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The Serpent Sire of Alexander the Great: A Palinode

Introduction

In previous publications I reviewed the evidence for the tradition of Alexander's divine sire, which features both Zeus and Ammon, closely identified with each other and, strikingly, a serpent. In attempting to contextualise a serpent that could also be a Zeus, I turned to the sometimes anguiform figure of Zeus Meilichios and hesitantly concluded that the serpent sire may have had an identity of this sort in origin. I now argue that this was (diametrically!) the wrong approach to take to the tradition, which should not be aggregated but rather disaggregated: we are dealing not with a single messy tradition but rather with two cleaner and originally quite distinct ones—on the one hand the Zeus-Ammon tradition; on the other the divine-serpent tradition—which have, occasionally, been contaminated with each other. The identity of the serpent sire, now liberated from any original association with Zeus(-Ammon), may accordingly be sought elsewhere entirely.

I Catalogue A: The Divine Sire of Alexander the Great: The Principal Testimonies

The following list catalogues the principal references extant in the Alexander tradition to Alexander's divine sire (simple references to Philip himself as Alexander's sire are excluded).

1. The coinage of Alexander.¹

DATE: 336–323 BC.

CONTENT: Alexander's association of himself with the traditional Argead eagle-and-thunderbolt imagery potentially offers a context for the generation of the

¹ Mørkholm (1991) figs. 5–6 (cf. also fig. 202); Le Rider (1996) plate 9, nos. 10, 11 and 12 (the reverse is paired with obverses of both Zeus' head and of Alexander's). Note also that Callisthenes, who died in 327 BC, described Alexander as a thunderbolt-bearer before whom even waves did obeisance: *FGrH / BNJ* 124 F40 (*apud* Pol. 12.12b3).

tale known from Plutarch (A, 12, below) in accordance with which Zeus sires Alexander by striking his mother Olympias' womb with his thunderbolt (the eagle being Zeus' thunderbolt-bearer).

SIRE: **Zeus (?)**.

2. Ephorus *FGrH* / *BNJ* 70 F 217 *apud* Tertullian, *De anima* 46.

DATE: Before ca. 330 BC.

CONTENT: Philip has a vision of himself sealing Olympias' womb with a lion-embazoned signet-ring. On the assumption that the lion represents (the lion-skin wearing) Heracles, the vision could suggest either that Zeus is siring Alexander as a second Heracles, or that Heracles is siring a son for himself.

SIRE: **Zeus / Heracles**.

3. Inscribed pedestal from the temple of Ammon at Bahariya, near Siwah²

DATE: 332–331 BC (?)

CONTENT: The pedestal carries bilingual dedications supposedly by Alexander himself, the Greek one reading “King Alex(a)nder to Ammon, his father” (Βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξ(α)νδρος Ἄμμωνι τ[ῶ]ι πατρί).

SIRE: **Ammon**

4. Callisthenes *FGrH* / *BNJ* 124 F14 *apud* Strabo C814 (= 17.1.43).

DATE: 331–327 BC.

CONTENT: Ammon addresses Alexander as his own son at Siwah.

SIRE: **Ammon**.

5. Eratosthenes *FGrH* / *BNJ* 241 F28 *apud* Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.

DATE: Later 3rd c. BC (?), 1st c. AD (?).

CONTENT: As Olympias sends Alexander off on campaign she tells him the secret of the way in which he was sired. The analogy, for what it is worth, with the Scipio tradition may imply that the secret consisted of his siring by a serpent. According to Silius Italicus, when the ghost of Pomponia tells Scipio that he had been serpent-sired, the information is similarly presented as the final revelation from mother to son of a long-kept secret (see B, 10, below).³

SIRE: ***drakōn* (???)**.

² Published by Bosch-Puche (2008).

³ Silius Italicus *Punica* 13.634–649.

6. Cicero, *On Divination* 2.135.

DATE: 45–44 BC.

CONTENT: Cicero in effect identifies the *drakōn* that tells Alexander how to heal the dying Ptolemy at Harmatelia with Alexander's own sire: "When Ptolemy, Alexander's associate, had been struck in battle by a poisoned arrow and was dying from that wound in the greatest pain, Alexander, sitting by him, fell asleep. Then, in his slumbers, he saw a vision of that serpent [*draco*] that his mother Olympias used to keep carrying a root in its mouth and at the same time telling him where it grew (nor was it far from that place)." Although Cicero does not directly specify that Olympias' *drakōn* is Alexander's sire, his characterisation of it as her pet is surely a gentle rationalisation of such a serpent sire.⁴

SIRE: *drakōn*.

7. Diodorus 17.51.

DATE: Ca. 30 BC.

CONTENT: The priest of Ammon addresses Alexander as "son."

SIRE: **Ammon.****8. Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.196–210.**

DATE: Before 19 BC.

CONTENT: Iarbas, the Gaetolian king hostile to Dido and Aeneas, is sired by (H) Ammon when the latter rapes a Garamantian nymph. He is a devoted worshipper of Jupiter in his role as lord of the lightning bolt. It is difficult not to see an allusion to the Alexander tradition in this imagery, and if Alexander does indeed lurk behind it then the passage will constitute the first indication of an assimilation between Ammon and Zeus-Jupiter in the role of Alexander's sire.

