἐπισπόμενον).⁹⁰ But underworld entrances could suck people into themselves too. 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.⁹¹ Pausanias tells of a wind or torrent that sucks consultants into the inner cave of Trophonius.⁹² Plutarch’s mysterious story of Strato and Callisthenes, the competing suitors for the hand of Aristocleia seems to imply that the cave sucked Callisthenes into itself so that he could be with his dead beloved in the underworld.⁹³ The drawing-power of underworld entrance and serpent are seemingly assimilated in Aelian’s information about the sacred *drakōn* 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.⁹⁴

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.

Abbreviations

<i>FGrH</i>	Jacoby <i>et al.</i> 1923-
<i>HRR</i>	Peter 1906-14
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> 1981-99
<i>ThesCRA</i>	<i>Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum</i> 2004-5.

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⁹⁰ Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 2.10.

⁹¹ Seneca *Hercules furens* 662-96.

⁹² Pausanias 9.39.

⁹³ Plutarch *Moralia* 771e-772c.

⁹⁴ Aelian *Nature of Animals* 11.16.

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