

THE DIVINE SERPENT IN MYTH AND LEGEND

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The Mythic Beginnings

Since the very beginnings of time, on every continent of this earth where humanity has worshipped divinity the serpent has been recognized and accepted as a god. From Africa's steaming jungle to the icy wastes of northern Europe; from the fertile crescent to the deserted outback of Australia the serpent has been worshipped, feared and adored. Serpent mythology is arguably the most widespread mythology known to mankind.

We will be dealing with language that is found in myth and legend any discussion of a divine serpent, so we should take time to explain the use of the myth in religious and legendary arenas before we begin. When we examine the history of truth or knowledge in the history of mankind we are faced with the fact that the Oorigin of myth lies in the Greek concept of muthos [muthos] , which as the definition of truth or knowledge predates the use of the Greek word Logos [lpgos], from which we derive our word logic. Myth for the early human usually referred to those realities which were known by experience, be it archetypal , unconscious, or based upon the cultural and ritual beliefs of human civilization. An esteemed 'egg-head' mathematical scientist , Albert Einstein once said; " Knowledge is experience; anything else is just information".

In this article the word "myth" will be defined as a story of forgotten or vague origin, basically religious since we are dealing with the concept of divinity, which seeks to explain or rationalize an important aspect of the world or a society.

Furthermore, in the context of this article, all myths used are, or have been at some stage, actually believed to be true by the peoples of the societies that used or originated the myth. This definition is thus clearly distinguished from the use of the word myth in everyday speech which basically refers to an unreal or imaginary story. Myth, as used herein, is also distinctly different from an allegory or parable which is a story deliberately made up to illustrate some moral point but which has never been assumed to be true.

Originally myths were not expressed in verbal or written form because language was deemed inadequate to convey the truth expressed in the story. The myths were enacted, chanted, painted, costumed, danced, sung and imagined, sometimes in hypnotic or hallucinatory states. In this manner the creative energies and relationships behind and beneath the natural world were brought into the conscious realm The myth was believed to not only to tell about but to create a chain from the metaphysical world to the physical one.

Later in historical time myth becomes connected to and often identified with another Greek concept, that of legend, which stems from the Greek Legion or Logos

[logos] which meant word or language. Myth then became a written form. And

Mythos/Logos is the activity of human consciousness which translates or transfers the underlying forms and powers from the unconscious to the conscious, from the dream world to the world of activity.

In our 'modern' world we have so discounted the power and reality of the myth, denigrating them to the level of 'fairy tales' that we have lost contact with our ground. We don't know who we are, and so we don't know how to act. We have thrown out the 'baby', our orienting myths of origin with the 'bath water', non-useful and unnecessary data which often accompanied these myths.

Joseph Campbell is quoted as saying: " Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration for whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation."

I believe that there could be nothing more absurd than to think that our modern scientific methodology could ever eliminate the poetic and mythic, for science is closed against certain dimensions of the real which only myth and the poetic can attain. It is the height of absurdity to imagine that scientific 'knowledge' exhausts reality !

I would like to use a collective definition composed of many theories which meet my criteria for mythology framed into a single paraphrase: Myths are stories, usually, about gods and other supernatural beings. They are often stories of origins, how the world and everything in it came to be in illo tempore [Eliade]. They are usually strongly structured and their meaning is only discerned by linguistic analysis [Levi-Strauss]. Some times they are public dreams which, like private dreams, emerge from the unconscious mind; they more often reveal archetypes of the collective unconscious [Jung]. Myths are symbolic and metaphorical, and they orient people to the metaphysical dimension, explain the origins and nature of the cosmos, and on a psychological plane, address themselves to the innermost depths of the human psyche. Some of them are explanatory, being prescientific attempts to interpret the natural world (such as the shedding of snake skin). As such, they are usually functional and are the science of primitive peoples. Religious myths are sacred histories and are distinguished from the profane. But, all tell of the truth told by human experience which cannot be explained by normal use of language. It was that great scientist, Albert Einstein, who said " Science without religion is lame; Religion without science is blind."

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The myth in any primitive society, that is in the original living form of the myth is not a fairy tale but a reality lived. Myths are human experience, and when myths are narrated it is not usually the speaker who speaks but the wisdom of the forefathers speaking through him. The principal role of the shaman was the myth holder and narrator.

In the theories of the eminent Swiss psychologist, Karl Jung, the fantasies of the

collective unconscious stem from the actual experiences of ancient ancestors, and the development of prehistory as a serious field of study is of considerable importance to the creators of myth. Certain facts exist in human history, and these are most often found hidden in myths. I have even been led to muse on the fact that the usual depiction of the double helix representing DNA is remarkably similar to the ancient depiction of the serpents guarding the world tree, a figure still found in the caduceus.

In Jung's view, the snake, as a chthonic and at the same time spiritual being, symbolizes the unconscious. In particular, according to Jung, the symbolism of the snake's has sudden and unexpected manifestations and painful or dangerous intervention in human affairs often has frightening effects. Crucial to the understanding of the serpent as a libido symbol is a consideration of the biological characteristics of the actual creature. Jung stresses the fact that the snake is a cold- blooded vertebrate and with that fact alone the true psychic rapport that can be established with practically all warm-blooded animals comes to an end. Like the Gnostics of early Christianity who identified the serpent with the human medulla and spinal cord, Jung regards the serpent as the psychic representation of the profoundly unconscious functions which are governed by these organs. I think that perhaps this is why the serpent is so often seen as a divine creature, a sort of god which lies behind all human functioning.

The mysterious dynamism of the snake, its extraordinary vitality and its seeming immortality through the periodic rejuvenation of shedding the old and appearing new each year must have instilled a sense of awe and invoked a powerful response in our earliest ancestors, the Neolithic agriculturist. The snake was consequently mythologized, attributed often with powers that could control the entire cosmos. Everywhere we find the snake, or its representation, the spiral, on primitive pottery. Vases show forth gigantic snakes winding over the whole universe, or over the sun, moon and stars; elsewhere the snake appears below a growing plant or coils above the belly of a pregnant woman. The snake was the symbol of energy, spontaneous, creative energy, and of immortality.

Respect and worship of the serpent by humans has been obvious from the time that both humans and serpents co-habitated the earth.

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One must consider, for example, not only the serpent's seeming immortality but also its ability to periodically desquamate the integument covering its entire body without bleeding, illness or infection and immediately replete a new body covering. In accomplishing this 'miraculous' function the serpent liberates itself from scars, dermatoses and ticks. Such ability is beyond the scope of human efforts. This early connection between the serpent and healing becomes a permanent facet of serpent worship.

The wonderful ability of the serpent to shed its skin and so renew its youth makes it the master of the secret of death and rebirth. The moon, waxing and waning is the celestial body capable of this same ability. The moon, long associated with the life-creating

rhythm of the female, and therefore of time itself becomes the lord of the mystery of birth and death and the serpent is the earthly counterpart .

In early rites of initiation where the candidate was seen to die and be reborn, the moon was the goddess mother and the serpent the divine father.

If we summarize what we expect to find about the divine serpent at the onset rather than at the conclusion of this work it would look like this:

The Serpent is emblematic;

1. Of wisdom... [Biblical: "be ye therefore wise as serpents "Matt 10:16]
2. Of subtlety...[Biblical: " Now the serpent was more subtle than an beast of the field" Gen. 3:1]

The Serpent is symbolical;

1. Of deity: Plutarch et al
2. Of eternity: forming a circle with tail in mouth
3. Of renovation and resurrection: the old becomes young [skin shedding]
4. Of guardian spirits: Greek and Roman temple altars

The Early Years

Even before the Sumerian legends we can find vases with a gigantic snake winding over the whole universe, or over the sun, moon and stars. The snake can also be found below a growing plant or above the belly of a pregnant woman. The snake is thus seen as a symbol of energy and life.