SIRE: **Ammon = Zeus.****9. Livy 26.19.7–8.**DATE: After 19 BC.⁵

CONTENT: Scipio's habit of sitting alone in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol "revived the rumour formerly spread about Alexander the Great, which was comparable in its emptiness and fantasy, that he was conceived by sex with a huge snake [*anguis*]." (See B, 6, below for the full text.)

SIRE: *drakōn*.

⁴ Lucian (as catalogued below) evidently inverts the chronological order of the generation of this myth and its subsequent rationalisation for satirical purposes.

⁵ Dating of Livy's third decad: Fusillo and Schmidt (2005) 750.

10. Antipater of Thessalonica at *Greek Anthology* 9.241.

DATE: Turn of the eras.

CONTENT: In a brief list of gods that transformed themselves into animals: “The famous Ammon was a snake [Ἄμμων δ’ ὠμφιβόητος ὄφις].” This can only entail the tale that Ammon sired Alexander in the form of a serpent.

SIRE: **Ammon** = *drakōn*.**11. Trogus at Justin 11.11.**

DATE: Ca. AD 9 (Trogus).

CONTENT: “Then Alexander made his way to Hammon to ask about the future and about his own origin. For his mother Olympias had confessed to her husband Philip that she has conceived Alexander not from him but from a serpent [*serpens*] of great size.... As Alexander entered the temple the priests greeted him at once as the son of Hammon.” The text is ambiguous rather than truly disjunctive: it may imply a tradition that the siring serpent was itself Ammon, but need not do so.SIRE: **Ammon** OR *drakōn*.**12. Curtius 4.7.8.25–7.**DATE: Mid—late 1st c. AD.

CONTENT: Jupiter-Ammon’s eldest priest addresses Alexander as his son.

SIRE: **Zeus** = **Ammon**.**13. Plutarch, *Alexander* 2–3.**

DATE: Ca. AD 100.

CONTENT: (A) Alexander is sired by a thunderbolt, i.e. Zeus; OR (B) by a lion-emblazoned signet ring (cf. Ephorus, above); OR (C) by a gigantic *drakōn*, revealed to be Ammon: “And once too a serpent [*drakōn*] was seen stretched out beside Olympias’ body as she slept. And they say that this most of all blunted Philip’s desire for and fond feelings towards his wife, so that he no longer visited her frequently to sleep with her.... Anyway, after the manifestation Philip sent Chaeron of Megalopolis to Delphi, and they say that he brought an oracle from the god that bade him sacrifice to Ammon and honour this god most of all. And it said that he would lose the eye that he had applied to the hinge-gap in the door when he saw the god sleeping with his wife in the form of a serpent [*drakōn*].”SIRE: **Zeus** OR *drakōn* = **Ammon**.**14. Plutarch, *Alexander* 27.**

DATE: Ca. AD 100.

CONTENT: Ammon's prophet greets Alexander as "son".

SIRE: **Ammon**.

15. Ptolemy Chennus *apud Photius cod. 190, §148a.*

DATE: Ca. AD 98–138.

CONTENT: Alexander is sired by a man called Drakon (a self-evident rationalisation of the *drakōn*-proper tradition).

SIRE: ***drakōn***.

16. Alexandrian choliambic epitaph.⁶

DATE: 2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: "Alexander the Macedonian king, whom Ammon sired in the form of a snake [*ophis*]."

SIRE: **Ammon = *drakōn***.

17. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 6.1.1.

DATE: Later 2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: "That which has been written in Greek history of Olympias, the wife of king Philip and mother of Alexander, has similarly been handed down in tradition in relation to the mother of the first Publius Scipio..." i.e., the tradition that he was sired by snake (*anguis*).

SIRE: ***Drakōn***.

18. Pausanias 4.14.7

DATE: Later 2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: "The Messenians hold that Aristomenes of Messene's birth was rather splendid, for they say that a demon [*daimōn*] or a god took on the form of a serpent [*drakōn*] and had sex with his mother Nicoteleia. I am aware that the Macedonians have said similar things in the case of Olympias and the Sicyonians in the case of Aristodama, but these differ to the following extent. For the Messenians do not make of Aristomenes a son of Heracles or Zeus as the Macedonians make Alexander the son of Ammon and the Sicyonians make Aratus the son of Asclepius."

SIRE: **Ammon = *drakōn***.

19. Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* 13.

DATE: Ca. AD 170s.

⁶ Reproduced at Fraser (1972) 2.950.

CONTENT: A fast-paced dialogue between the ghosts of Alexander and Diogenes in the underworld:

DIOGENES: So Ammon was lying when he said that you were his own son, when you were really Philip's son all along? ALEXANDER: Yes, obviously I was Philip's son, for if I was Ammon's son, I wouldn't have died. DIOGENES: And the same was true of the things said about Olympias, to the effect that a *drakōn* had sex with her and was seen in her bed, and that that was the way in which you were sired, whilst Philip was deceived into thinking that he was your father?

The dialogue ostensibly indicates that the *drakōn* and Ammon were sires to Alexander in alternative traditions, as opposed to constituting variant expressions of the same sire: the text is seemingly disjunctive.

