

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. LV



HELSINKI 2021

ARCTOS – ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

Arctos has been published since 1954, annually from vol. 8 (1974). *Arctos* welcomes submissions dealing with any aspect of classical antiquity, and the reception of ancient cultures in mediaeval times and beyond. *Arctos* presents research articles and short notes in the fields of Greek and Latin languages, literatures, ancient history, philosophy, religions, archaeology, art, and society. Each volume also contains reviews of recent books. The website is at www.journal.fi/arctos.

Publisher:

Klassillis-filologinen yhdistys – Klassisk-filologiska föreningen (The Classical Association of Finland), c/o House of Science and Letters, Kirkkokatu 6, FI – 00170 Helsinki, Finland.

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ISSN 0570-734X (print)

ISSN 2814-855X (online)

Layout by Vesa Vahtikari

Printed by Grano Oy, Vaasa

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THE SYMBOLISM BEHIND THE *DRACO* STANDARD

KIRSI SIMPANEN

Abstract: This paper discusses the symbolic meanings of the *draco* as a Roman military standard. Although similar standards were used by several ancient peoples, the appearance of those standards differed from nation to nation. In Rome it resembled a serpent. While the history and usage of the emblem have been discussed before, the symbolism behind it has received less attention. Thus, my aim is to determine the reason for the standard's anguine form in Roman usage, and what symbolic meanings were attached to it. The *draco* shared a common symbolism with other serpents depicted in ancient sources, but its symbolic meaning also changed over time.

Keywords: *Draco*, Roman military standards, snake symbolism

Introduction

The Roman *draco* military standard was an impressive sight, with its fierce and menacing serpentine head and its long, textile body that writhed in the wind in a manner that made it look like a living creature. The history of the standard is no less fascinating than its physical appearance; the Romans first became acquainted with it as an enemy emblem, but were so impressed by it that they adopted it to their own use. This paper concentrates on the symbolic meaning of the standard, and seeks to answer the following questions: why did the Roman version of the standard resemble a snake? What kind of message did the Romans want to convey with it? What was its significance to the Romans themselves?

Understanding the cultural meanings of military standards is as important as understanding their tactical usage, and studying the Roman *draco* not only gives more information about the standard itself, but also increases our knowledge about Roman belief systems in general. It may also help us to perceive what kind of psychological tools were used in ancient warfare, and also which qualities were considered essential for both an army and individual soldiers.

The symbolic value of the *draco* has not been studied in depth in previous research. No broader monograph on the topic has been written, and the article “The ‘*draco*’ standard” by J. C. N. Coulston is still the most thorough study on the subject.¹ The standard has been discussed mostly in books dealing with the Roman army and military matters. In this article, I approach the *draco* standard from a new angle, by exploring what similarities it shares with other interpretations of the snake in classical sources on a symbolic level in order to answer my research questions. My new analysis of the symbolism of the *draco* is based on both iconographical analysis of the surviving examples and their depictions in art as well as in ancient literature. This analysis will also reveal the changes that occurred in the meaning of the *draco* with the rise of Christianity, and how these changes affected the fate of the standard.

It is necessary to begin with a brief discussion about the relationship between the *draco* and the serpent, and then to understand why the Roman *draco* was as it was, before proceeding to a short overview of the background of the standard.

The *draco* as a creature

In antiquity, the *draco* (derivative from the Greek “δράκων”) was considered to be a real snake, albeit a huge one.² As for the different words for snake, Servius claims that *anguis* refers to an aquatic snake, *serpens* to a snake living on land, and *draco* to a snake sacred to gods. Servius then notes that these meanings are

¹ J. C. N. Coulston, “The ‘*draco*’ standard”, *JRMES* 2 (1991) 101–14. However, see also E. Kavanagh, *Estandartes militares en la Roma antigua: Tipos, simbología y función*, Madrid 2015, 182–221.

² Discussion on the meaning of the word *draco* see e.g. D. Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford 2013, 2–4; E. Pottier, s.v. *Draco*, *Dar.–Sag* (1892) 403–404; R. Merkelbach, s.v. *Drache*, *RAC* 4 (1959) 226–227.

often confused.³ On the basis of the surviving literature it seems that these words were used almost interchangeably, just as δράκων and ὄφις in Greek, although the division Servius provides is right in connecting *draco* with the divine. The word alluded to the great mythological serpents who had supernatural powers, a hybrid form, and an affiliation with the gods,⁴ although at the same time it was also used of the ordinary snakes of the real world.⁵

The oldest known appearance of the word “δράκων” in literature is from the *Iliad*,⁶ and in one of the passages where the word is used the same creature is also referred to as ὄφις.⁷ The earliest application of the word δράκων in natural history is from *Τῶν περὶ τὰ ζῶα ἱστοριῶν* by Aristotle.⁸ Here Aristotle mentions that the eagle and the δράκων are enemies, because the eagle eats snakes (τοὺς ὄφεις), and it is clear that Aristotle has a real snake in mind. Likewise, Nicander considers δράκων to be a common snake in his *Θηριακά*, which is the first work to give a more detailed description of the animal.⁹ Similarly, Roman authors saw *draco* as a snake. The most detailed and hence the most interesting texts dealing with the subject are the *Naturalis historia* by Pliny and *Περὶ ζῴων ιδιότητος* by Aelian.

In both of these texts, other words for snake are used interchangeably with *draco*/δράκων.¹⁰ In accordance with the literature, classical art presents *dracones*/δράκοντες as snakes.¹¹ As for *draco* the military standard, classical authors used other words for snake to describe it; Arrian mentions that *dracones* were made to look like snakes (he uses the word ὄφις) in order to make them more

³ Serv. *Aen.* 2,202–5.

⁴ Ogden remarks that until the end of the fifth century BCE δράκων nearly always refers to a creature that is either supernatural itself or is possessed by some supernatural power.

⁵ It does not seem worthwhile to try to identify *draco*/δράκων as some certain species of snake. The descriptions of *draco* are so varying that different authors may have had different snakes in mind.

⁶ The word δράκων appears in the following passages: 2,301–320; 3,33–37; 6,181; 11,38–40; 12,195–229; 22,93–97.

⁷ Hom. *Il.* 12,200–209.

⁸ Arist. *Hist. an.* 9,2,3.

⁹ Nic. *Ther.* 438–57.

¹⁰ E.g. Plin. *nat.* 8,26; Ael. *NA.* 6,63.

¹¹ One only needs to cast a glance over Greek and Roman art to see that the creatures called *dracones*/δράκοντες in ancient literature were presented as snakes.

frightening.¹² Claudian uses both *anguis* and *serpens* to describe the standard,¹³ and Sidonius Apollinaris calls it an *anguis*.¹⁴

In light of this evidence, then, it seems apparent that the *draco* the military standard was part of the wider tradition of *dracones*, creatures who might have had supernatural powers but who in their appearance resembled ordinary snakes. Thus, the varied symbolism of the serpent surely applied to *dracones* as well.