In some of the very earliest of figurine artifacts which have been found we have the fecund goddess with large belly and pendulous breasts, all of which are indicating fertility connotations. Almost always accompanying these figurines, either on the figurine itself or on associated material, we find the spiral. The spiral is one of the most widespread of the symbols of the goddess. It appears in American Indian, Asian, African, Australian and European art, most often as a coiled serpent. In some early Middle Eastern coins and plaques we see spiral designs around the heads of gods. This is usually regarded the symbol of superhuman life.

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In Babylonia as in Egypt the maze is also seen as representing the mystery surrounding the

serpent. Also early ritual dances are thought to have imitated the tracks of the serpent in motion, chthonic gods in serpentine form. Also snakes were often seen coming out of holes in the ground, thus perhaps from the Underworld.

When we come to Sumer we meet the most famous of the mythic epic story of olden times, the Gilgamesh Epic. Among other pieces to be found in this tale of a search for the meaning of life is the tale of the plant of eternal life. According to the story, Gilgamesh was told that the plant lay at the bottom of a certain lake. With much effort, he dove to the bottom, retrieved the plant and brought it to the surface and the shore. While Gilgamesh was resting, before eating the plant and becoming an immortal, a snake came along and ate the plant. The end result was that the snake became immortal, and Gilgamesh went home to die.

Early Sumerian and Akkadian artifacts show pictures of a tree or pole which is called the "axis mundi", or the world axis. It is intended to be the center and support of the world. Guarding this tree or pole is a snake or pair of intertwined snakes. We can see here the beginnings of the association between the snake and the rod which we will see later in the Bible and the caduceus. Also, in Sumer, we have a cylindrical seal which has on it the mythical date palm with its two fruits, life and enlightenment. This tree is copied again in the book Genesis in the Jewish scripture. This tree is guarded by a serpent. Again, this is duplicated in the Bible.

In these early Sumerian/Akkadian myths we meet Etana, the chosen king, later a demi-god, who must find the tree which stands at the center of the earth. This tree is the home of an eagle, who has devoured the young of the serpent who guards the tree. The serpent appeals to the Father god, Shamash, for justice, and Shamash shows the tree how to help the serpent capture the eagle. There exists an early Akkadian seal [ca. 2350BCE] showing the serpent in human form enthroned with the caduceus emblem behind him and guarding him.

According to one theory, all primordial serpents of myth are derived from a Sumerian arch-serpent in subterranean waters, whose name was Zu. This old Sumerian serpent-god, whose other name is Ningizzida, is the ultimate archetype of the lord of the watery abyss from which mortal life arises and to which it returns. We might note that among the Celts the underworld serpent, Sucellos, represented the same dark power. Later, we meet the great serpent by the name of Tiamat, also named Papohis [later to be found as the Biblical Leviathan]. In the beginning there were only the mingled waters of Abzu, the abyss of sweet water and Tiamat, the serpent of salt water oceans. Abzu and Tiamat were the parents of the first Babylonian gods, Lahmu and Lahamu, who were the grandparents of the great gods Anu and Ea.

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Tiamat was Chaos and was focussed on destroying the world. I find that a common theme in early comogonies is that to bring Cosmos out of Chaos, some organizing agent, usually light and speaking are necessary.

Marduk, to save Babylonian army, and the country, must slay Tiamat and cut him in half. When he does this, he creates the sky from her [Tiamat is female] top half, and earth from her bottom half. This story is echoed in the Norse tale of Odin.

It is in Persia that we first meet the great sky serpent Azhi Dahaka, the creator of all the planets in the sky. Early Mid-eastern myths not only see the serpent as lord of the sky and earth, he is also a lord of waters. Dwelling in the earth, frequenting springs, marshes and other water streams, the serpent glides with a motion of waves. The phallic suggestion is immediate, as it was in the initiation rites. Likewise a dual association of fire and water attaches to the lightning of the serpent strike, the forked appearance of the tongue and the lethal burning of the poison.

The early, pre-Canaanite Phoenicians had a serpent god which was called the Basilisk. This has been considered an early phallic god, common in ancient religions. An interesting note is that the word basilisk is where we got the later word a temple of the phallic god, and eventually a type of church, the basilica. St. Peter's Basilica in Rome carries a remembrance in the form of a phallic ball on top of the structure.

The basilisk, though usually considered a serpent, does not always have clearly defined anatomical features. To look directly at a basilisk is to die, so it is impossible to picture them accurately. It is almost always an icon of fear. This ability to kill with a glance is shared by the gorgons of Greek mythology, who may be the ancestors of the basilisk. The only way to kill a basilisk was the way Perseus slew Medusa, by use of a mirror-like object in which the reflection could be viewed.

The Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, writes of the basilisk; " The basilisk serpent has the same power, to kill with its gaze. It is a native of Cyrenaica, not more than 12 inches long. It routs all snakes with its hiss, and moves its body forward in manifold coils like other snakes".

In the Middle Ages, the basilisk became identifies with the cockatrice, a serpent mentioned occasionally in Isaiah and other Hebrew scriptures. When we enter the modern period, and Medusa becomes a innocuous decorative motif, the basilisk immigrates to the United States and becomes identified with different American snakes, most especially the rattlesnake. One of the first rattle snakes seen by European explorers, a tropical variety known as the "Mexican West Coast rattlesnake" was given the scientific name "crotalus basiliscus", or basilisk snake.

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There exists a lovely Elamite painted bowl which shows the guardian serpent of the World tree coiled up the trunk. There are clear similarities to the divine Sumerian or Akkadian serpent.

In other early legends, all primordial serpents are derived from the Sumerian Arch-

Serpent which dwelt in the subterranean waters, or chaos. In Greek legend, Apollo took over the Delphic oracle by killing a serpent already there, at the earth's navel.

It is not unusual for us to find that in later ages, especially among Semitic and Indo-European peoples, the dragon [Greek drakon = serpent] or cosmic serpent is seen as a symbol of chaos.

It is this chaos, or serpent which must be overcome to create order and maintain life in any meaningful way. We will see this in our discussion of Biblical texts.

In that land we now call Turkey, Iraq and Syria we find peoples sometimes referred to as Hurrians . These people set up a short-lived but powerful kingdom called the kingdom of the Mitanni. It is known that Egyptian pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty married Mitanni princesses. These people were Aryan peoples, and they brought many of the Indian gods and goddesses to the area. One main god was the serpent god Indra, who became very popular. The Hurrians were related to and supplanted by, the Hittites, who adopted the Hurrian gods.

We find, for example, Illuyankas, the serpent god and Hedammu, the serpent who loved Ishtar and was her divine servant. These were powerful and popular Hittite gods. We cannot help but wonder what influence these people had on the Egyptian and Israelite peoples with whom they came in contact, and what influence the serpent gods of India, transferred and transformed here would have later.

AFRICA

Egypt

When we come to the snake as a divinity in Egypt we need look no further than the great crowns worn by the divine Pharaoh. No matter which crown, the Blue crown, the informal crown or the great double red and white crown we examine we will find the snake god of Lower Egypt present. Even when the vulture god of Upper Egypt is missing, the asp, or Egyptian cobra, is there. The serpent, in Egypt, has a varied career, the Uraeus, or cobra, and other mythical snakes are all considered quite differently. The spinal cord was symbolized by the snake and the Uraeus serpent coiled upon the foreheads of the Pharaoh represented the divine fire which had crawled serpent-like up the tree of life.

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The Uraeus, or asp, is a benevolent guardian god, a tutelary god of the delta region of Egypt. This is probably where this snake was most often found. Even today the swamp-like areas of the Nile delta is home to the Egyptian cobra. This snake was also connected to the god Horus, and therefore with the living Horus, who is seen incarnate in the Pharaoh. The Uraeus rules by day, and therefore is also connected to the sun god Ra, who is also a god of Pharaoh. It is not an accident of history that the legendary Cleopatra

chose to be joined to the Egyptian cobra, the asp, by being bitten by the serpent. She is identifying the goddess Isis, whom she represented, to the sacred Uraeus who was her protector and who would lead her into eternal life in the western land.