SIRE: **Ammon** OR *drakōn*.

20. Lucian, *Alexander* 7; cf. 15.

DATE: After AD 181.

CONTENT: "There [in Macedon] Alexander [of Abonutichus] and Cocconas saw huge serpents [*drakontes*], so completely tame and harmless that women keep them as pets, they sleep alongside babies and they tolerate being walked over and don't get angry when squeezed and drink milk from the breast, just like babies. (They have many snakes of this sort, and this was no doubt the origin of the tale that was bruited abroad about Olympias, to the effect that she conceived Alexander when a serpent of this sort, I suppose, slept with her.) The story of Alexander the Great being sired by a *drakōn* is said to have arisen from the custom of Macedonian women of keeping large, tame serpents as pets." Alexander of Abonutichus takes one of these serpents to turn into his famous 'New Asclepius' or 'Glycon.'

SIRE: ***Drakōn***.

21. *Alexander Romance* (A) 1.6–8, 10, 12, 14, 24, 30, 35, 2.13, 21, 3.33.

DATE: Early 3rd c. AD.

CONTENT: Nectanebo sleeps with Olympias whilst dressed as Ammon, whilst also deploying a magically manufactured *drakōn*. He subsequently transforms himself into a huge *drakōn* before Philip, coils on Olympias' lap, and kisses her. Ammon sends Alexander a dream of himself embracing Olympias, to confirm his own fatherhood. The tradition that Ammon sired Alexander in the form of a *drakōn*, *inter multa alia*, evidently lies behind this complex and contradictory tale.

SIRE: **Ammon** = *drakōn*.

22. Solinus 9.18.DATE: Mid 3rd c. AD.CONTENT: Olympias professed that Alexander was sired when she had sex with a *draco*.SIRE: *Drakōn*.

II The dating of the tradition of the serpent sire

How far back can we take the tradition of Alexander having a serpent sire? It is hard to say. The tradition surely did exist by 45–44 BC when Cicero offers us in passing what is evidently a rationalised version of the tale (A, 6).

Beyond this, we enter the realm of speculation. For reasons given above (the comparison of Silius Italicus' words on Scipio), it is quite possible that the secret of Alexander's birth referred to in the Eratosthenes fragment consisted of a serpent sire (and the fact that the secret is focused upon Olympias herself and indeed herself alone seemingly points in the same direction—contrast the non-serpent stories in Plutarch's collection). But the difficulty here is the dating of the fragment: is it genuinely Eratosthenic (as Frances Pownall holds in her *BNJ* commentary), or does it belong to the pseudo-Eratosthenes of the *Catasterisms*? One can imagine the story being told, for example, in connection with the *Catasterisms*' treatment of the constellation of Draco.⁷ The developmental tradition of the *Catasterisms* text was complex, and material in it need not be earlier than the first century AD.

Beyond this again we can only construct a circumstantial case that the tradition of the serpent sire originated in or close to Alexander's own age by pointing to the proliferation of serpents in the early tradition for Alexander. First, the Agathos Daimon serpent, the presiding hero of the city of Alexandria, is first attested iconographically as early as ca. 320–300 BC (he is integrated into statues of Alexander Aegiochus), and his cult was tightly associated with that of Alexander's own, but we have to wait until the early third-century AD *Alexander Romance* for the literary justification of this association. This tells how Alexander had the original great Agathos Daimon serpent slain and then heroized at the site of Alexandria as the city was initially being built, and how the serpent's body was then somehow transmogrified into the smaller Agathos Daimon snakes

⁷ As found at [Eratosth.] *Cat.* epitome 1.3.

that served the historical Alexandrians as protective house-snakes.⁸ Secondly, Clitarchus (as we can tell from the coincidence between Diodorus and Curtius), writing probably ca. 310 BC, spoke of the *drakōn* that appeared to Alexander in a dream and gave him instructions for the healing of Ptolemy at Harmatelia.⁹ Thirdly, Onesicritus of Astypalaea, who wrote before 309 BC, had the Indian king Abisares tell Alexander that he kept a pair of pet *drakontes*, one of 140 cubits in length, the other of 80 cubits.¹⁰ Fourthly, Ptolemy, writing before 282 BC, spoke of a pair of *drakontes* endowed with human voice that rescued Alexander and his army from the Libyan desert when lost en route to Siwah.¹¹

III The original identity of the serpent sire: “Ogden I”¹²

I have written on Alexander’s serpent sire on several previous occasions.¹³ In these contributions I approached the above catalogue of sources aggregatively. I looked for an Ammon or a Zeus that could also have been a *drakōn*, a great serpent, and that we could expect either to have had some purchase in the Macedon of Alexander or to have been imagined have done so by the later tradition. Nothing could be done with “Ammon”: there was no basis for thinking that he ever possessed an identity as a serpent in his own right beyond the realm of

⁸ *Alexander Romance* (A) 1.32.5–13 ≈ (Arm.) §§86–87 Wolohojian; cf. also Phylarchus ~~BNJ~~/~~FGrH~~-F27 (*apud* Ael. *NA* 17.5), F28 (*apud* Plin. *HN* 10.208); Dio Cass. 51.17.4–5; *The Oracle of the Potter at P.Oxy.* 2332 lines 51–3; [Epiph.] *De prophetarum et obitu* first recension p.9 Schermann, second recension pp.62 Schermann; *Chronicon Paschale* p.293 Dindorf. Discussion at Durnand (1969) and (1981); Stewart (1993) 246–253, 421–422, with figs. 82–83; Hillard (1998) and (2010); Ogden (2012), (2013a) 286–309, (2013b), (2014); Barbantani (2014); Djurslev and Ogden (2018).