The origins of the *draco* standard

It is uncertain when the Romans first became acquainted with the *draco* standard, and from whom they adopted it to their own use. The origin of the standard is also uncertain, but it is strongly connected with the eastern steppe people, and these must have played a role in the standard's transmission to the west. Arrian calls the standard "Scythian" in his Τέχνη τακτική,¹⁵ but he probably means "Sarmatian".¹⁶ During the first centuries before and after the beginning of the Common Era, internal turmoil between different Sarmatian tribes drove some of them from Asia to the area of the Danube, where they came into contact with the local peoples. Presumably the *draco* travelled to the west with these Sarmatian tribes and was then adopted by the Dacians and other local sedentary peoples. The general opinion is that the standard came into Roman use either by adopting it from the Sarmatians serving in their auxiliary units or by taking them from their enemies. The Romans employed Sarmatians in their auxiliary units from the first century CE onwards, and most likely they brought their own equipment with them. In the light of the sources, however, it seems more likely that the Romans adopted the *draco* from their enemies rather than their allies. In Roman art the emblem is first associated strongly with their enemies, and the first depiction of the standard in Roman use is from the end of the second century, while the first enemy *dracones* appear in art roughly a hundred years

¹² Arr. *Tact.* 35,3.

¹³ Claud. 5,185–88; Claud. 7,138–41.

¹⁴ Sidon. *carm.* 5,402–407.

¹⁵ Arr. *Tact.* 35,2–5.

¹⁶ Coulston (above n. 1) 106.

earlier.¹⁷ In Trajan's column the *draco* is an emblem of the Dacians, but at some point after Trajan's Dacian wars the Romans began to arm some of their cavalry troops on the model of the heavily armed Sarmatian cavalry, and the *draco* may have been adopted along with other equipment in this instance. From Arrian we know that *dracones* were used in Roman cavalry parades during Hadrian's reign.¹⁸ It is possible that *dracones* were first used exclusively in parades, and were only incorporated into the family of Roman military standards slightly later.¹⁹

During the second and third centuries the *draco* was used solely by the cavalry in the Roman army, but by the fourth century the infantry had also taken it into use, and it may have become the official standard of individual cohorts.²⁰ During the fourth century the *draco* also became the personal

¹⁷ The Portonaccio sarcophagus, which dates to the reign of Marcus Aurelius and is now at the Palazzo Massimo delle Terme in Rome (inv. no. 112327), contains the first putative representations of the standard in Roman use. The *dracones* on the sarcophagus are not explicitly depicted as belonging to either side, as the main relief presents a chaotic battle scene typical to battle sarcophagi, and the staff of the *draco* standard disappears among the intertwined combatants. However, based on their positioning, the *dracones* are generally interpreted as belonging to the Romans. The *draco*, *vexillum*, and *aquila* are framing the central character, and in Roman art *dracones* were often associated with other Roman standards and were used to highlight the presence of important persons. On the right end of the sarcophagus, two barbarians bow in submission to the Roman general and cavalrymen, who have *dracones* floating above their heads along with a *vexillum*. E.g. Coulston and Töpfer are convinced that the *dracones* of the Portonaccio sarcophagus are Roman: Coulston (above n. 1) 102; K. M. Töpfer, *Signa Militaria. Die römischen Feldzeichen in den Republik und im Prinzipat*, Mainz RGZM 2011, 35, 375–376. Literature on the sarcophagus: D. E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, New Haven 1992, 301–302. The first enemy *dracones* are portrayed on two marble pilasters, which are now at Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (inv. no. 59 and 72). The pictorial motif of the pilasters is *spolia* taken from defeated enemies and piled on top of each other. The pilasters are dated to the reign of Domitian, and are originally from Rome, possibly from the Aventine Hill, and are related to the *Armilustrum*. The *dracones* and other objects on the pilasters are ornate and stylized, which raises the question of whether real *spolia* were used as a model or not. Literature: G. A. Mansuelli, *Galleria degli Uffizi: Le sculture. Parte 1*, Roma 1958, 25–26; J. W. Crous. "Florentiner Waffnenpfeiler and Armilustrum", *MDAI (R)* 48 (1933) 73–106.

¹⁸ Arr. *Tact.* 35,2–5

¹⁹ The equipment used in parades were often more ornate than common military equipment.

²⁰ Veg. *mil.* 2,13: *Dracones etiam per singulas cohortes a draconariis feruntur ad proelium*. This passage is the first, and rare, reference to a particular cohort standard. Because of the scarcity of sources, the existence of an official cohort standard has been an unresolved question. As Coulston notes, the third

emblem of the emperor,²¹ however there is some evidence that the rise of Christianity, with its negative attitude towards snakes, caused the standard to be seen with some reserve from the later fourth century onwards. The fourth century poet Prudentius is certainly hostile to *dracones*, and enthusiastically plays with their symbolism in his poems.²² Moreover, the Christian standard, the *labarum*, had become the leading military emblem; the church father Gregory of Nazianzus, a contemporary of Prudentius, reproached the emperor Julian for removing Christian symbols from this “king of standards”, which was positioned at the head of the army before the *dracones* and other military emblems.²³ The *draco* is also no longer depicted in Roman art after the fourth century. The serpent of Eden, the sea serpent Leviathan, the dragon of the revelation, and all the other monstrous serpents of the Bible ensured that Christians would associate snakes with evil, or even with Satan himself. In Christian hagiographies the serpent also symbolises paganism. Quite curiously, despite all of this the negative connotations the serpents were burdened with did not seem to impact the status of the *draco* in the army as dramatically as one might expect. The literary evidence reveals that the *draco* was still used by the army in the fourth and fifth centuries, and also by those Christian emperors who took actions against pagan cults.²⁴ *Draconarii* are mentioned even later in the Byzantine sources: in his

century policy to detach cohorts from their legions may be a reason for the introduction of the *draco* as a cohort sign: Coulston (above n. 1) 110.

²¹ Coulston (above n. 1) 106, 110; Töpfer (above n. 17) 34. This is also evident from Roman art and literature. The examples are discussed below, see n. 24 and 74.

²² In his *Liber Cathemerinon* Prudentius describes how Moses fled from Egypt with the Pharaoh's army on his heels, holding up their *dracones*: Prud. *cath.* 5,55–56. The anachronistic association of the *dracones* with the Pharaoh's troops naturally aims to symbolize the paganism of the Egyptians. In *Liber Peristephanon* Prudentius relates the story of two *draconarii* who want to leave the army after coming over to the Christian faith: Prud. *perist.* 1,33–35. Abandoning *dracones* is a symbol of abandoning pagan gods. In *Contra Symmachum* Prudentius mentions that the *labarum* preceded the *draco* and all other standards at the battle of Pollentia (402), thus ensuring the Roman victory: Prud. *c.Symm.* 2,712–13.

²³ Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 4,66. While Gregory clearly places the *labarum* before traditional Roman standards in this passage, he does seem to be fascinated by the appearance of the *draco*.

²⁴ Libanius describes how *dracones* were present when emperor Valens visited Antioch in 371: Lib. 1,144; Themistios implies that the emperors Constantius II and Theodosius I had *dracones*: Them. Or. 1,2a; 18,219a; Ammianus Marcellinus also mentions the elaborate *dracones* of Constantius II: Amm. 16,10,7; Claudian describes the *dracones* of emperor Honorius: Claud. 7,138–41; 8,570–76; 28,597–605.