When we come to night and darkness, the crocodile becomes supreme. Ra , the sun god of Heliopolis is diminished. The solar ship has entered the realm of night and encountered darkness. The crocodile, in Egyptian legendary, is seen as an aspect of the serpent rather than a separate creature. There are places in the world where the great saurians are not seen as serpents, but as a completely separate genus of creature. The Americas would serve as an example of this, but in Egypt and other Africa nations which were influenced by Egypt, the crocodile is a serpent, no matter in what form it is depicted.

In the original Egyptian creation story we find a serpent and the primordial egg, which contained the " Bird of Light" . In Chapter 175 of the Book of the Dead we find the prophecy that when the world returns to its original chaos, the hidden aspect of the supreme god, Atum, will become the new serpent. There is a text I found in the "Coffin Texts" [I.161 ff] which contains Atum's description of himself:

" I am Atum, the creator of the Eldest Gods,

I am he who gave birth to Shu,

I am that great he-she.

I am he who did what seemed good to him,

I took my space in the place of my will.

Mine is the space of those who move along

like those two serpentine circles" [emphasis mine]

Later in a debate, which can be found in "The Book of the Dead, [chapter 175] which takes place between Osiris and Atum, [described here as the "High God", we find Atum's description of the end of all, when " Then I will be what will remain, just I and Osiris, when I will have changed myself back into the Old Serpent who knew - no man and saw no god."

Also, in the Book of the Dead, in the Eleventh section of the Tuat, we find the story of how the boat of Afu Ra [the sun god] passes the territory of the town of Sais. "The region to the left of the god is one of fire, and close to the boat stands Horus who is working magic with the sake-headed boomerang which he holds in his hand, Before him stands the serpent god, called 'Seth-heh', i.e. the 'eternal Seth'.

Before the boat is the great serpent Ankh-neteru, and twelve amikhiu gods, taking hold of the tow line, enter this serpent at the tail, and drawing the god in his boat through the body of the serpent, bring him out at his mouth.

During his passage through the serpent Afu Ra is transformed into Khepera [the ancient god associated with the creation of the world] and is now towed into the sky by 12 goddesses."

The Egyptians also adopted the ancient Persian god Azhi Dahaka, the sky serpent who formed all of the observable heavenly planets. So, in one sense powerful gods of both light and darkness are seen as serpents. This may have some connection to the linking of the snake to the moon in the mythological and psychological areas.

This identification is intensified because of the waxing and waning of the moon, demonstrating the death of the old and the rebirth of the new and forever young.

One of the chief powers of this darkness is the serpent god Apep, who tries to swallow the sun ship. Apep [or Apepi or Apophis] is the great primordial serpent who lived in the waters of the celestial Nile [the Milky Way] and is considered the serpent of chaos and destruction. A mighty struggle took place and when the sun appeared in the east the next day prayers of thankfulness were offered that Ra was triumphant and the sun would continue to shine. Just imagine what chaos a solar eclipse would cause !

The serpent Apep is seen in two other forms, or traditions. The first was most likely the crocodile and was called Typhon, or dragon. Two other serpents divinities mentioned in Egyptian mythology are Nehebkau, a serpent with human arms and legs. This fearful god, once he was tamed by Ra, became his faithful servant. The other serpent god is Am-Mut, the 'eater of souls'. The other, and more extensive is as Set, or Seth, or Sethos. This is a half-crocodile, half -human creature who becomes important in the Egyptian pantheon. The serpent Typhon is the youngest son of Gaea and Tartarus in Greek legend. He was taller than any mountain, and had great wings, eyes of fire , hands made of dragons, and a lower body compsed of vipers. He and Echidna gave birth to Hydra, Cerberis, Chimera and the Nemean lion. The Egyptian Typhon was a more simple serpent lord.

Again, it is important to note here that the dragons we have included in this study are only those dragons which are seen as serpentine. The classic European dragon which looks more like a mammal with wings, like the Griffin, are excluded. The Egyptian and Chinese dragon concepts depict them as serpents, as does the Greek. [I will speak more of dragons when I write of the Asian serpents]

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Perhaps the most fearsome aspect of Set can be seen in the famous weighing of the soul picture in the Book of the Dead. Sitting beside the scales, waiting to devour the sinful soul of a condemned person is a half crocodile, half jackal or hyena creature who is

identified as Set. It was Set, as the brother of Osiris, of course, who slew Osiris.

Set becomes a powerful god in the Egyptian 'two kingdoms'. The cult of Amun, later Amun-Ra lasted about twenty dynasties, the cult of Osiris was very short-lived, although Osiris was venerated for a long time.

The Isis cult lasted into the Christian era as an active mystery cult. But, the original priesthood of the serpent god, Set, in ancient Egypt survived for twenty-five recorded dynasties (ca. 3200-700BCE) It became one of the two central priesthoods of predynastic times, the other being that of HarWer (Horus the Elder).

Unification under both philosophical systems, one in Upper, and one in Lower Egypt, resulted in the name of the empire being called the 'Two Kingdoms' and its Pharaohs wearing the famous 'double crown' of Horus and Set. The vulture (early hawk and cobra/asp).

Set was originally a stellar deity, perhaps the cyclical counterpart of the solar Horus. But, later, the cults of Osiris and Isis recast Set as an evil principle. Set did return, for a short time during the XIX and XX dynasties, as the patron of Pharaoh, but by the XXV dynasty a new wave of persecution by priests of Osiris led to the final destruction of the Set priesthood.

When the Egyptians abandoned the mines in the Timma Valley (about nineteen miles north of the Gulf of Aqaba) during the Egyptian decline of the twelfth century BCE, the Midianites converted the local temple into a Midianite shrine. In the makeshift Holy of Holies of the shrine, modern excavators have found only one religious object. They found a molded copper serpent with a gilded head, the ancient symbol of life and fertility of the Middle East. This would indicate that the Midianites had a serpent god or goddess in their pantheon. Again. We see echoes of Biblical stories here.

Before we leave Egypt we must briefly mention two other aspects of the divine serpent; Nehebu-Kau is the great snake under the world and upon which the world rests, and there is a winged serpent found in hieroglyphs which may be the ancestor of our Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl.

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Central and Southern Africa

Traveling further south in the African continent we find the great serpent

"Anyiewo' who comes out to graze on rain and whose refection is the rainbow. This is found in the Ewe tribe.

The strange, stone-age Dogan people of central Africa have a divine being named Lebe. Lebe is the first member of those creatures called the living dead, and he lives as a serpent.

In Dahomey, the Fon people have a great serpent god who is seen as a rainbow named Danh, the son of Mtawu-Lisa.. This serpent encircles the whole world with his tail in his mouth, representing unity and wholeness. This god, also called Da orders the whole cosmos. Da has a dual nature rather than a female-male identity. When he appears in the rainbow, the male is the red part of the rainbow, the female the blue. Above the earth Da has 3500 coils, called asa-xasa, and the same number of coils beneath the earth; together they support the world. Da is the name given to this god in action, Mawu-Lisa is the name given to the god in thought. This god was exported to Haiti and Surinam.

The Fon legend says that the world was created by Nana-Buluku, the one god, who is neither male nor female. This god gave birth to twins, Mawu and Lisa and it is they who shaped the world, and control it still. Mawu, the female, is the moon and Lisa, the male, is the sun. In the beginning, before Mawu had any children, the rainbow serpent, Aido-Hwedo, already existed, and this great serpent assisted in the creation. For example, all the mountains were formed from the serpent's dung. Later, because Aido-Hwedo cannot stand heat, the oceans were created for him to live in. And there Aido-Hwedo has remained since the beginning of time, with his tail in his mouth [this tail-in-mouth representation is common]. Nana-Buluku charged the red monkeys that live beneath the sea to keep Aido-Hwedo fed, and they spend their time forging the iron bars that are the serpent's diet. When the monkey's supply of iron eventually runs out the serpent will be so hungry that he will start to chew his own tail. Then his writhings will be so terrible that the whole earth will tilt, and then slip into the sea, and that will be that !