⁹ Clitarchus *apud* Diod. Sic. 17.103 and Curt. 9.8.22–28 [not in *FGrH* / *BNJ*]; cf. also Strab. C723 [15.2.7]. I continue to prefer the traditional date of ca. 310 BC for Clitarchus as opposed to the late third-century BC date for him that some believe they can extrapolate from *P.Oxy.* lxxi 4808.

¹⁰ Onesicritus of Astypalaea *FGrH* / *BNJ* 134 16a–c.

¹¹ Ptolemy *FGrH* / *BNJ* 138 F8, *apud* Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.4–6; contrast Aristobulus *FGrH* / *BNJ* 139 F14.

¹² A pretentious calque on the two phases of Wittgenstein’s thought, with ‘Wittgenstein II’ discarding the work of ‘Wittgenstein I.’

¹³ Ogden (2009a), (2009b), (2011) 7–56, (2013a) 330–342, (2015). These items may be turned to for more detailed and more nuanced justifications of the points perforce made more telegraphically in this piece.

the actual traditions under discussion here.¹⁴ But one kind of “Zeus” seemed to offer some promise: Zeus Meilichios and the more minor Zeus deities of a similar sort, Zeus Ktesios and Zeus Philios.¹⁵

Zeus Meilichios himself had a well-established profile in his iconography (where the bulk of the evidence for him resides), particularly that of fourth-century BC Athens, both as a humanoid Zeus figure in the standard paternal mould and, at the same time, as a great serpent. He is shown in the latter guise most notably in a particularly fine series of relief stelae from the Piraeus. His anguiform nature has led to him being much misunderstood, one might almost say maligned, in the past: he has been considered a terrible deity, with his epithet, Meilichios, “The Gentle One,” “The Propitiated One,” being taken as sinisterly propitiatory in its significance. But there is simply no evidence for this supposed terrible nature, and no citable example of this god behaving in dreadful fashion towards anyone. Rather it was without irony that he was “gentle,” “readily propitiated,” or even perhaps “already propitiated.” His iconography and the (limited) literary sources for him reveal him to have been a god devoted to the promotion of wealth and success, above all in the context of the household and its nuclear family. The Piraeus stelae typically depict daddy, mummy and a pair of children approaching the great coiling serpent as he towers over them—not threateningly: protectively, perhaps—and as they give thanks for the benefits he has conferred. Indeed, he evinces the sweet and harmless nature that is common to all the anguiform deities of the ancient Greek world, notably Agathos Daimon, to whom we have already referred, and of course the famous Asclepius, no harmer but actually a healer of harm, of whom more anon.

Secondly, there was vestigial evidence for a cult of Zeus Meilichios in Macedonia, under the Antigonids at any rate. Philip V made a dedication to him at Pella.¹⁶ If the remains of the colossal marble coiling-serpent statue found in a deposit in the antechamber of Temple II in the Eucleia sanctuary at Vergina did not represent Zeus Meilichios himself, then they must have represented

14 The only text that might be thought significantly to suggest so is a passage of Herodotus in which the historian tells us that sacred horned snakes lived near Egyptian Thebes, and that when they died they were buried in the temple of Zeus (i.e. Ammon) there, to whom they were sacred (2.74). But the significance of this gesture is made clear in context: Ammon is not given horned snakes because he is a snake but rather because, as actually a ram, he is himself horned. *Pace* Bosworth (1980) 272 (on Arr. *Anab.*3.3.2).

15 For Zeus Meilichios in the round, and the more minor Zeus deities of similar type, see Ogden (2013a) 272–286, with further references; for his iconography and his cult at Athens, see Lalonde (2006).

16 Gauthier and Hatzopoulos (1993) 146 n. 3; Le Bohec (2002) 47.

one of the closely allied deities. The remains are dated to some point before the mid second century BC.¹⁷ Thirdly, a Zeus Meilichios-like deity featured in the Macedonian myth of the eponymous Pindus. Aelian records at some length the tale in which the wholesome Pindus' hunting—his wealth, of a sort—in the country around the river that was to bear his name is prospered by a gigantic *drakōn* he encounters there, endowed with human voice. The *drakōn* arrives too late, alas, to prevent the young man's murder at the hands of his envious brothers, but it avenges him by crushing them to death, and then guards his body until his better relatives can retrieve it.¹⁸

IV The original identity of the serpent sire: “Ogden II”

However, on further consideration of Catalogue A, I have come to see this approach as profoundly misguided. It is now apparent to me that the Catalogue should not be taken to preserve the different facets of a unitary identity, but rather to preserve two contrasting traditions that were in origin wholly separate from each other, and that over the course of time became contaminated and merged, as follows:

- **The Zeus-Ammon tradition:** (1) the Neisos gem and the coinage, (2) Ephorus, (3) the Bahariya pedestal, (4) Callisthenes, (7) Diodorus, (8) Virgil, (11) Trogus-Justin, (12) Curtius, (13) Plutarch, (14) Plutarch, (19) Lucian.
- **The serpent sire tradition:** (5) Eratosthenes (???), (6) Cicero, (9) Livy, (11) Trogus-Justin, (15) Ptolemy Chennus, (17) Aulus Gellius, (19) Lucian, (20) Lucian, (22) Solinus.
- **The contaminated tradition:** (10) Antipater, (13) Plutarch, (16) the Alexandrian cholimabic epitaph, (18) Pausanias, (21) *Alexander Romance*.