Περὶ ἀρχῶν τῆς Ῥωμαίων πολιτείας, or *De Magistratibus reipublicae Romanae*, Ioannes Lydus discusses the composition of the army, amongst other things, and mentions δρακονάριοι, i.e. δρακοντοφόροι as part of the army.²⁵ The Στρατηγικόν also mentions *draconarii*.²⁶ Furthermore, *draconarii* are mentioned in a number of inscriptions and papyri, written in both Greek and Latin. The topics of these texts vary from administrative documents and legal contracts to funerary inscriptions, and they date mainly from the fourth to the sixth century.²⁷

Two Byzantine signet rings provide rare pictorial evidence for the existence of the *draco* in the Byzantine army. One of these rings is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 1), and the other, almost identical one is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.²⁸ A soldier with a halo around his head is carved on both rings. He is holding a *draco* standard in his hand, while simultaneously stamping on a serpent. It almost seems as if the two snakes are represented as opposites of each other: the serpent on the ground symbolises evil forces, while the standard is an emblem of the saintly soldier and waves proudly in the air. The estimated date for the rings is the fifth or sixth century.²⁹

²⁵ Lydus, *Mag.* 1, 46. Lydus may well have described the earlier Roman army, but his intention was to show that there was continuity between earlier Rome and the Byzantine empire, and that the same practices continued in the Byzantine empire.

²⁶ Strat. 12, 8, 7–8.

²⁷ Inscriptions: *CIL* 3, 14333, 1 (Uncertain); *AE* 1891, 105; *ILS* 8881; *IK* 27, 120; *AE* 2002, 624; *SEG* 32, 1554, A36; *MAMA* 1, 218; *CIL* 11, 32968; Ostraca: *SB* 16, 128444; *O. Eleph.* DAIK 255; Papyri: *CPR* 24, 15; *P. Amst.* 1, 45; *P. Lond.* 1, 113, 1; *P. Münch.* 1, 14; *P. Strasb.* 6, 579; *SB* 18, 3860; *SB* 24, 16043; *ChLA* 29, 877. The last example, a papyrus from Ravenna, is dated to as late as the eighth century. The possible reasons for the later appearances of the standard, or its bearers, in the sources are discussed below.

²⁸ The ring in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is made of silver, and its accession number is 41.160.279. The ring in the Victoria and Albert Museum is made of gold, and its inventory number is M 175. For the rings, see H. Nickel, “Of Dragons, Basilisks, and the Arms of the Seven Kings of Rome”, *MMJ* 24 (1989) 25–34. It is noteworthy that the rings bear the inscription “BPATHAA”, which according to Nickel is an archaic Balkan-Slavic diminutive for “brother”. Thus, these rings might be “class rings” of *draconarii*, and they may have belonged to mercenaries recruited from Slavic tribes. In this case, the standards depicted in the rings could also represent the traditional emblems of these mercenaries.

²⁹ A terracotta plaque representing St. Theodore from Vinica, Macedonia (sixth or seventh century), may provide another, later representation of the standard. The saint is represented on horseback and holding an object that looks strongly like a *draco* standard. There is some uncertainty in this

After the sixth century, *dracones* and *draconarii* disappear from the sources almost completely, and appear only sporadically.³⁰ During that time banners became the most popular form of military standard.³¹

Thus, it could be argued that the standard stirred up mixed emotions in the late empire. It remained in use for quite some time, and the reason for this is apparently that Christians were able to find new interpretations that justified its continuous usage despite the serpent's negative reputation in their religion.³²

However, it was not seen as an appropriate pictorial motif after the fourth century,



Fig. 1: Byzantine signet ring. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941. Available under Creative Commons Zero (CC0). <https://www.metmuseum.org>.

identification, however, for St. Theodore was known as an early Christian dragon-slayer and the scene is often interpreted as the saint's triumph over the beast. The dating is also somewhat uncertain. Literature concerning the plaque: C. Walker, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition*, New York, 2016, 45–46; 50–51; E. Dimitrova, *The Ceramic Relief Plaques from Vinica. The Most Significant Values of the Cultural Heritage*, Skopje, 2017, 10–11.

³⁰ Isidore of Seville mentions *dracones* in his *Etymologiae* in the seventh century, but it seems that he is describing something he is not familiar with: Isid. Etym. 18,3,3. The tenth century source *De Ceremoniis* mentions *draconarii*, and the *Historia* of Niketas Choniates from the twelfth century refers to the standard. For the latter two mentions see A. Babuin, "Standards and Insignia of Byzantium", *Byzantion* vol. 71 no. 1 (2001) 14–15. When considering later mentions of *draconarii*, one cannot always be sure what was meant by the term, especially without further context, because in the late empire the term was adopted to describe officials in the civil service: *Cod. Iust.* 1,27,1,35.

³¹ There is also the possibility that the terms *draco* and *draconarius* were used anachronistically in later centuries, and that the actual standard in used was no longer similar to the one that was known in the earlier empire. For example, it may be that the *draco* appeared as a motif in the field of a flag at later dates.

³² These are discussed in more detail below.

judging from the fact that it hardly appears after this date in surviving visual sources.³³ Furthermore, during the late empire Rome had persistent conflicts with many barbaric tribes who also used the *draco* standard, and perhaps this, combined with the negative Christian attitude towards snakes, caused the *draco* to be associated with enemies once again.³⁴ There is some pictorial evidence of medieval *dracones*, but whether this is a sign of continuity, rediscovery, or intentional emulation of earlier Roman practices is uncertain.³⁵

Whether the Romans adopted the standard from their enemies or from their auxiliaries, the journey of the *draco* from an enemy standard to the personal emblem of the emperor was enabled by its unique appearance, which made it both a practical and impressive standard at the same time. It was easy to recognize from afar, and it made a huge impression on viewers. In Rome it served important functions, first in the service of the cavalry and then the infantry, perhaps as the standard of the cohort, and lastly as the imperial standard. However, the rise of Christianity altered the way that serpents were perceived, and that was reflected in the diminished status of the *draco* standard in the army. Considering the general lack of evidence, it is hard to form a definite image of the last phases of the standard, but it seems fair to assume that the spread of Christianity changed the way that the standard was perceived and had at least a part to play in its demise.

³³ The special status of standards in the army was hard for the Christians to accept in general, as they saw it as idolatry. E.g. Tert. *idol.* 19,2; Tert. *apol.* 16,8.

³⁴ Some of the literary mentions from the later empire give this impression. Prudentius (above n. 22) has already been cited. In the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris contrasts the Roman *Aquila* with enemy *dracones* in his panegyric to Anthemius: Sidon. *carm.* 2,232–233. However, in his panegyric to Majorianus both the enemy and the Romans have *dracones* as their standards: Sidon. *carm.* 5,402–407.

³⁵ *Psalterium aureum Sancti Galli*, now at Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen in Switzerland, portrays a ninth century Carolingian *draco* that looks very ichthyic. The Bayeux Tapestry, now at the Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, is from the eleventh century and depicts *dracones* used at the battle of Hastings. These *dracones* seem to have wings and forelegs. *Dracones* began to have such features in the illustrations of medieval bestiaries. As for the question of medieval usage of the standard, see Coulston (above n. 1) 108. Also I. Lebedynsky discusses the theme in his article *Draco: Dragon Standards East and West*, published in *The Flag Bulletin* no. 164 (1995) 94.

What was the enemy *draco* like?