In what is now Zimbabwe, there is the legend of the creation of humanity. The first man, Mwuetsi [moon] was created by Mwari, the high god. He was given a wife, Massassi, who gave birth to all the plants of the world. Then he was given Morongo, who bore goats, cattle, sheep, humans. On the fourth night Morongo warned Mwuetsi not to sleep with her, but he did so anyway. She then gave birth to snakes, scorpions, lions, and all other creatures which harm man. After this the Great Serpent became ruler and husband of Morongo and fathered a great tribe.

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In the land between the present Union of South Africa and Zimbabwe there lives a people called the vhaVenda, who have a god who is a white crocodile. This crocodile is viewed as a serpent divinity of great strength and great wisdom who watches over the peoples. This divine serpent creature is identified with the vhaVenda chiefs, who may be his sons.

Perhaps the most impressive architecture in ancient Africa, excepting Egypt, would be the royal city of Benin in Nigeria. The most prominent feature of this architecture is the form of the serpent. Early artifacts found in this area also display the serpent motif.

There is a famous legend told among the tribes of central Africa. The tale concerns two unmarried men, one too mild and one too bad-tempered to find wives.

One day they met the great rock python. Moma. After a gesture of extreme kindness towards her she rewarded him with a wife, the most wonderful wife in the whole village. The bad-tempered man was given the same opportunity, reacted insultingly toward the serpent goddess and was rewarded with an ugly, nagging, abusive wife.

The Middle East

Before leaving Africa we journey back to the Middle East to spend some time examining the Hebrew attitude toward the divine serpent. To do so we will use the best source available, the Jewish Holy Scripture. When the Hebrews emigrated from Egypt during the XIX dynasty they took with them a caricature of Set and gave him the title Satan from the hieroglyphic Set-hen which was one of this god's formal titles.

We first meet the serpent in the Jewish Scripture in the Book Genesis. In Genesis 3:1 we find that " the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts" [1]

We might remember, that in all of scripture only two animals had the gift of speech; Balaam's ass, [Numbers 22:30] and the serpent.[Genesis 3] This was a God-given gift. We might certainly ask why these two beasts, among all the rest, are singled out for such a distinction. In the case of Balaam's ass the message is clearly God's, what about in the case of the serpent?

It should be noted, from the beginning, when one carefully examines Biblical passages regarding serpents, that you will never find anyplace where serpents are specifically called evil creatures. Rather, the snake is used as a symbol for everything from the Devil to the highest order of angels; from lying to wisdom. This symbolism is common to the Bible and should not be taken as a literal judgment about the snake. The Bible uses the dove, for example, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit and this does not mean that doves are holy birds.

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The Bible uses many Hebrew words to describe the snake: akshub means a coiled serpent, ephah is a hissing, probably venomous snake, Livyathin [Leviathan] is the sea serpent , nachash, a hissing serpent, pethen, a twisting snake, probably the asp, seraph, the burning serpent, shephiyphon, a snapping serpent, the adder, tsepha or tsiphoniy is the tongue thrusting snake. We might compare the Greek words for snake: aspis, drakon, echnida. Herpeton [from whence we get the classical name for the study of serpents, herpetology, and ophis which gave a name to an early Christian sect.

But, to continue with the Biblical picture, the ass was given speech to deliver the 'word of God'. Can we assume that the snake had the gift for any other reason? We find here the

serpent guarding the tree of life and knowledge just like he did in Sumer. There are too many similarities in the tree and the serpent to be accidental.

It is evident to me that the account of the "fall of man" from Eden was adapted by biblical writers from pre-Judaic polytheistic traditions in which a divine and omniscient serpent, representing the female creative nature, was pitted against the created order of a male oriented divinity. It is for this reason that the serpent is stressed as demonic, in spite of the fact that the Genesis authors are compelled to harmonize their account with those of the surrounding peoples, and therefore must write that the serpent is a creature of God, and "more 'subtil' (sic) [Genesis 3:1] than any beast of the field which the Lord God has made."

Here we might suggest that the serpent saves humanity by putting it in touch with nature; death is recognized as a function of all nature, including humanity, and this knowledge is necessary for new life to begin. This would bring Jewish legends into more equivalent to other Near East traditions.

In Genesis the serpent is not only sentient of God's prohibition against partaking from the Tree of Knowledge; it knows why God will enforce that command; it knows the gift of the Tree of Knowledge, as if it possessed that gift.

The deific aspect of the serpent is further underscored by the punishment imposed upon it by God: "upon thy belly shalt thou go.....". Does this mean that before punishment the serpent had legs or even wings?

We next meet the serpent in Exodus 4:3,4 and Exodus 7: 10-12. In these

passages the snake, presumably the Egyptian asp, is connected to a rod. Aaron's rod. When Moses doubts that he is really hearing the voice of Yahweh, he is asked what he is holding in his hand and when he replies that he is holding a rod, he is

commanded to throw the rod down on the ground. When he does this, the rod becomes a serpent [Exodus 7:1-16]. When he picks it up it becomes a rod again.

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This association between serpent and rod is a very ancient one. Later when Aaron throws his rod down before Pharaoh, it becomes a snakes. Pharaoh recognizes this magical association, as do the Egyptian priests, who also change their rods into serpents. However, to demonstrate the superiority of the Jewish god, Aaron's snake ate the Egyptian snakes.

Again, when Moses sets the plagues upon Egypt, he does so by stretching forth this serpent/rod. When Moses parts the sea for the passage of his people, he again does so with the assistance of this powerful rod/serpent. In the wilderness Moses strikes the rock with this same rod to create water. This object becomes so

"sacred" that it is one of the objects for which room is made in the Ark of the Covenant.

Before we examine some more ominous aspects of the serpent in Jewish scripture we will have to look at Numbers 21:9. Moses, who had thrown a fit when Aaron made a golden image of the Egyptian goddess of mercy and miners, Hathor

[Exodus 32: 19-20] claiming that God condemned such terrible action, himself makes and puts on a pole a copper, or brass serpent, claiming that God had ordered him to make and display this image to cure the people from snake bites.

" Yahweh sent fiery serpents [seraphim] among the people; their bite brought death to many in Israel. The people came and said to Moses we have sinned by speaking against Yahweh and against you. Intercede for us with Yahweh to save us from these serpents. Moses spoke for the people, and Yahweh replied, ' make a fiery serpent and use it as a standard. Anyone who is bitten and looks at it will survive. Moses then made a serpent out of bronze and raised it as a standard [Numbers 21: 6-9]

We are informed , in II Kings 18:4, that this serpent symbol was so popular that the people continued to revere the bronze serpent until the time of King Hezekiah [719-691 BCE], who, according to the record "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it ".

Here we see not only the divine power of the serpent, but also the connection with healing which pervades this part of the world. This action by Moses might show his Midianite heritage or the universal recognition of the divinity of the serpent, but it certainly shows a different Moses. One might ask how can a 'jealous God' condemn the golden calf and approve the 'brazen serpent '? What is it about the snake that commands such loyalty?

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Perhaps we can find a hint as to the position of power in Judaism when we discover that one of the most powerful of the heavenly creatures may have serpentine connections, the Seraphim.

We find in Isaiah 14:29 a description of the highest of all of God's angelic

creatures, the Seraphim. The word 'seraph' [of which Seraphim is the plural] can be translated " fiery serpent". Therefore there must be significance that the word used for serpent in Isaiah 14:29, Isaiah 30:6 and in the Numbers 21:8 description of a serpent, is the word "seraph" Could it be that these "fiery serpents" stood highest in the hierarchy of angelic beings? There is no doubt that the Hebrew 'shrpm' refers to serpents.