Of particular interest in this regard are Trogus-Justin (A, 11) and especially Lucian (A, 19), both of whom indeed present Ammon and the *drakōn* less as a unitary sire for Alexander, or as different aspects of the same one, but more as paradigmatic alternatives to each other. The contaminated tradition begins—for us at

¹⁷ Saatsoglou-Paliadeli (2000) 12–21.

¹⁸ Ael. NA 10.48.

any rate—with Antipater of Thessalonica (A, 10), who wrote around the turn of the eras.¹⁹

V Catalogue B: The serpent sires of the Graeco-Roman world

With Alexander's serpent sire now dissociated from Zeus-Ammon in its original incarnation, we are left to renew our enquiry as to what its original identity might have been. The method of investigation that commends itself is to survey the phenomenon of Graeco-Roman serpent sires in the round and to determine their typical profile. Accordingly, the following catalogue charts all the evidence known to me for individuals being sired by serpents in antiquity, in rough chronological order. For clarity and convenience, the relevant evidence bearing upon Alexander the Great from Catalogue A is interleaved at the appropriate points.

1. The two children of Nicasibula: *EMI (B) 42 = IG iv² 122.42 = Edelstein and Edelstein 1945 no. 423.*

DATE: 4th c. BC.

CONTENT: A record from the Epidaurian miracle inscriptions. The barren Nicasibula incubates at Epidaurus. In her dream, Asclepius visits her and his serpent avatar has sex with her, siring two male children.

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Asclepius**.

2. Alexander: Eratosthenes *FGrH / BNJ 241 F28 (apud Plutarch Alexander 2).*

DATE: Later 3rd c. BC (?), 1st c. AD (?).

CONTENT: See above (A, 5).

SIRE: *drakōn* (???) = **unspecified**.

3. Aratus of Sicyon: Statue base, Epidaurus, *IG iv² 622.*

DATE: 3rd c.—2nd c. BC.

CONTENT: The Sicyonians set up an offertory in the form of a *drakōn*, to salute the form of Aratus of Sicyon's father Asclepius.

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Asclepius**.

¹⁹ This raises the mild possibility that it is a reflex of the potentially earlier Roman tradition in accordance with which Scipio Africanus was sired by Jupiter in the form of a serpent (see B, 5–6 below). However, the contaminated tradition always ties Alexander's *drakōn*-sire to "Ammon" as opposed to "Zeus" or "Jupiter."

4. Alexander: Cicero, *On Divination* 2.135.

DATE: 45–44 BC.

CONTENT: See above (A, 6).

SIRE: *drakōn* (in strongly **Asclepian** context).**5. Scipio Africanus: Caius Oppius, *apud* Aulus Gellius 6.1.1.**

DATE: 43–33 BC.

CONTENT: “That which has been written in Greek history of Olympias, the wife of king Philip and mother of Alexander, has similarly been handed down in tradition in relation to the mother of the first Publius Scipio to acquire the surname Africanus. For both Gaius Oppius and Julius Hyginus, and others who have written of the life and achievements of Africanus, relate that his mother had long been held barren. They say too that Scipio, to whom she was married, had given up hope of children. But subsequently, when she was lying down alone and had fallen asleep in her bedroom in the absence of her husband, a huge snake [*anguis*] was suddenly seen lying by her side in the bed. The people that saw it were terrified and shouted out, whereupon it slipped away and they were unable to find it. Publius Scipio himself referred the matter to the soothsayers and they, after making sacrifice, replied that children would be born to him. And indeed a few days after that snake was seen in the bed, his wife began to perceive the signs and feelings of pregnancy. In the tenth month thereafter she gave birth and that Publius Scipio was born who defeated Hannibal and the Carthaginians in Africa in the Second Punic War. But he too was believed to be a man of divine excellence because of his achievements rather more than because of that portent. I do not hesitate to relate this too, which the same writers I mentioned above have entrusted to writing. This Scipio had the custom of frequenting the Capitol during the last part of the night, just before dawn, ordering the temple of Jupiter to be opened and staying there for some time, as if he were consulting with the god about affairs of state. The shrine’s temple-wardens would often wonder that he was the only person that came on to the Capitol at that time without the dogs barking at him or running at him, although they would attack all others.” (Hyginus is Augustan in date.)

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Jupiter (?)** – but with broadly **Asclepian** imagery: **cf. Nicasibula, above (B, 1).**

6. Scipio Africanus: Livy 26.19.7–8.

DATE: After 19 BC.