In Roman art, the head of the enemy *draco* resembles that of a wolf. On the Column of Trajan, for instance, the creature has pointed, erect ears and its mouth is open, revealing a curved tongue and a row of teeth, including long canines (Fig. 2).³⁶ The wolf as an emblem of the Dacians would make sense, as the animal was symbolically important to them.³⁷ Even the word “Δάοι”, by which the Dacians were called “in early times” as Strabo says, is said to derive from a word for wolf. Strabo also states that the Scythians were called by the same name.³⁸ Sometimes the emblem does not look strictly lupine, however, but has more peculiar features. In some cases it nearly resembles a marine creature. In the reliefs from the *Hadrianeum* the *draco* has its typical, pointed ears, but it also has projecting eyes and a snout that brings to mind a dolphin (Fig. 3).³⁹ On both Trajan’s column and the *Hadrianeum* reliefs the enemy *draco* has strips of fabric attached to its body. The reason for



Fig. 2: Draco on the pedestal of Trajan’s column (photo by the author).

³⁶ There are 27 *dracones* on Trajan’s column, the largest and thus the most detailed ones being on the pedestal. Following the numbering of Cichorius (C. Cichorius, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule*, Berlin 1896–1900), the scenes with *dracones* are: XXIV, XXV, XXXI, XXXVIII, LIX, LXIV, LXVI, LXXV, LXXVIII, CXXII. The *Dracones* on the column are clearly symbols of the Dacians; they are the ones portrayed with the standards, although their Sarmatian allies also appear on the column.

³⁷ Mircea Eliade discusses the relationship of the Dacians and wolves in his article: M. Eliade, “Les Daces et les loups”, *Numen* Vol. 6 Fasc. 1 (1959) 15–31.

³⁸ Strab. 7,3,12.

³⁹ The *draco* is depicted on two of the trophy panels of the *Hadrianeum*. One is now in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome (inv. no. M. C. 764), and the other is in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (inv. no. 6739). Literature: Kleiner (above n. 17) 283–285.

this may have been to add a sense of movement to the standard, and thus make it an even more spectacular sight, but the strips could also represent fins and scales. The enemy *dracones* represented in Roman art actually have strikingly much in common with depictions of an ancient sea monster known as κῆτος in Greek and *cetus* in Latin. In art, the appearance of κῆτος varies: sometimes it resembles a whale, but often it has anguine body

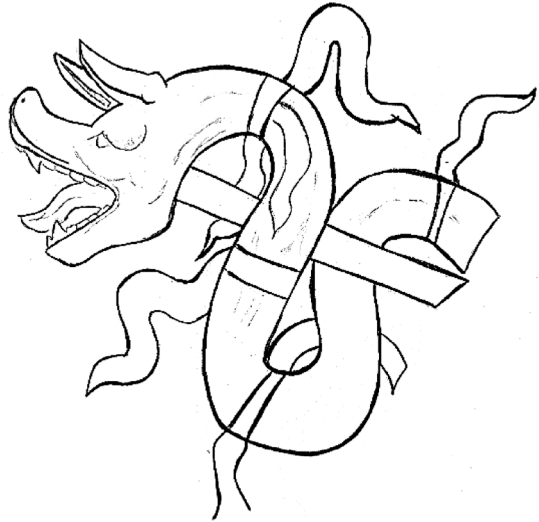


Fig. 3: Draco on the trophy panel of the Hadrianeum, a detail (drawing by the author, after Coulston, above n.1).

with a mixture of features from other animals. These fantastical features could derive from a lack of scientific knowledge of aquatic animals, with imagination filling in the gaps. The idea of such monstrous creatures may have arisen from a fear of the unknown. They may also have symbolised the dangers of the sea in a broader sense, as well as the uncontrollability of nature.

The strange features of the eastern *draco* has led some to think that it may not have been meant to represent a wolf, but rather some kind of hybrid creature, which were common in eastern art. The similarity between them and the representations of sea monsters may be caused by a similar use of the imagination in the face of the unknown, and as a resulting shared symbolism. Vasile Pârvan believes that the wolf-serpent creature of the Dacians has its origin in the art of Asia Minor, and dates it to the second millennium BCE. According to Pârvan, the standard was transmitted to different nations in two different types: the Iranian type had a wolf's head, and the Thraco-Getic type had a reptilian head.⁴⁰ However, the *draco* was used also by the Parthians

⁴⁰ V. Pârvan, *Dacia: An Outline of the Early Civilizations of the Carpatho-Danubian Countries*,

and Sasanians. Lucian of Samosata calls Parthian *dracones* serpents,⁴¹ but it is possible that the Parthian, like the Sasanian, emblem represented the Senmurv, the mythical Iranian creature with a dog's head and forepaws and the wings and tail of a bird.⁴² Sometimes the creature also has scales like a fish or reptile. In Zoroastrian tradition, the snake is considered an "evil" animal, while the dog is benevolent and respected.⁴³ A silver head of a Senmurv, identified as a part of a military standard, has survived, but it may be post-Sassanid.⁴⁴

It seems plausible that the standard developed from a single prototype that possibly represented some kind of hybrid creature. This was then transmitted to different nations, who often altered it somewhat in order to make it fit with their own traditions. Every nation chose a creature that was symbolically important to them and had qualities that made it suitable to serve as a military emblem. This is how the same standard came to symbolize various nations who from time to time fought against each other.

What was the Roman *draco* like?

The physical appearance of the Roman *draco* is fairly well known, as a headpiece of a *draco* standard was found at Niederbieber, Germany (Fig. 4).⁴⁵ The similarity between this object and the *dracones* represented in Roman art and literary

Cambridge 1928, 124–126. Pârvan as a source is old, but he has searched the origins of the *draco* more deeply than most.

⁴¹ Lucian *Hist. conscr.* 29. The passage will be discussed in more detail below.

⁴² P. O. Harper, "The Senmurv", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 20 no.3 (1961) 95–101. For more recent view for this dog-bird hybrid see e.g. M. Compareti, "The so-called Senmurv in Iranian Art. A Reconsideration of an Old Theory", in P. G. Borbone, A. M. Mengozzi, M. Tosco (eds.), *Loquentes linguis: Studi linguistici e orientali i onore di Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti*, Wiesbaden 2006, 185–200.

⁴³ R. Folz, "Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals", *Society and Animals* 18 (2010) 370–71.

⁴⁴ The head is now at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The estimated date for the head is the seventh or eighth century, but this dating is uncertain. About the Senmurv head: C. V. Trever, "Tête de Senmurv en argent des collections de l'Hérmitage", *IrAnt* 4 (1964) 162–70.

⁴⁵ The Roman fort at Niederbieber was founded ca. 185 CE and its existence came to an end in 260 CE, when the Franks attacked the *limes* of *Germania Superior*. The object is now at the Landesmuseum Koblenz.

sources allows us to reconstruct an archetype of the Roman *draco*.

The Niederbieber *draco* was found in the *vicus* outside the fort, and is made of two copper alloy sheets, the upper being fire-gilded and the lower one

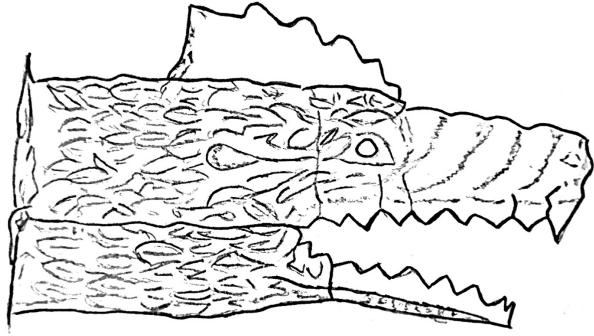


Fig. 4: The Niederbieber *draco* (drawing by the author, after Coulston, above n.1).

tinned. The scales, ears, and other details are embossed onto the sheets, and the nostrils and eyes are small and reptilian. The pupils are left hollow. The snake has a crest above its head, and its snarling snout reveals its open mouth, which is packed with sharp, triangular teeth. The head has a circular hole for the shaft in the throat, and on the top behind the crest. The head measures 30 x 12 x 17 centimetres, and is dated to the ca. mid-third century.