Judeo-Christian tradition, however, comes down very hard on this serpent concept, perhaps as a part of the conflict between the ancient maternal gods which underlie and support early matriarchal tribal traditions and the later paternalistic nomadic traditions. Where early traditions depict the serpent as one of the favorite theriomorphic forms of gods and goddesses, it becomes with the "fall" of Adam and Eve the infernal enemy of the so-called "one true God."

The most fearful creature in the Bible is that creation called Leviathan. We have many mentions of Leviathan in the Jewish scripture. Basically, he appears like a chaos which underlies the order of creation or like a dragon which threatens order and creation. Perhaps we should point out that Leviathan is a female and her male counterpart is Behemoth. We find a lengthily poem about Leviathan in Chapters 40 and 41 of the Book of Job, and a wonderful hymn about Leviathan in Psalm 74. Where we hear the words:

"...it was you [God] who crushed the head of Leviathan

who left him as food for the seafaring men". [1]

[Translation from the Tanakh: Jewish Publication Society]

Perhaps the best citation would be Isaiah 27. In this passage Leviathan is described as the 'elusive serpent' and 'Dragon of the sea'. This latter description can be translated [and we find it so in the Tanakh] "The monster which the Lord vanquished of old; the embodiment of chaos, or perhaps the forces of evil in the present world.

The Leviathan appears in more than one religion. In Canaanite mythology and literature, it is a monster called Lotan, the 'fleeing serpent', the coiling serpent, the powerful with seven heads'. It was eventually killed by Baal. The Leviathan is also the Ugaritic god of evil.

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In Christianity, St. John did draw a comparison between Jesus on the cross and Moses' snake on the pole, saying that both were lifted up upon a pole for the salvation of mankind, and I have in my possession copies of art work showing a crucified serpent with the thorn-crowned face of Christ.

Christians were taught to see the brazen serpent of Moses as divinely authenticated type of the crucifixion, and an image of saving faith. There is some indication that there existed early Gnostic Christian sects, especially Ophitic sects

[from ofis, serpent] which utilized both nakedness and serpent-worship as part of the

'love feast' [agape] worship service.

In Christian tradition Philo of Alexandria, for example, is so impressed with the serpent's ability to rejuvenate itself, as well as its ability to kill and cure (an ability he saw as indicative of the positive and negative cosmic powers that rule the world) that he saw the serpent as "the most spiritual of animals".

In early Gnostic Christianity there were several systems of thought which found room for serpent worship. The basic idea of these systems was that the origin of evil coincided with the idea of creation itself. The god of the Old Testament , called the Demiurge [demiurgos], created the world not from nothing [ex nihilo], but by engulfing a quantity of light of the infinite true Father. This light, the Spirit, he lured, conjured or ravished downward into Matter, where it is now trapped. This was the first descent of the serpent.

The second descent of the serpent was a voluntary down-coming, to release the spiritual forces; and the Bible story of the serpent in the garden is an account of this appearance. The serpent in this account caused the male and female, Adam and Eve, to violate the commandment of the Demiurge, and so commence the work of redemption. Yahweh struck back by delivering to Moses an impossible set of moral laws, to which the serpent then replied by coming down as the redeemer and taking up residence in a mortal Jesus.

German coinage of the 16th century, especially the German golden Thaler , shows a theme, common among iconography, which shows Jesus on the cross, on the obverse, compared to a serpent , on the reverse , both depicted on a cross or on a tree, both lifted up. Thus, the serpent's role as healer is expanded to include resurrection.

In Book X of Paradise Lost, John Milton demonstrates a vivid example of Christianity's tendency to concentrate all other gods into a generic, serpentine form.

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I am led also to wonder whether the hood of the snake which is commonly seen as a protective shield over saviors in other religions [cf. The Buddha] might not be similar to the halos found over the heads of Christian holy people? Certainly the symbols appear to be so similar as to bring up a doubt as to coincidence as the answer.

This image was often found in the Middle Ages and is seeing a reemergence in the twentieth century. But, basically the serpent's identification with evil is the one which caught the Christian imagination, and it was the dragon image which caught on. In Revelation 12 we find the story of the war in heaven. In this war, Michael, and his angels, fight the dragon. This dragon is identified as 'that serpent of old that led the whole world astray, whose name is Satan or the Devil'.

This identification was also picked up in Islam. There is an Islamic myth about the

garden of Eden and the serpent. It seems that Paradise, or Eden, was guarded by a peacock who was very wise and kept Satan out. Satan, in this myth called Iblis, wanted to get into paradise to get revenge on Adam, because it was Adam's being placed first which resulted in Satan being expelled in the first place. The peacock was too wise. So Satan (Iblis) had the serpent carry him back into paradise hidden in his mouth.

But, with the exception of Wadd, a pre-Islamic moon god of the Minaean tribe and state of Southern Arabia, in Islam there was little room for myth. Some of the old Arabian legends were retained, but the basic philosophy was anthropomorphic monotheism.

When he considers the place of the serpent. Carl Jung appears like the Gnostics of Christianity who identified the serpent with the human medulla and spinal cord. Jung regards the serpent as the psychic representative of the human functions which are governed by these parts of the body.

The serpent would correspond to what is unconscious and incapable of becoming conscious, but which, as the collective unconscious seems to possess a wisdom of its own and a knowledge that is often felt to be supernatural.

In that area of civilization which flourished between Asia Minor and Europe we see the serpent goddess prominent in the Minoan culture of Crete. In a repository in the second Palace of Knossos (@ 1600 BCE) we find many statues of the goddess Ariadne, a large busted woman, wreathed in snakes, and a similar goddess in many other burial and temple sites on Crete. There is a connection between Ariadne and Dionysus as that goes back to 5250 BCE, and ancient serpent connection indeed.

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This goddess was supposedly the daughter of Minos, the founder of the Minoan civilization and brother to the Minotaur.

She depicts the benevolence and sacred power of the life force. Ariadne is definitely a very important goddess of fertility. And in that she may be a local aspect of Ishtar or Astarte who has become identified with serpents.

EUROPE:

Greece

In Greece, Zeus, the father of the Greek pantheon of gods is one of the few Greek gods who never appears attended by a snake. But, the Olympian Zeus known as Zeus Meilichios assumes the form of a serpent to attend the spring rites of the mother-goddess Earth. Zeus, as a serpent coiled with Rhea, who had also taken the form of a snake. The snake from then on becomes the symbol of earth and water.

Ophion, one of the Greek Titans means literally "serpent". It is claimed that Zeus took the form of a serpent to escape from the murderous aggression of his father, Chronos.

It is said that Zeus became unquestioned father of the gods by his conquest of Typhon, the serpent of the cosmic sea, just as Yahweh conquered Leviathan in Biblical lore. The resemblance of both of these victories to that of Indra, king of the Vedic pantheon is, to me, beyond question.

In Greece, Cecrops, [Kekrops], the founder of Athens and of all Greek civilization, supposedly sprang half-man, half-serpent from the Greek soil. In Athens, the temple of the city guardian, Athena, contains serpents as divine presences. Athena, herself, bears a serpent on her shield, and is often identified with that creature of the gods.

In Greece, as we have briefly mentioned earlier, a great snake, named Python which lived at the center of the world, and held it together, guarded and controlled the shrine of the oracle Gaia at Delphos [Delphi] in the period of time before Apollo became the patron of that oracle. Python was the child of Gaia, and had been born

of the slime and mud that was left on the earth by the great flood of Deucalion. No one dared approach this divine beast and the people asked Apollo for help. He came down from Mount Olympus and killed Python, using his silver bow and golden arrows. After this, he was known as the Pythian Apollo.