CONTENT: “This habit [of Scipio’s of sitting alone in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol before performing any business], maintained through the entirety of his life, brought about for certain men belief in the notion bruited abroad, be it ad-

visedly or rashly, that he was a man of divine stock, and it revived the rumour formerly spread about Alexander the Great, which was comparable in its emptiness and fantasy, that he was conceived by sex with a huge snake [*anguis*], and that the manifestation of that prodigy had been seen often in his mother's bedroom, and that, when people came across it, it suddenly shot off and slithered from view. He himself never did anything to compromise belief in these miracles. Nay rather, this belief was enhanced by the variety of artfulness he deployed in neither denying nor openly confirming any such thing.'

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Jupiter**.

7. Alexander: Livy 26.19.7–8.

DATE: After 19 BC.

CONTENT: A passing reference in the discussion of Scipio, as above.

SIRE: *drakōn* = **unspecified**.

8. Alexander: Trogus at Justin 11.11.

DATE: Ca. AD 9.

CONTENT: See above (A, 11).

SIRE: *drakōn* = **unspecified OR = Ammon**.

9. Augustus: Asclepiades of Mendes *FGrH* / *BNJ* 617 F2 (*apud* Suetonius, *Augustus* 94).

DATE: Later 1st c. BC –2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: “Atia came in the middle of the night for a solemn rite of Apollo. She had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, the other matrons sleeping likewise. A serpent suddenly insinuated itself into her and exited a little later [*draconem repente irrepsisse ad eam pauloque post egressum*]. When she woke up, she purified herself as she would after the embrace of her husband. And at once there manifested itself on her body a mark as of a painted serpent [*draco*], and she could never expunge it.”

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Apollo**—but the imagery of incubation is again strongly **Asclepian**: cf. Nicasibula again, above (B, 1).

10. Scipio Africanus: Silius Italicus, *Punica* 13.634–49.

DATE: Ca. AD 100.

CONTENT: Having slept, Scipio's mother Pomponia awakes at midday in a brilliant light, to find herself embraced by Jupiter in the form of a giant serpent.

SIRE: *drakōn* = **Jupiter**.

11. Alexander: Plutarch, *Alexander* 2–3.

DATE: Ca. AD 100.

CONTENT: See above (A, 13).

SIRE: *drakōn* = Ammon.**12. Alexander: Ptolemy Chennus *apud* Photius cod. 190, §148a.**

DATE: Ca. AD 98–138.

CONTENT: Alexander is sired by a man called Drakon.

SIRE: *drakōn* = unspecified.**13. Miletus: Inscription of Caesarea Troketta, *IGROM* iv.1498.**

DATE: Ca. AD 160.

CONTENT: Miletus, the priest of Apollo Soter, is declared to be the son of “Paphlagonian Glykon.”

SIRE: *drakōn* = Glykon = Asclepius.**14. Alexander: Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 6.1.1.**DATE: Later 2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: See above (A, 17, B, 5).

SIRE: *drakōn* = unspecified.**15. Aratus of Sicyon: Pausanias 2.10.3 and 4.14.7.**DATE: Later 2nd c, AD.CONTENT: Aratus’ mother Aristodama was represented “on” a *drakōn*, his sire, in a mobile hanging from the roof of the temple of Asclepius in Sicyon.SIRE: *drakōn* = Asclepius.**16. Aristomenes of Messene: Pausanias 4.14.7.**DATE: Later 2nd c. AD.CONTENT: A *daimōn* or a god took the form of a *drakōn* and had sex with Aristomenes’ mother Nicoteleia (see above for the full passage: A, 18). This tale is seemingly ~~derivative after~~ the late-3rd c. BC *Messeniaca* of Rhianus of Bene, which also mentioned Nicoteleia (see *FGrH* / *BNJ* 265 F39 / 50 Powell).SIRE: *drakōn* = a daimon or a god.**17. Alexander: Pausanias 4.14.7.**DATE: Later 2nd c. AD.

CONTENT: See above (A, 18).

SIRE: *drakōn* = Ammon.

18. Alexander: Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* 13.

DATE: Ca. AD 170s.

CONTENT: See above (A, 19).

SIRE: *drakōn* = unspecified.**19. Alexander: Lucian, *Alexander* 7; cf. 15.**

DATE: After AD 181.

CONTENT: See above (A, 20).

SIRE: *drakōn* = unspecified.**20. Alexander of Abonutichus: Lucian, *Alexander* 11.**

DATE: After 181 AD.

CONTENT: Alexander of Abonutichus claims to have been sired by Podalirius of Tricca, the son of Asclepius.²⁰SIRE: (*drakōn?*) = Podalirius, son of Asclepius.**21. Augustus: Cassius Dio 45.1.2–3.**

DATE: ca. AD 229.

CONTENT: Caesar chooses to adopt Octavian-Augustus on the basis of Atia's claim that he had been sired by Apollo; cf. *Epigrammata Bobiensia* 39 (text at Speyer 1963) and: the Portland Vase (?).SIRE: *drakōn* = Apollo.**22. Scipio Africanus: Cassius Dio 16.7.39; cf. 17.57.63.**

DATE: Ca. AD 229.

CONTENT: Jupiter takes the form of a serpent to have sex with Scipio's mother.