The Niederbieber *draco* has much in common with *dracones* in Roman art. For instance, on the Ludovisi sarcophagus,⁴⁶ which is estimated to be contemporary with the Niederbieber *draco*, the standard is equally reptilian, with its flat, scaled, and crested head. The open mouth of the animal likewise reveals its serrated teeth (Fig. 5). Another good example is from the Arch of Constantine, where *dracones* are represented on the relief made especially for the arch in the fourth century.⁴⁷ The *draco* in the relief is once again very similar to the Niederbieber *draco*, with a crest on top of its reptilian head and its open mouth full of teeth (Fig. 6). Both the *dracones* of the Ludovisi sarcophagus and the arch of Constantine have beards on their chins. The crest of the Niederbieber *draco* is made of metal and is attached on the top of the head, but there is no

⁴⁶ The marble sarcophagus is now at Palazzo Altemps in Rome (inv. no. 8574). The lid is in The Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz (inv. no. O.9066). Literature: Kleiner (above n. 17) 389–390.

⁴⁷ *Dracones* are on the frieze that presents Constantine entering Rome. Literature: Kleiner (above n. 17) 444–55.



Fig. 5: Draco on the Ludovisi sarcophagus (photo by the author).

beard on the chin. It is highly possible that military *dracones* originally had beards, but that they were made of some organic material. Beards and crests are a conspicuous feature of *dracones*. Iconographically, snakes represented with crests in Roman art usually have beards as well. The snakes of Pompeian *lararia*, for instance, are very similar to the *draco* standard, and are usually depicted with crests and beards.⁴⁸ Aelian notes that beards and crests are distinctive characteristics of the male *draco*,⁴⁹ although traditionally both male and female *dracones* could have them. It is possible that by Aelian's time the beard had come to symbolize the manliness of male *dracones*, and this may have been reflected in the symbolism of the *draco* standard, but it seems more likely that the beard and crest symbolised the paranormal nature of *dracones*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ To be more precise, Pompeian snakes are often presented as a pair, male and female. Usually at least the male is crested and bearded, but both can have crests and beards. E.g. H. I. Flower, *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden: Religion at the Roman Street Corner*, Princeton 2017, 63. Examples of Pompeian snakes: G. K. Boyce, *Corpus of the Lararia of Pompeii* (MAAR 14), Ann Arbor 1937: 56 (pl. 27, 2); 99 (pl. 17, 1); 110 (pl. 28, 2); 156 (pl. 18, 1); 219 (pl. 15, 1 and 2); 224 (pl. 16, 1); 230 (pl. 27, 1); 316 (pl. 24, 1); 409 (pl. 26, 1); 419 (pl. 16, 2); 442 (pl. 26, 2); 468 (pl. 22, 1).

⁴⁹ Ael. NA. 11,26.

⁵⁰ Ogden (above n. 2) 159–60. Ogden remarks that beard and crest distinguish the great, supernatural



Fig. 6: *Draco on the Arch of Constantine* (photo by the author).

As with their beards, it is possible that *dracones* also had tongues sticking out of their open mouths. According to pictorial evidence, a protruding tongue seemed to be an essential part of the enemy *dracones*, and it looks like the *draco* of the Ludovisi sarcophagus might also have had a tongue in its mouth. *Dracones* were also depicted with notable dentition, and the teeth of the Niederbieber *draco* are serrated.⁵¹

In Roman art, the textile body of the Roman *draco* seems smooth and does not have ribbons attached to it as enemy *dracones* have. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, however, Roman *dracones* had woven scales on their bodies.⁵² When it comes to the colour of the standard's fabric body, Arrian says that the bodies are made of multicoloured cloths sewn together, but otherwise the bodies are usually described as purple.⁵³ The material may have been silk.⁵⁴

dracones from ordinary serpents: no common serpent is represented with beard and crest, although on the other hand they are not mandatory for supernatural *dracones*.

⁵¹ The *draco* in Roman use always looks very serpentine in the surviving sources, although in some cases the *dracones* are not portrayed in detail. The only exceptions are the *dracones* on the Portonaccio sarcophagus. The reasons for their divergent appearance are discussed below.

⁵² Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 4,66.

⁵³ Arr. *Tact.* 35,2–5. It must be remembered that the *dracones* described by Arrian were used in parades, and therefore might have been more ornate than “ordinary” *dracones*. For purple colouring of the *draco* see e.g. Amm. 15,5,16.

⁵⁴ Coulston (above n. 1) 109.

In many ways the Roman *draco* looked more natural than enemy *dracones*: it resembled a real, reptilian snake, whereas the enemy emblems had fanciful features. Ancient writers often emphasize that *dracones* looked like living snakes when the wind made their bodies writhe, and they were seen as both horrific and beautiful at the same time. The open mouths of the beasts seem to have made them especially fearsome in the eyes of an ancient viewer, because this feature is often mentioned. Writers also relate that *dracones* emitted hissing sounds when the wind blew through them. Apparently, some kind of device was attached to the standard in order to make the sound, and this undoubtably added to the impression of them being living, ferocious snakes about to attack.⁵⁵ All in all, the military standard has much in common with other representations of snakes in Roman art, and it seems reasonable to assume that they also shared common symbolic meanings as well.

Why was the snake the emblem of Rome?

The symbolism of the snake is thoroughly characterized by its duality. Throughout history the snake has signified both good and evil, healing and destructiveness, eternal life and death, and so on. The classical tradition likewise includes both horrific, beastly snakes and kind, benevolent ones. This naturally correlates with everyday encounters with snakes: poisonous and constricting snakes can undoubtably pose a real threat to the well-being of humans, but there are also many harmless species. Some snakes were even useful to ancient people, killing off the destructive rodents in their houses, gardens, and fields. One explanation for the polarity of snake symbolism is that in some areas, such as Greece and Rome, the attitude toward snakes was more positive because the species that lived in those countries were mainly harmless, whereas in Asia and Africa the serpent was seen in a more negative light due to the numerous dangerous species in those areas.⁵⁶ This certainly would correlate with the fact that the serpents in the Near Eastern tradition were often regarded as evil creatures, while the Greek and Roman tradition featured benevolent serpents, but it cannot be seen as the undisputed truth. Serpents evoked both admiration and abhorrence nearly

⁵⁵ E.g. Amm. 16,10,7.

⁵⁶ This is the explanation voiced by e.g. Pottier (above n. 2) 405.

universally, and several symbolic meanings were connected to snakes all over the world. This certainly applied to Rome as well, and several factors can explain why the Romans used the serpent as their military emblem.