The term 'Delphos means womb, and Delphos was considered the womb of the world. Also, the oracle was situated in a cave, and the Greek word for cave is also the word for vagina. This great snake, then, somehow is connected with the very birth and source of life of the world. The sibyl or Pythia told prophecies after inhaling volcanic fumes from the center of the world guarded by the divine Python.

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There was a serpent shrine at Epirus, dedicated to Apollo, but in effect a pre-Hellenic Aegean shrine. The snakes at this shrine were said to be the descendants of the great Python of Delphi.

Also, in Greece, we find the Medusa Gorgon, the Goddess of Righteous Wrath. In some traditions she was a serpent of the Libyan Amazons and represented female wisdom. In other traditions she was an Anatolian Sun Goddess. This Medusa is very similar to the destroyer aspect of the dark Egyptian goddess Nieth. She was also one member of the triple personae of the North African goddess An-Ath. She was imported by the Greeks as patroness of Athens, and her fierce visage was embossed on Athena's shield. We find the best statues of Medusa at Corfu.

In Greece we also discover the cult of Dionysos, the god of wine and the vine. Dionysos was born to Persephone, daughter of Ceres, and Zeus, and was born in the form of a

serpent.

This serpent-god is, therefore, half brother to Apollo. After being slain and swallowed by two Titans sent by Hera, Dionysos is reborn in human form.

The Greek Daemons [daemonae] were the invisible divine beings which were assigned by Zeus to every god and every important human being as sort of a guardian angel creature to give good advice and lead them properly. The Daemons

(from which, of course we get our word demon) could appear as a handsome young youth or as a wise serpent.

It is Greek mythology which gives us the most memorable heavenly divine serpent. By heavenly, I mean literally, since I am speaking of the constellation Draco or the Dragon. One only has to look at this constellation to realize that this "dragon" is a serpent in every aspect. Draco is the pet of Zeus. Cadmus was trying to find his sister, Europa, who had been kidnapped by Zeus. After Cadmus slew Draco, he was told by Athena (who understood serpents and their powers) to plant the dragon teeth into the soil. An army arose, who fought a great war until only five men were left. With these five men Cadmus founded the famous Greek city of Thebes. Then Cadmus married Harmonia and assumed the Illyrian throne. .

Zeus transformed them both into serpents and demanded serpents as offerings. Zeus immortalized Draco by placing him in the sky. I could also be pointed out that the largest of all the stellar constellations is also a serpent, the Hydra, a lengthy string of stars.

The Greeks had additional serpent deities and demigods. The Chimera, for example had a serpent for one of its three heads.

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Finally, in Greek mythology, we find the serpent guardian figure from Sumerian or Akkadian times. A great and wise serpent, called Ladon, guards the tree of the golden apples of the Hesperides. This mythic tree is guarded by an immense horned serpent which coils up around the tree , rising from a cave in the earth. Herodotos documents winged snakes as divinely appointed guardians of the spice-bearing trees of Arabia.

Coiled snakes are found on much of the best ancient Greek jewelry. After the goddess Demeter initiates Triptolemus into the mysteries of Agriculture, he spreads the wisdom on his chariot drawn by serpent servants. Hecate, the Greek goddess of witchcraft, is dressed in serpents. The Hydra, a mythic monster, is essentially a serpent.

Rome

In Roman ruins we discover the remnants of Etruscan culture in a strange figure, the Chimera. This creature has the body of a lion, the head of a goat sticking up from its

back, and a snake for a tail.

Appearing in both Greek and Roman mythology is The god of healing, Aescpepus or Askepulus. This god appeared to the Romans in the form of a snake.

It is written that Aescpepus learned the art of healing by watching snakes.

This might be a good place to include a snake symbol which was Greek, Roman and is in constant use today, the caduceus, or to give it its original Greek name, the Kerykeion [Kurkhion]. The caduceus, which is recognized internationally as the symbol of medicine, began as the token of Hermes, the Greek messenger of the Greek gods, and god of healing. This winged tipped, snake entwined rod is reminiscent of the very early Sumerian and Akkadian tree of life and knowledge guardian images. Jewish mythology linked the snake and the rod in the Aaron stories. It is interesting to note that the snakes of the caduceus are intertwined much like the intertwining of snakes in mating. This twisted intertwining, bearing as it does the connotation of sexual congress is the common symbol used to depict the DNA helix.

This symbolic rod was then carried by the Roman Hermes , Mercury. It was also carried by Roman soldiers during a flag of truce. The serpents may come from the tradition that Sesculapius, the god of medicine appeared during a plague in the form of a serpent. Romans, like most ancients, not only believed that snakes held the secret of eternal life, since they shed their skins and appeared new each year, but they also believed that snakes as being able to search out health-giving medicinal herbs. Thus, this combination of rod, wings and snakes represented speed, authority and peace. The caduceus is still the common symbol of the medical profession.

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In Roman mythology the familiar spirit of protection for a place is often depicted as a caduceus, reminiscent of the guardian spirit of the Sumerian/ Akkadian guardians of the world tree.

There is not much of a legendary divine serpent presence in southern Europe. We do find a legend of a dreadful god-like snake Erensuge which lived between the Pen de Orduna and the caves of Balzow and Montecristo. This dreadful monster attracts humans with his breath and then devours him. It would seem that this legend refers to a snake not a dragon. He carries the Basque name Herren-surge, and he has seven horrible heads.

In the mountainous country of Georgia there exists the myth of Mindia, the snake-eater, a member of the mountain tribe of the Khevsurs. When Mindia was taken prisoner as a youth he noticed that his captors ate snake meat from which they derived supernatural powers. One day, he is so hungry he eats a piece of the snake meat and acquires great physical and intellectual powers. When he finally escapes, he takes the practice back to his tribe. These people recognize that snakes are stronger and wiser than humans.

As we travel further North in Europe the snake god is not so powerful, perhaps because snakes were less common. Welsh had a giant red serpent spirit called Dewi. The Balts revered a serpent called Zaltys who was the lover of the sun-goddess, Saule. The Norse did have a snake demi-god called the World Serpent, and other serpent gods, which we will discuss separately.

Celtic

In Celtic legends there is probably none better known than the tale of Saint Patrick ridding Ireland of its snakes. This tale is often told, and too often taken as literal truth. In fact of matter, Ireland never had any significant serpent population, and one tiny snake still makes it home among the shamrocks.

The tale of Patrick and the serpents must be taken as allegorical, and refers to the conflict between good and evil, between Christian sanctity, represented by Saint Patrick, and pagan non-Christian gods, who would, in early Christian eyes represent evil. The serpent is also seen as a frequent symbol of the attributes of the Celtic version of the War God.

However, it should be noted that in that great illuminated Celtic masterpiece, The Book of Kells, the illumination of St. Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Christ "then there were crucified with him two thieves", we find the cosmic self-consuming, self-renewing serpent.

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Long before even the Celts arrived on Irish shores, probably around 3000 years ago, Ireland was pantheistic. God was to be found in everything and nature was the Church. The Irish paganism was probably female in character. Goddess worship and consecrated priestesses would have been the norm of worship. When it was decided to unify Ireland under the Christian rule, this strong bastion of paganism had to be defeated. The first thing was to draw the lines; Paganism must be evil if Christianity was to be the good. Therefore, we must identify paganism with the evil forces of the universe. What better than Satan, that wily old serpent ? Also, the Irish people had a tradition of bawdiness, and the focus on female goddesses and priestesses ran contrary to current Christian tendencies.

There are few good sources for the serpents that Patrick "drove" out of Ireland. The bloody cult of Crom Cruaich in County Caven demanded human sacrifice to a serpent deity and the dismantling of that cult may now be remembered as " snakes being driven out of Ireland".

