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Review of D. Ogden, *Drakōn*: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds

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Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii, 472. ISBN 9780199557325. \$185.00.

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[Preview](#)

Ogden's latest book examines the serpents of myth and cult from Homer to hagiography. This is a wide-ranging investigation in which both the monster Typhon and the healing *pareias* snake of Asklepios find a place, as they and other *drakontes* are approached through literature, linguistics, and iconography. It is an ambitious project that sometimes falls short of that ambition: the separate threads don't quite come together, and the nuances of important scholarly arguments are often glossed over in footnotes. It is more encyclopedic than interpretive, in Ogden's words, a "descriptive handbook" (p. 1). As the first comprehensive work in English on this topic, however, it will be indispensable to anyone working on any aspect of serpents in antiquity.

The introduction defines the core of the study as the *drakon*, the large, typically fantastical snake at the heart of many mythical battles, which sets it apart from previous scholarship devoted to Greco-Roman dragon-slaying tales that used the fight itself as the organizing principle.¹ Although Ogden chooses *drakon* as his terminological focus, *ophis*, *serpens*, and other words are also used almost interchangeably in Greek and Latin. This section would be bolstered by a closer analysis of these terms (pp. 3-4, n. 5, lists some occurrences of *drakon* in the 5th BC, and Chapter 4 contains some discussion of its etymology). Throughout the book, the use of the italicized *drakōn* with a long mark suggests a correspondence to the ancient vocabulary that is not always there; as it is used in the title, it is a coined term for a concept set by Ogden. After the book's purpose and organization is laid out, the Introduction turns to a very brief overview of the Prehistoric, Near Eastern, and wider Indo-European backgrounds.

The eleven chapters that follow fall into three sections—dragon-slaying myths, characteristics of dragons, and serpents in cult—with a concluding chapter on the continuation of dragon myths in Christian thought. Ogden sticks to a tight, thematic organization that will make it easy for readers to find information on a specific topic.

The first three chapters detail the dragon-fights of Greek and Latin literature, and, to a lesser extent, art. Ogden begins with what he calls "pure" *drakontes* (e.g., Python) before moving on to "composite" creatures, who have one or more anguiform aspects (e.g., Typhon). The third chapter is not about *drakontes* at all, but *kete*: sea monsters. Ogden admits that these are almost never called *drakontes* and later even notes that their iconography differs (p. 337), but he includes them because he finds them so "conceptually close" (p. 116). Choosing to be inclusive certainly brings in a richer body of material to the study. However, by straying from the *drakon*, it opens the author to the same criticisms he cast at his predecessors, i.e., a

preference for themes and motifs over terminology.

These chapters are driven by the ancient sources: the stories are richly documented with reference to Greek and Latin literature, with modern scholarship adding to the footnotes. The topical organization has a drawback as Hesiod, scholiasts, and images on Apulian vases are all cited on equal footing. There is occasional interest in chronological factors (e.g., the discussion of the Hydra notes new images of the creature that arise in the Roman period, p. 30) and almost none in context (e.g., a reference to a farting Lamia in Aristophanes — a comedian — is used uncritically as evidence that she was odoriferous, p. 91). The abundance of source material can be overwhelming and leaves the impression that there was more variety and less commonality across, and even within, the tales.

The next three chapters highlight some of the major features of *drakontes* and analyze their genealogies. Serpents have a propensity to guard treasure, and commonly share physical traits, such as fiery breath, crests, or beards. A catalogue of many of the main deities and mythological characters associated with snakes includes a few cultic examples, such as Athena's snake on the Acropolis. Perhaps the most important theme is the one drawn out in Chapter 6, the symmetrical features of *drakon* battles. Ogden shows that elements in a fight are often mirrored: fire vs. fire, curved objects vs. the curves of the snake's coils, or even a serpent turned against another of its own kind. These readings of literary battles and imagery could serve as a model to explore other kinds of battles as represented in text or art; I suspect this symmetry is not exclusive to snakes.

The serpents of cult are the subject of the following four chapters. Chapters 7-9 are devoted to the different realms with which these snakes are associated: the earth and death, wealth and luck, and healing. The precise relationship snakes hold with the dead and heroes is difficult to sort out—do they represent the dead in some way, or serve as protectors?—but Ogden concentrates on description over categorization. Chapter 8 covers Zeus's appearance in the guise of a serpent as Meilichios, Ktesios, and or Philios, an iconography popularized in the 420s BC. Agathos Daimon is examined at length, from his early references in Greek texts to his popularity in Alexandria. The serpents of Roman *lararia* also make a brief appearance. Deities associated with healing (Asklepios, Hygeia, Amphiaraos, Trophonios) are surveyed in the final chapter along with Glykon, the snake-puppet hoax. The emphasis is on the deities' physical appearance as snakes, as opposed to their association with them. This chapter concludes with some reasonable speculation about why the snake form might have been so appropriate for healing gods.