In his article, Coulston suggests that the Roman *draco* may have come to resemble a snake due to the influence of the cult of the Thracian rider god.⁵⁷ The snake is featured in the iconography of the cult of the Thracian rider, who was identified with “nearly every Greek, Roman, Thracian, or eastern divinity”.⁵⁸ The rider is usually depicted approaching a snake-entwined tree or an altar, or as a hunter accompanied by different animals, one being a snake. Apparently, the cult was connected with concepts of life after death and healing, which are also symbolic meanings associated with the snake.⁵⁹ Yet, because the role of the snake in this cult is not at all martial, it would be strange if it had influenced the appearance of a military standard. Rider cults were common all over the east, and the snake is also featured in the Danubian rider cult. The serpent is often depicted as if floating in the air next to the rider, and sometimes the snake appears not as the companion of the rider, but as a *draco* standard. Dumitru Tudor, who has catalogued the monuments of Danubian riders, emphasizes that the *draco* as a military standard only appears on monuments after the Romans had adopted the standard to their own use, and therefore it cannot be seen as coming directly from the Scytho-Sarmatic or Dacian cultures.⁶⁰

It is not unreasonable to assume that the Romans actively sought out the snake as their emblem due to its characteristics and the cultural response it created. According to surviving evidence, *dracones* of other nations differed from Roman examples in their appearance. After all, military standards were psychologically important to the soldiers who marched under them, and through their standards the soldiers were able to identify themselves with the army and their unit. In this sense, as identity markers, military standards can

⁵⁷ Coulston (above n. 1) 109–10. This is also the opinion of Pârvan, see Pârvan (above n. 39) 125–26.

⁵⁸ N. Dimitrova, “Inscriptions and Iconography in the Monuments of the Thracian Rider”, *Hesperia* Vol. 71 No. 2 (2002) 211.

⁵⁹ According to Dimitrova, the iconography of the Thracian rider is borrowed from Greek funerary art representing the heroized dead, and does not evolve from a native Thracian tradition. Dimitrova (above n. 58) 213–14, 220.

⁶⁰ D. Tudor, *Corpus monumentorum religionis equitum Danuvinorum (CMRED) Vol. 2 The Analysis and Interpretation of the Monuments*, Leiden 1976, 113–17.

almost be seen as national emblems, and it would only make sense that different nations wanted to personalize their standards and make them look different from the enemy emblems.⁶¹ As a matter of fact, the first *dracones* represented in art as being in Roman use are similar to the *dracones* of their enemies: they look like wolves, with pointed ears and canine muzzles. Arrian, on the other hand, mentions that the *dracones* used in cavalry parades looked like snakes. That the Romans may have initially wavered regarding the appearance of their *dracones* might in fact speak in favour of them having chosen the snake as their symbol on their own initiative, for although they apparently had the lupine variation of the standard in use at some point, the snake soon became the only type that the Romans used.⁶² If one accepts that the Romans chose the serpent as their symbol of their own accord, then certain features and traits that are considered characteristic to snakes must be the key to understanding the symbolic meaning of the standard.⁶³

Snakes have several characteristics that usually evoke a response, either biological or cultural, that range from horrified to fascinating or even mystical. They differ from mammals in many ways: they have limbless, elongated, scaled bodies. They slither swiftly and silently and can be quite inconspicuous. They can move on the earth, in water, and climb trees (i.e. move in the air), so it seems they can go anywhere and appear unexpectedly from anywhere. What makes snakes especially frightening is their life-threatening qualities: both venomous and constricting snakes represent death. In ancient times the bite of the snake often meant an inevitable demise. That this death can approach imperceptibly from any direction and suddenly snatch even those in their prime makes it even more

⁶¹ The role of some military standards was mostly tactical, while some of them were important precisely because they symbolized the unity of the army, and ultimately the unity of Rome. Moreover, Roman military standards also had a political nature. As Dirven notes, the standards symbolized loyalty to the emperor and the state. Soldiers swore oaths on the standards and sacrificed to them. Conquered enemies were also obliged to pay honours to the standards as a sign of submission. Thus, the standards and the state were closely entwined in Roman thought: L. Dirven, “ΣΗΜΗΘΙΟΝ, ΣΜΥ , signum: a Note on the Romanization of the Semitic Cultic Standard.” *Parthica* 7 (2005) 132.

⁶² For the first pictorial evidence of the standard in Roman use, see note 17.

⁶³ It is not possible to deal with the wide and varied general symbolism of the snake in the scope of this paper. I have chosen to deal with those I feel are connected to the symbolism of the *draco* the military standard.

frightening.⁶⁴ As for the *draco*, ancient authors such as Nicander and Pliny relate that it is a non-venomous snake.⁶⁵ According to Pliny and Aelian, it rather kills by constricting.⁶⁶ In either case, it was conceived of as perilous, and symbolically those who had such snakes on their side had a type of mastery over life and death.⁶⁷ Thus, on the battlefield, advancing enemy *dracones*, with their bodies writhing in the air and their open mouths hissing savagely, might have had a huge psychological effect on opposing soldiers.

Concerning the open mouth of the *draco*, another factor that makes snakes frightening is that they devour their prey. Some can swallow whole an animal many times their own size. Ancient writers clearly associated this quality of snakes with military *dracones*: as already pointed out, they often mentioned their gaping mouths and seemed to think that this made them dreadful. In his satire *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit*, Lucian of Samosata ridicules a historian who pretends to be an eyewitness to a battle between Parthians and Romans, although he has never set foot outside his hometown. This “eyewitness” describes Parthian *dracones* as living, horrifying snakes that were released from their staffs during the battle and devoured many Roman soldiers.⁶⁸ Although this tale is purposefully extravagant, it may reflect the reality of how *dracones* were perceived from the enemy’s point of view.⁶⁹ Claudian is another author

⁶⁴ J.H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized*, New Haven 2010, 44–55.

⁶⁵ Nic. *Ther.* 446–57; Plin. *nat.* 29,21.

⁶⁶ Plin. *nat.* 8,12; Ael. *NA.* 2,21; 6,21.

⁶⁷ Real, living snakes may have been used as weapons in ancient warfare exactly because they aroused fear in the opposing side, and threw their lines into disarray. To the enemy these snakes meant danger, and *draco* the military standard had the same meaning on a symbolic level. See e.g. Frontin. *strat.* 4,7,10.

⁶⁸ Lucian *Hist. conscr.* 29.

⁶⁹ That *dracones* are a fascinating yet frightening sight is a recurring theme in ancient literature: apart from Lucian, this aspect is stressed by Arrian (*Arr. Tact.* 35,2–5.), Gregory of Nazianzus (*Greg. Naz. Orat.* 4,66), Ammianus Marcellinus (*Amm.* 16,10,7), Nemesianus (*Nemes. Cyn.* 81–85), Claudian (5,181–188; 5,387–389; 7,138–141; 8,574–576; 28,601–605) and Sidonius Apollinaris (2,32–235; 5,402–407). Even if the way that *dracones* were described may partly have been a literary *topos*, the literary testimony should not be underestimated. The appearance of *dracones* was very different from other ancient military standards, and no other type of standard is described as vividly in literature. Arrian and Ammianus Marcellinus had military experience themselves and were probably familiar with the standard, yet they seem to be no less impressed by it than other authors. It might also be

who noted the horrible gaping mouths of *dracones*. He relates how some young Roman maidens who were following a triumphal procession wondered whether it was the wind that moved the *dracones* or whether they were really living snakes, about to grab the enemy in their jaws.⁷⁰ Undoubtedly the open, toothed mouth of the *draco* symbolized the snake's ability to devour its prey and served as a threat to the enemy.