Sex, often associated with snakes was part of the picture. Patrick, the epitome celibate monastic priest-bishop is given the task of 'driving out' the snake of acknowledged feminine spiritual power, and introduce the concept of Original Sin, and the power of the Church.

One serpent was allowed to remain. A giant water serpent, now called the Lough Derg Monster was tricked by Patrick to stay at the bottom of Lough Derg until La Luain, which the snake understood as Monday, but, in Irish language can mean the Apocalyptic Last Day. So the snake is confined for ever and a day, and the lake is a pilgrimage site.

Pre-Christian, pagan gods were very popular in early Ireland, and continued to be popular in any place where Celtic influence was felt. They were often called the 'old ones'. Usually they were nature gods.

The early, nature, gods could not be directly attacked without creating a terrible back lash, so the Christians chose that ancient foe, Satan in the form of the snake as the enemy. So, we have set the stage for the drama of the conflict between "good" and "evil" , between Saint and Satan, between Patrick and snakes. Celtic mythology informs us of the expected result. Patrick's mission in Ireland, then, was to put a male name on Celtic worship.

One version of the legend would see Celtic paganism as female centered. Goddess worship, consecrated by priestesses had been the order in pre-Christian Ireland. There was the cult of Anu has deep roots in Celtic memory by the time of Patrick. Brigid took her place, and the serpent, the acknowledged feminine spiritual power was driven out, and original sin was introduced.

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Saint Patrick is often represented in iconography as standing upon a snake. He does not appear to be crushing the snake as supported by it. One must remember that Patrick died under the care of Saint Brigid at Sahhall, (now Saul in County Down). Brigid can be viewed as a personification of the Triple Goddess. She is deeply associated with fertility and healing, and so is the snake symbol.

When St. Patrick ' drove the snakes out of Ireland', he did not banish the serpentine dragons, but commanded that they remain in the waters which they inhabited. Later, during the medieval times, dragons gradually left the water and became land-dwelling creatures. With this migration the dragon slowly lost its serpentine characteristics and became more animalistic, looking more like lions, griffins, etc. An example of this transformation is the wyvern. The wyvern has metaphorized into a creature looking somewhat like a cross between a winged lion (the front half) and a serpent (the back half). It acts like a creature with both animalistic and serpentine characteristics.

Norse

When we journey further north in Europe and examine Norse mythology, we find that Odin was the first of the three gods (or the son of the first god] exposed from the ice licked by the cosmic cow. His universe was upheld by the "World Ash, Yggdrasil" whose shaft was the pivot of the revolving heavens.

There is a Norse legend which says that from the beginning Odin had a thirst for knowledge and wisdom [much like the Biblical Solomon] and he questioned all living things to learn. He learned most from his uncle Mimir, who guarded the well of knowledge, but he had to sacrifice an eye for the privilege of drinking from the well. Odin, who was fond of the poetic arts, went to great lengths to acquire that talent. Odin put himself into bondage who lived in an underground cave. After drinking a potion, which gave him poetic artistry, he found that he was trapped in the cave. Knowing, with his great wisdom, that only the serpent had sufficient wisdom to escape, Odin changed himself into a wise serpent and slithered through a hole in the cave, whereupon he changed back into a man. Odin ever after honored the serpent.

On top of this great tree sat an eagle, and the great cosmic serpent gnawed at its roots while guarding it. We seem to have here similarities with ancient Babylon !

The serpent, or worm, that eats its own tail was seen by Viking culture as a symbol for the natural forces of land , sea and sky. Ouroboros was and is the name given the Great World Serpent, encircling the earth.

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The word Ouroboros encompasses many cultures, beside the Norse legends. For example, there is the serpent or dragon gnawing at its own tail. From this we see the symbolic connection to the returning cyclical nature of the seasons; the oscillations of the night sky; disintegration and re-integration; the Androgyne; life and death. Born from this symbolic concept, there are many different cultures which share this serpent symbol. The serpent Jormungand from the myth of Yggdrasil, is just one. I might be helpful to remember that the Ouroboros is what Carl Jung would refer to as an archetype.

The most famous divine serpent in Viking or Norse mythology was Jormungand, the son of Loki. Loki was the closest thing the Teutons have to a Satan. The Vikings imagined the world completely surrounded and supported by the Great Divine World Serpent, Jormungand . There is another serpent, Nidhogg, one of the serpents at the base of the world-tree, who will devour the bones of the whole fallen humanity.

There is an old Norse tale which tells of Thor combating this great serpent, called the Midgard Serpent. Midgard [middle-world] is the realm where human beings live. Midgard, the Earth, was created from the flesh of the primeval giant Ymir. In Norse mythology Midgard is conceived of as a gigantic tree, called the World tree or Yggdrasil, around which existed nine realms at different levels. This tree had its roots embedded in, or resting upon the World Serpent.

The Norse god, Loki, troublesome brother of Thor, had three offspring: Fenris the wolf, Hel, who had a house roofed by guardian serpents, and the Midgard serpent, who lives in the sea and is so large it spans the world. The gods decreed that Thor, son of Odin should slay the Midgard Serpent before it grew too terrible and would rule the gods. Thor went out of Asgard and enlisted the help of the giant Hymir. The two went fishing, and when

Hymir would not share his bait with Thor. Thor killed Hymir's largest ox and cut off its head. Thor took the ox head as bait, made a very strong line and a large hook. The Midgard serpent took the bait and Thor drew it to the boat.

The serpent glared at Thor and belched poison. Hymir, frightened cut Thor's line and let the serpent loose. As the serpent sank back into the sea, Thor threw his hammer after it. Some versions of the legend say that the hammer struck and killed the serpent, other versions say that the Midgard serpent is still alive and lying in the depths.

There is also an old German myth which tells of a snake called the "great worm" who carried the name of Fafnir. Fafnir had great magical and mystical powers.

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There are other dragon stories to be found in Europe, and some of them would indicate a dragon of divine powers, but these dragons are not serpentine dragons so we will omit them in this study. The European dragon usually is portrayed with a thick, long body, scaly skin, four legs, two bat-like wings, wedge shaped heads and long necks. Included in this category are usually found the Wyverns, the 'Faerie Dragons', and sometimes the Hydras. These may, or may not be considered serpents, depending on how wide one is willing to spread the definition of serpent.

NORTH AMERICA:

Native Americans

When we reach the Americas we find that the gods are anthropomorphic. Therefore, we will find no snake god among the North American Native Americans. We will find many stories about snakes, their wisdom, cunning and danger. In Central America the god reappears.

When Moses was busy coming down the mountain with an explanation of values for the Israelites, Native Americans were sculpturing beautiful and mysterious figures on hilltops and dotting the countryside with tall mounds to connect their dead to heaven. Easily one of the strangest and most unearthly Native American sites in North America is the incredible Serpent Mound in the Amish country of southern Ohio. Possibly constructed by the Adena culture around 700 BCE, Serpent Mound is a narrow band of earth which uncoils over a quarter mile expanse atop a wooded hill. This mound appears, from above, to be a snake ready to swallow a frog. A snake skeleton enshrined leaves little doubt that the mound is meant to be the replica of a snake- the creature of mythic proportions to these early mound builders, as well as indigenous people across the Americas. This is one of the "effigy" mounds in Ohio. It lies on a plateau overlooking the Valley of Brush Creek, Ohio.

There is a serpent legend among the Northern Cree, in and around Bulkley Lake in British Columbia. This legend tells of a boy named Fast Bird, who was the messenger for

his village. On one perilous trip he met an evil serpent. An old woman gave him three special arrow points and he was able to kill the serpent, and go on to become chief.

There are other such stories. A Chippewa story tells of a hero, Nanabozho, who lived on the shore of Lake Superior. At the bottom of the lake lived the Great Serpent, along with a number of evil spirits, who were his servants. Nanabozho decided to kill the Great Serpent after the Great Serpent killed his cousin.