SIRE: *drakōn* = Jupiter.**23. Alexander: *Alexander Romance* (alpha) 1.6–8, 10, 12, 14, 24, 30, 35, 2.13, 21, 3.33.**DATE: Early 3rd c. AD.

CONTENT: See above (A, 21).

SIRE: *drakōn* = Nectanebo, Ammon (Zeus, Heracles, Dionysus).

²⁰ The slightly tricky case for understanding that Podalirius performed this act of siring in the form of a *drakōn* is laid out at Ogden (2009c).

VI The serpent sires of the Graeco-Roman world: their identity-profile

If we bracket off the Alexander examples under discussion, the identity-profile of the remaining serpent sires can be characterised as more coherent than is initially apparent. The dominant trend is emphatically Asclepian:²¹

- Asclepius: (B, 1) Nicasibula's children, (B, 3) Aratus, (B, 13) Miletus, (B, 15) Aratus,
- Apollo, the father of Asclepius: (B, 9) Augustus, (B, 21) Augustus,
- Podalirius (?), the son of Asclepius: (B, 20) Alexander of Abonutichus
- Zeus-Jupiter: (B, 10) Scipio Africanus, (B, 22) Scipio Africanus
- Mysterious *drakōn*: (B, 16) Aristomenes

Three individuals (in four contexts) are directly given Asclepius as father. Augustus is (twice) given as his father Apollo, who is the father of Asclepius, and in one of these contexts his siring is of an emphatically Asclepian nature: Asclepiades of Mendes has his mother Atia incubating in a temple of Apollo, just as one might more normally do in a temple of Asclepius, where she is penetrated by a sacred snake, just as the barren Nicasibula is penetrated by a sacred snake in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus. Alexander of Abonutichus is given as his father Podalirius, who is the son of Asclepius (if indeed he is given a serpent sire at all). It becomes apparent that the stand-out anomaly here is Scipio Africanus, who is twice given Zeus-Jupiter as his father. And yet even so Asclepianism lurks in his tradition too. First, it is noteworthy that the earlier account of this Scipio tradition, that of Oppius, whilst (so far as we can tell from Aulus Gellius' report) suggesting that the serpent's identity is Jupiter rather than directly declaring it, imbues the tale of the serpent-siring with strongly Asclepian imagery: again, a barren woman is impregnated by a snake as she sleeps, like Asclepius' own Nicasibula. Secondly, it is a strong possibility that the tradition of Scipio's serpent sire was a secondary development of the tradition of Augustus' own serpent sire as the incipient emperor sought to fashion a typological precedent for himself: the switch to Jupiter may have been occasioned either

²¹ For Asclepius in general see Edelstein and Edelstein (1945) (incorporating a vast collection of sources), and LiDonnici (1995) (for the Epidaurian miracle inscriptions). For his iconography see *LIMC* Asklepios *passim*. For his shrines see Riethmüller (2005) (a monumental catalogue), and for incubation in his sanctuaries see now Renberg (2017) esp.1: 115–270, 634–649, 689–713. For the god's serpentine affinities see Ogden (2013a) 310–317.

by Scipio's own established relationship with that god, or indeed simply for reasons of *variatio*.²²

VII Alexander and the Asclepian

When we return to Alexander it is noteworthy again that the earliest certain mention of Alexander's serpent sire, Cicero's (B, 4), is also emphatically Asclepian in its context: Cicero connects the serpent sire with the serpent that manifests itself in a dream to Alexander at Harmatelia to show him the herb to use to heal the wound dealt to Ptolemy with a poison arrow (an arrow imbued with snake venom in turn, as it happens).²³ There is enough here to raise the possibility that the Alexander tradition had originally conceptualised his serpent sire as Asclepius or at any rate Asclepian.

Could such thinking have had any root in Alexander's own lifetime or close to it? We know at least that Asclepius in the aspect of a giant serpent was of interest to Ptolemy Philadelphus a generation later. Aelian tells that two gigantic snakes were brought for Philadelphus from Ethiopia, and that three similar creatures were brought also for his successor Euergetes; these were then carefully maintained in the Alexandrian Asclepieion. A vestige of this tradition is already found in Diodorus, who tells that Philadelphus was given a serpent of the length of 30 cubits by some hunters, and that he kept it as a pet.²⁴

The pickings from Alexander's own biographical tradition are not rich, and such as they are indicate an ambivalent attitude towards the god on the king's part: he made offerings to Asclepius in his temples at Soli, Epidaurus and Gortys in Arcadia,²⁵ but then he also supposedly burned down his temples because he failed to save the life of Hephaestion.²⁶

But the star witness in this connection is a piece of contemporary evidence that stands outside Alexander's biographical tradition. In frustratingly allusive *obiter dicta* Hyperides, writing in the early 320s BC, remarks that "[Euxenippus] behaved abominably over the *phiale* [a *patera*, a shallow dish], in having allowed Olympias to dedicate it to the image of Hygieia."²⁷ It is suggestive indeed, from a

²² For Augustus' serpent sire see Becher (1996); Lorsch (1997).

²³ Cf. again Clitarchus [not in *FGrH* / *BNJ*] *apud* Diod. Sic. 17.103 and Curt. 9.8.22–28.