Chapter 10 is titled, "A Day in the Life of a Sacred Snake." The author explores whether there were actual snakes in sanctuaries and, if there were, how they were managed. The evidence is fairly inconclusive, partly because many texts speak of these serpents as present, but not meant to be seen. Ogden uses both ancient and cross-cultural evidence to imagine how serpents might have been kept (if they were kept at all), and looks at modern Mediterranean snake breeds, as well.

Although occasionally an explicit connection is made between the serpents of mythical battles and those of religious experience, a deep division exists between the two sections of the book: it can be hard to see what Typhon and Zeus Meilichios have in common. The final "capstone" chapter goes a little way toward rectifying that divide. It considers the continuation of the dragon fight in Christian literature, which includes "historicized" accounts of shutting down pagan snake cults. A few biblical serpents are discussed before turning to hagiographic literature, primarily of the 2nd-6th centuries AD. For Ogden, the symmetry found in these serpent battles is the linchpin indicating affiliation with the pagan tales. The only iconography mentioned here is that of the later St. George; medieval dragons are depicted so differently from the serpents of Greco-Roman art, and the opportunity to address that shift is

unfortunately missed.

This book is richly footnoted and sourced, which will aid those wanting to go deeper into some of the issues that for lack of space get only cursory treatment.² Much effort is devoted to the summary of what is found in literary and historical sources. Visual evidence is frequently cited, usually accompanied by a helpful reference to *LIMC*, but the incorporation of material culture is unsatisfactory. Images are regularly treated as separate from, or in addition to, the written sources (most noticeable in the mythological topics), and objects are repeatedly described qualitatively as “very fine” or even “the finest of all” when chosen for special treatment, with little explanation in support of their selection as evidence. Etruscan material is almost unrepresented.

The text is supplemented by an extensive index and is well-edited.³ The writing style is accessible; Greek is almost exclusively kept to footnotes, and background information and plot summary are typically included. Forty-two black and white illustrations also enhance the text. Sixteen of these are drawings of the objects, most by Eriko Ogden. Although these lack the sharpness of the photographs,⁴ this is a commendable, cost-effective way to increase the images available to the reader. An illustration of the Archinos relief from Oropos would have been a helpful addition, since it is important evidence in Ogden’s arguments about the relationship between snake and god and the snake’s role in healing.

Almost concurrently, Oxford released a second book on snakes by Ogden: *Dragons, Serpents, and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds: A Sourcebook*. Although this is not the place to review it, readers should be aware that it serves as a companion to *Drakōn*. The sourcebook includes translations of the major dragon texts with a useful guide to the motifs therein. I would recommend as a supplement, since its organization helps clarify many of the connective threads among the material covered in *Drakōn*.

Drakōn may have its flaws, but it will become the essential resource for any further study of the serpents of the Greek and Roman worlds.

Notes:

^{1.} Ogden is particularly critical of Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959) and Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

^{2.} There are a few additions I would make to the bibliography: Kathryn Topper, “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction,” *Hesperia* 76 (2007): 73-105 belongs in the discussion of the beautiful Medusa (Ogden p. 96); Eleanor Guralnick, “The Chrysapha Relief and its Connections with Egyptian Art,” *JEA* 60 (1974): 175- 188 is the source of the argument for the Egyptian origins of the bearded snake (not Mitropoulou, Ogden pp. 160-161); and Timothy Gregory, “The Survival of Paganism in Christian Greece: A Critical Essay,” *AJP* 107 (1986): 229-242 provides an archaeological example of a conversion of an Asklepieion (Ogden pp. 417-425).

^{3.} A few minor errors: Zeus is mistakenly named as the castrator of Uranus (p. 82); in the bibliography, Schulz 2010 should be Schultz (problematic as an actual Schulz is also cited); and the phrase, “Some fragments refer to are illustrated with *drakontes*,” (p. 354).

^{4.} Some of the missing details are troublesome: fig. 1.7 lacks its painted beard and crest, fig. 4.1 also lacks its beard, and it is impossible to tell where the inscription was located in fig. 8.1 (it should be on the bottom; drawings have the ability to clarify hard-to-read inscriptions, and adding it would have been a nice touch).

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