Because snakes are able to cause inevitable and sudden death, they were also connected to the concept of power. In one of the minor scenes of the *Ara pacis Augustae*, for instance, a snake is approaching a nest of hatchlings and is about to swallow them. This has been interpreted as symbolizing Rome and its superiority over its enemies, who are like the weak hatchlings of the scene and do not stand a chance against the encroaching might of Rome.⁷¹ Similarly, the *draco* standard could be seen as a symbol of Roman sovereignty over the world.⁷² Later, when the standard was the personal emblem of the emperor, it was lavishly decorated. The body was made of fine fabric and the staff was gilded and adorned with precious jewels.⁷³ The opulence of the standard strengthened the message of power, although as an emblem of the emperor it also had a practical role to fulfil. There was a need for an instantly identifiable emblem when the role of emperors became more prominent in warfare from the third century onwards,⁷⁴ and the *draco* was perfectly suited to the task.⁷⁵

remembered that the ancient world was not as filled with visual and auditive stimuli as the modern world is, and thus the *draco* would have made a much more impressive sight for the ancient viewer than for the modern.

⁷⁰ Claud. 28,564–568. In addition, Gregory of Nazianzus emphasizes the gaping mouths of *dracones* (Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 4,66), Ammianus Marcellinus (Amm. 16,10,7) and Sidonius Apollinaris (Sidon. *carm.* 50,402–7).

⁷¹ A. Harden, “Animals in Classical Art”, in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, Oxford 2014, 51.

⁷² Likewise, the *aquila* was seen as a symbol of Roman dominion: Joseph. *BJ.* 3,6,2; L. Hawtree, “Animals in Epic”, in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, Oxford 2014, 75.

⁷³ Amm. 16,10,7.

⁷⁴ Coulston (above n. 1) 110.

⁷⁵ At the battle of Argentoratum, when the emperor Julian saw that some of his cavalymen were about to flee, he rode towards them with his standard. On recognising him by his *draco*, the soldiers rallied: Amm. 16,12,39–40. Snakes were connected with sovereignty, so the choice of the *draco* as the

Considering the snake's reputation as a bringer of death, it is not surprising that it was often seen as a sinister omen, especially if the creature was somehow peculiar in its appearance, or it was seen in an unusual place. For instance, Livy mentions crested snakes as worrisome portents.⁷⁶ The disasters that these portents forecast, of course, was often death. In the same manner, it could be argued, the crested *draco* standard was an omen of approaching death for the enemy who saw it advancing on the battlefield.

The snake was a symbol of chaotic, uncontrollable, and life-threatening forces, and this seems to be the significance of the snake in ancient *draco*/δράκων -slaying myths. These legends may have influenced later Christian myths with similar motifs. In these tales, a hero slays a huge serpent that is terrorizing the area it inhabits. In these stories, the animal is often sacred to and sent by some god.⁷⁷ Although beastly, the animal itself cannot be seen as either good or bad; it is following its nature. Therefore, it is a symbol of unpredictable nature, which is often hostile to human beings in the form of natural disasters.⁷⁸ In myths, it is possible to give a form to these chaotic forces and disarm them through the medium of a hero. As Ogden states, the best way to fight a *draco* was to have a *draco* on one's own side.⁷⁹ Therefore, it could be seen that the sinister forces of the *draco* were needed in order to fight an equally sinister enemy.

The most fundamental symbolic role of the serpent in antiquity, however, was that of a guardian. Ancient mythology knows numerous snakes who guarded a treasure or some other important resource. Ladon, the guardian of the golden

imperial insignia was not merely tactical. Tales of serpentine parentage were connected with many famous men, such as Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, and Augustus. The purpose of these tales, of course, was to emphasize the divine origin of these men, as it was a god who had sired them in the form of a serpent. Ogden (above n. 2) 330–41.

⁷⁶ Some of the snake portents in Livy: Liv. 1,56,4; 41,9,5; 43,13,4. We have far fewer reports of such prodigies from later centuries, and therefore fewer examples of snake portents as well, but it seems unlikely that the interpretation of these omens would have altered.

⁷⁷ Examples of ancient *draco*/δράκων -slaying myths: Heracles slaying the Hydra, Apollo slaying Python, and Cadmus slaying the serpent of Ares.

⁷⁸ Fontenrose sees that the roots of such combat myths were in more concrete encounters between herdsmen and hunters and wild animals and brigands. J. Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins*, Los Angeles 1959, 217–218. See also Ogden (above n. 2) 26–147, Merkelbach (above n. 2) 229–231 and Pottier (above n. 2) 404, 407.

⁷⁹ Ogden (above n. 2) 215.

apples in the garden of the Hesperides, or Python of Delphi, or the ever-alert guardian dragon of the golden fleece, will suffice as examples. The concept of the snake as a guardian is nearly universal, as it can be found in various cultures all over the world.⁸⁰ The medieval dragon later inherited the snake's role as a guardian of treasure, and thus dragons are known as hoarders of treasures even today.

In Greece, snakes served as manifestations of an *agathodaemon*, a benevolent spirit, that apart from being associated with prosperity and fertility also played a role in funerary cults, and was a protector of households, societies, and territories. Regarding this last role, the Roman concept of the *genius loci* comes close to that of the *agathodaemon*. Snakes portrayed on Pompeian shrines and wall paintings have been identified as these guardian spirits of those places.⁸¹ They are guarding families and their households from hostile intruders, and thus they are menacing to outsiders but protective of their own. This characteristic would certainly have been considered proper for the *dracones* of military standards as well.⁸² As already stated, iconographically the *draco* standard has similarities with Pompeian snakes. Similarly to the *draco*, the Pompeian snakes have crests and beards. With their raised heads they look slightly menacing, as if they were about to attack, although the target of the Pompeian snakes is usually a sacrificial offering. Nonetheless, their open, toothed mouths and protruding tongues are similar to those of the *dracones*, and may be seen as distinctive features of a fierce and relentless guardian judging by representations of *dracones* in classical art. The famous guardian *dracones* of mythology, as well as those of Pompeii, all share these features, whereas *dracones* in other contexts are presented quite differently. For instance, the *dracones* associated with the cult of Asclepius usually seem much more tranquil.

⁸⁰ That snakes were seen as suitable guardians in various cultures is undoubtedly partly due to the fact that they have no eyelids, and thus they seem to be always awake: e.g. Charlesworth (above n. 64) 46. Indeed, the guardian snakes of mythology are usually described as being ever vigilant and never sleeping. Even the word *draco* is thought to derive from the Greek verb δέρκεσθαι, to see clearly: Ogden (above n. 2) 173. When discussing serpents, ancient authors often mention their sharp gaze: e.g. Ael. NA. 6,63; Lucr. 5,32–34.

⁸¹ Other suggestions concerning the meaning of Pompeian snakes have been made, but the evidence in favour of them being *genii loci* seem convincing. On Pompeian snakes as *genii loci*: e.g. G. K. Boyce, "Significance of the Serpents on Pompeian House Shrines", *AJA* 46 (1942) 14–22; Flower (above n. 48) 63–70.

⁸² It is noteworthy that the Senmurv is also considered a benevolent helper of human beings.