²⁴ Ael. *NA* 16.39; Diod. Sic. 3.36–7.

²⁵ Soli: Arr. *Anab.* 2.5.8. Epidaurus: Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.5. Gortys: Paus. 8.28.1.

²⁶ Arr. *Epict. diss.* 2.22.17 and *Anab.* 7.14.5–6.

²⁷ Hyp. 4.19.

historical perspective, to learn that Alexander's mother was in actual fact a devotee of Asclepius' daughter.²⁸

Hyperides' words also direct our attention to the iconographic traditions for Hygieia and Olympias alike. Hygieia (and subsequently her Roman reflex Salus) had a simple and consistent iconography in her statuary and on coins (perhaps because she had no mythology of her own to inspire experimentation in it): she is shown either seated and cradling a great serpent on her lap, or standing, with the serpent winding itself around her body; in both cases she feeds the serpent from a *phiale*. We can see, therefore, that Olympias' gift was a very appropriate one. The serpent represented at once the alternative form of Hygieia's manifestation, or her avatar, just as the serpent that wound itself around her father Asclepius' staff did in his case.²⁹ We have to wait until late antiquity before we find images of Olympias with Alexander's siring serpent, but when we do, they are strikingly reminiscent of the iconography of Hygieia. On a series of fourth-century AD Roman contorniates Olympias ("*Olympias regina*") reclines on a bed and the serpent coils vertically by her side as she feeds it from a *phiale*.³⁰ Enough remains of a fragmentary mosaic from Baalbek to show that a serpent once similarly coiled on the lap of its seated Olympias. Whether she also fed it from a *phiale* is less clear. Perhaps not: the left hand in which she would have had to have held it seems wrongly positioned for it.³¹ The convergence of Olympias and Hygieia's iconography cannot be better demonstrated than by the confusion surrounding a fragment of a marble relief from Palatitsa in Macedon: the body of a large serpent coils vertically on a woman's lap: scholars dispute, precisely, whether it belonged to a Hygieia or an Olympias.³²

Is it conceivable that the tradition of Olympias' impregnation by a serpent originated in the association of her name with a serpent-toting statue of Hygieia on the Athenian acropolis?

28 Discussion at Carney (2006) 95–96.

29 For Hygieia and her iconography see Croissant (1990), Saladino (1994), Ogden (2013a) 317–321.

30 See Ross (1963) 17–21, Vermeule (1982), Stewart (2003) 62–65, Carney (2006) 122–123; cf. also the coins at Dahmen (2007) 140–141, 154.

31 See Chéhab (1958–9), Ross (1963) 3–5.

32 Louvre M. A. 2550; discussion at Simon (1957) 25–26.

VIII An alternative possibility: ostentatious mystery

The one non-Alexander entry in our catalogue of serpent sires we have yet to address is that of Aristomenes of Messene (B, 16). Pausanias declares that his serpent sire was either “a *daimōn* or a god” but asserts the mysteriousness of his identity beyond this in a positive way; indeed, far from seeking to identify Aristomenes’ sire further, he pours scorn on the attempts of others to identify the serpent sires of both Alexander and Aratus of Sicyon. Whilst Asclepius is hardly excluded as a potential sire for Aristomenes by these words, they do raise the possibility of an alternative syndrome of a *drakōn*-sire that is ostentatiously mysterious and designedly not tied to any one nameable god. This potential syndrome is worth mentioning because it is possible that—*pace* Pausanias’ own words here—two of the Alexander texts conform with it. If the Eratosthenic passage (A, 5 = B, 2) is indeed serpent-related (irrespective of whether or not it is penned by the actual Eratosthenes), then it might well, given its ostentatious obfuscation, constitute another example of a “mysterious *drakōn*” tendency. It is also possible that Ptolemy Chennus’ more ludic, euhemerising treatment of the theme (A, 13 = B, 12), in apparently excluding reference to any further deity (but we do depend on Photius’ summary for his words), points to an underlying tradition of a similar “mysterious *drakōn*,” beyond which one is simply not supposed not look.

Conclusion

Such, then, has been my palinode. Careful scrutiny of the tradition for Alexander’s divine sire encourages us to disaggregate it into two principal strands or sub-traditions: a strand in accordance with which Alexander was sired by Zeus-Ammon; and a strand in accordance with which he was sired by serpent. By the turn of the eras there had developed an occasional tendency to knot these strands together, to contaminate the two sub-traditions, and so it was that Zeus-Ammon and the serpent-sire came to be identified with each other. But when we consider both the evidence for the original identity of Alexander’s serpent sire in its own context, and also the (not inconsiderable) comparative evidence for other serpent sires in the Graeco-Roman world, we are brought to conclude that, whilst the identity of Alexander’s serpent may (or may not) have remained (contrivedly) mysterious, its affinities were emphatically Asclepian.

Abbreviations

<i>BNJ</i>	Worthington (2012–).
<i>EMI</i>	LiDonnici (1995).
<i>FGrH</i>	Jacoby (1923–).
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> (1903–).
<i>IGROM</i>	Cagnat <i>et al.</i> (1906–27).
<i>LIMC</i>	Kahil <i>et al.</i> (1981–99).
<i>P.Oxy.</i>	Grenfell <i>et al.</i> (1898–).

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