Aelian and Pliny the Elder both mention snakes living on the banks of Euphrates who will not hurt the natives living in the area, but will kill all intruders.⁸³ Thus, because of its territorial behaviour, its ruthlessness towards enemies and simultaneous devotion to its charges, the serpent was a sensible choice for the emblem of a military standard, as the Roman army and its soldiers were expected to defend Rome in an equally vigorous manner.

In order for the *draco* to survive in the service of later Christian emperors, as it did for quite some time, the symbolism attached to it most likely had to change. The *draco* may no longer have been seen as a benevolent guardian, but rather as a symbol of God's power and his ability to command even the most fierce and savage beings by sending them against his enemies. In the Book of Numbers of the Old Testament, God sends snakes⁸⁴ among the Israelites who speak against Moses and God in order to show his power. As for the *draco* the military standard, the destructive nature of the serpent was harnessed and focused against the enemy, and the *draco* was no longer an active agent but merely a medium through which God exercised his power.⁸⁵ It might also be considered that certain characteristics of the serpent may have been considered suitable for soldiers, even though they were not otherwise seen as virtues. In the Bible, Leviathan is described as more fearless, mightier, stronger, and fiercer than any other creature.⁸⁶ These were certainly good qualities for a soldier to have, and it might be argued that in a war it was acceptable for a soldier to harden his heart and be fearless and proud like the serpent.⁸⁷ However, yet more profound explanation is needed in order to elucidate how it was possible for the *draco* to survive as a symbol of the Christian emperors and army. In the book of numbers, after God had sent fiery serpents among the people and they began to beg for

⁸³ Ael. NA. 9,29; Plin. nat. 8,93.

⁸⁴ These snakes are "the fiery *saraphs*" of the Bible. *Saraph* means "burning" in Hebrew. Most probably it refers to the burning sensation that the venom of these snake causes.

⁸⁵ Vulg. num. 21,5–6.

⁸⁶ Vulg. Job 41,1–34. The passage uses martial vocabulary to describe Leviathan.

⁸⁷ At any rate, the dragon was a popular motif in medieval heraldry precisely because of its martial qualities, but the ambivalent attitude toward snakes was ever present: for instance, Pope Gregory XIII (16th century) was demonized by his political adversaries because the emblem on his family's coat of arms was a dragon.

mercy, God instructs Moses to build a serpent and put it on a standard,⁸⁸ so that when those who had been bitten looked upon it they would be cured.⁸⁹ A similar type of bronze snake is alluded to in the Gospel of John: the snake that Moses lifts up on a standard in the desert is compared to Christ who is elevated on the cross.⁹⁰ The story of the bronze snake is important to Christian theology, because the serpent symbolizes Christ and the whole episode is seen as a prediction of the crucifixion of Christ and of the resurrection that followed it. It is entirely possible that the *draco* military standard reminded Christians of the serpent standard of Moses, especially when we know that the same kind of symbolism was most likely attached to another narrow, vertical object: the serpent column of Constantinople.⁹¹ This pagan monument continued to be an object of reverence in the Christian era, because it was seen as an apotropaic talisman that prevented venomous snakes from entering into the city. It was a common belief in the Byzantine world that serpent-like demons could be exorcized with their own image, just as *dracones* fought with *dracones* in antiquity.⁹² Because the serpent column was packed with this kind of symbolism and was likened to the bronze serpent of Moses, it came to be seen as a portent of the resurrection of Christ and, ultimately, the triumph of good over evil. Through its association with Christ, the bronze serpent became the counterpart of the evil serpents of the Bible.⁹³ In the previously mentioned Byzantine signet rings, it looks like the standard and the snake under the soldier's feet are opposites of each other. Therefore, despite its anguine form, the standard could be seen to possess similar symbolism as the serpent column; in other words, it was seen as an apotropaic Christian symbol that had the power to ward off the enemy and that ultimately

⁸⁸ The word used in the Hebrew Bible is נֶסֶם (*nes*), a standard, ensign, signal, sign; in the Septuagint, σημεῖον, and in the Vulgate, *signum*.

⁸⁹ *Vulg. num.* 21, 8–9.

⁹⁰ *Vulg. Ioh.* 3,13,16.

⁹¹ R. Strootman, "The Serpent Column: The Persistent Meanings of a Pagan Relic in Christian and Islamic Constantinople," *Material Religion* 10 (4) 432–51. The column was set up as a votive offering to Apollo at Delphi after the battle of Plateia (479 BCE). It was then brought to Constantinople by Constantine the Great. The column represented an intertwined three-headed serpent. The remains are still at the former hippodrome of Constantinople (now *Sultan Ahmet Square*). A part of one of the heads is on display at the Istanbul archaeological museum.

⁹² Strootman (above n. 91) 437–8, 441–42.

⁹³ Strootman (above n. 91) 442–444.

symbolised the victory of Christianity over paganism. This symbolism could explain why the *draco* survived in Christian usage despite the increasingly negativity attitude towards snakes, although it was not entirely able to negate the ambivalent feelings the animal aroused.

Conclusions

As a Roman military standard, the *draco* resembled a serpent and thus differed somewhat from the similar standards of other nations. It has been proposed that the Romans adopted the emblem outright, but while this possibility cannot be excluded with complete certainty, the role of the Romans themselves in the development of their *dracones* should not be underestimated. The personalization of such standards would only be understandable, as military standards were emotionally significant identity markers of the army and nation. Many factors made the serpent a suitable choice for the Romans. The snake was an ancient apotropaic symbol, and while on one hand it was seen as a symbol of destructive, chaotic forces, on the other hand its image was also able to repel these cataclysmic powers. The snake was also a fearsome and merciless predator. It was able to bring death to its prey in various hideous ways: either by poisoning, constricting, or swallowing its victims whole. All of these deaths were painful and feared, which in turn aroused fear towards snakes, and the inconspicuous nature of the creature only increased that fear. Thus, the snake became a symbol of death, and seeing one was often interpreted as an unfortunate omen. Because of its ability to cause inevitable death, the snake was also a symbol of power. When the *draco* became the emblem of the emperor, this aspect increased its significance. Perhaps the most essential symbolic role of the serpent, however, is that of a guardian, and as a military standard the *draco* was a protector of Rome, its grandeur and its people. Thus, it was precisely the ambiguous nature of the serpent that made it an excellent emblem for a military standard: to the enemy it signified death, but to the Romans it symbolized protection and power.

In ancient warfare, psychological factors often played a decisive role in determining the outcome of a battle. The demoralization of the enemy, while lifting up the spirits of one's own troops, was paramount. The *draco* was somewhat unique among ancient military standards because it provided both visual and

auditory stimuli to a person who encountered it. The *draco* clearly made a huge impression on ancient authors, who never cease to wonder at its resemblance to a living snake, and while this may partly be a literary *topos*, the standard must have been an impressive sight to a person not accustomed to it. Many of the symbolic qualities of the snake are universal, and thus any spectator would instantly have perceived the message of the advancing *dracones*. This message changed over time, however, and Christianity ascribed new meanings to the *draco*. Although Christians found a positive symbolism for the standard and were able to continue its use, the ambiguousness of the serpent became emphasized and evidently had its impact on the *draco*, as its appearance in literary and visual sources becomes scarcer and scarcer over time. The design of military standards also changed, and three-dimensional emblems gave way to military banners. At some point the *draco* ceased to exist in the form it was known in the Roman Empire, but the sense of fascination with the animal and admiration of its martial virtues remained, as the dragon became a popular motif in medieval heraldry.

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