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He caused the water of Lake Superior to boil, forcing the snake out into the forest, where he fell prey to the arrows of Nanabozho. Before the Great Serpent died he caused a great flood to come upon the whole earth to kill everything. Nanabozho built a raft and saved mankind and the animals, just like Noah had done with the ark.

The Brule Lakota [Teton Sioux tribe] Sioux never kill rattlesnakes, because there is an old legend about how three brothers who disobeyed the Great Spirit by taking a buffalo hide instead of giving it back to the spirit world. The Great Spirit turned them into rattlesnakes.

As they took up a life as snakes they told their youngest brother to tell the people that they would remain faithful Sioux. So, the Brule Lakota revere their brothers the rattlesnake.

The Comanches of south-western USA inherited the worship of the Jaguar god from the Mayan Indians to the south, and they also had a sacred parrot; but they also believed in great serpent god, who lived in the center of the earth and whose coiling and uncoiling could shake the mountains

The most divine-like snake story is that which tells of the creation of the natural wonder called the 'Wisconsin Dells'. A great snake wriggled down from his home near the 'big lake' and formed the Wisconsin River as he crawled. When he came to the sandstone ridge where the Dells begin he merely pushed his head into a crevice in the rocks and pushed them aside to form the narrow, winding passage we call the Dells.

The amazing thing is, that in spite of the myriad of snakes in south-western US, except for the Comanches previously mentioned, I have found no sound references to the divine serpent in that area. We do find the reference to rattlesnake being the faithful hound of Coyote, the divine trickster and voice of the Great Spirit.

Caribbean Islands

Before we discuss the serpent legends of Central America, we should point out that we do find mentions of divine serpents among Voudon [Voodoo] religionist of the islands of the Caribbean.

Simbu is the very powerful snake god of darkness. Even more powerful perhaps, certainly more widespread, is Dambala, another serpent god. These gods are morally neutral, and will work for good or evil depending upon for whom they are working.

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In Haiti, Dambala is given the title Le Bon Dieu, the good god. An aspect of this serpent spirit in Haiti is the god of the farmers called Dan Petro. Dambala's wife, Avida, is also an object of worship.

Damballa created all the waters of the earth, in the form of a serpent. The movement of his 7000 coils formed hills and valleys and brought forth stars and planets in the heavens. He forged metals from heat and sent forth lightning bolts to form the sacred rocks and stones. When he shed his skin in the sun, releasing all the waters over the land, the sun shone in the water and created the rainbow. Damballa loved the rainbow and made her his wife, Aida-edo. `

In the islands we also find a creature called El Cuchilu, from *cuchu* = pig and *vilu* = snake, who appears from the sea. This is an evil god who invades and destroys fishing weirs. It eats the fish inside the weir and kills human fishermen.

Central America

If we travel only a short distance further south, into Central America, the references are many-fold and are rich. As barren as Northern North America is for finding the divine snake, Central America, or Mesoamerica is equally rich. For example, we find very early Olmec carvings depicting a priest/ruler enveloped and caressed by a powerful serpent, and we have many other early serpent gods.

Not only do we have the primitive Mayan god *Labna*, but we also find, at differing ages and places *Kukulcan* and *Queztalcoatl*, and his two similars *Tezcatlipoca* and *Huitzilopochtli*. Each of these later manifestations of the feathered serpent are much like *Queztalcoatl*, with minor changes or additions. For example, *Huitzilopochtli* is often called the "trickster" because he loves to play pranks which would normally be considered quite un-godlike.

Among the Qiche Maya we find the serpent god who brought civilization and agriculture to the Maya who is called *Gucumatz*.

The god *Kukulcan* was one of the major gods of the Maya, and was inherited by the Toltec as equally significant. Not only was he a god of the four elements, he was also the creator god and the god of resurrection and reincarnation. He may have originated from Toltec myth, where he was a divine hero who taught the Toltec laws, fishing, healing, the calendar and agriculture. His name means

"the feathered serpent" and the Aztecs merged him with Quetzalcoatl.

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Whether it was imposed on them or adopted by choice, the Maya of Chichen Itza incorporated much of the Toltec culture. Although no absolute connection has been established, the emergence of Kulkulcan . the Mayan version of the feathered serpent coincided with the dusk of the Toltec civilization. The legend of the priest-king Quetzalcoatl of Tula and his self-imposed banishment to the east has been frequently linked to the emergence of the Mayan god Kulkulcan and the assimilation of Toltec culture at Chichen Itza. Feathered rattlesnake images are found everywhere at Chichen Itza.

The main pyramid in the Mayan/Toltec ruins of Chichen Itza is "El Castle", the pyramid of Kulkulcan. This pyramid is often mistakenly called the pyramid of the sun because of its astronomical orientation, but it is clearly dedicated to Kulkulcan, the feathered serpent. It was original built by Mayans about 600 CE, and improved by Toltecs around 1000 CE. The astronomical detail is interesting, showing the connection of the Great Serpent and the cosmos: There are 365 steps [the number of days in the solar year]; 52 panels [one for each year in the Mayan cyclical century; 18 terraces, one for each month in the Mayan religious year].

All four sides of the Feather Serpent Pyramid was originally covered by an elaborate facade of stone carvings. These carvings express the main visual messages of the Ciudadela [sacred city]. The main motif in both the rectangular panels

[tablero] and the trapezoid panels [talud] were undulating feathered serpents, depicted in profile and having rattles on the ends of their tails. A quite similar type of feathered serpent head, sculpted in high relief, was also attached to the balustrades of the staircase.

I have personally witnessed the unusual effect of the descending serpents bordering the main stair case. At sundown the light strikes these magnificent serpents so as to make them appear to be alive and slowly descending the stair case.

In the ruins of the early Mayan city of Teotihuacan, we find another significant pyramid dedicated to the feathered serpent. Although significantly smaller in size than both the Sun Pyramid and Moon Pyramid, it was one of the most elaborate monuments of the city. Each of these pyramids, unlike the Egyptian pyramids which were tombs, were solidly filled with rubble, and were, in fact, artificial mountains, on top of which stood a temple to the feathered serpent.

All four sides of this Feathered Serpent Pyramid had also been covered by an elaborate facade of stone carvings which included a series of large sculptural heads. Three of the

four sides have deteriorated, but the fourth, and principal face, the western, was covered by a platform and the facade is in good shape. The main motif of the pyramid is undulating feathered serpents, depicted in profile and having rattles on the ends of their tails.

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The heads of serpents are various deities: Tlaloc, the Storm god, Youalcoat;, a form of Quetzalcoatl, Cipactli, a crocodilian figure, and Xiuhcoatl, or the Fire Serpent.

The supreme god and creator of the Maya was Hunab Ku . He is the head of the Mayan pantheon and called 'god of the gods'. Hunab Ku rebuilt the world after three deluges, which poured from a great sky god, who is depicted in the form of a serpent. Even the Mayan war god was seen as a snake charmer.

The Aztec god of creation is both male and female, Ometeotl, the creative force, the god of fire and of time, is both father and mother of all. Ometeotl' four sons are aspects of himself. Each is associated with a color and a direction. (This symbolism can be also found in the Native Americans of the U.S.) The black Tezcatlipoca is the biggest and "baddest" of them all. His direction is north. The white Tezcatlipoca whose direction is the setting sun, is also called Quetzalcoatl. Aztec legends tell of how Quetzalcoatl becomes the sun and rises in the east.

When the Aztec replaced the Maya and Toltec as lords of Mesoamerica, the feathered serpent stayed s an important god figure. The Aztec feathered serpent carried the name Quetzalcoatl. He symbolized the blending of heaven and earth. He is associated with the planet Venus, the wind and breath of life [cf. Biblical concept of wind, breath of life, spirit connection], the discovery of maize [corn], the invention of writing , birth and renewal. There exist codices which identify Quetzalcoatl with Kulkulcan. It is my contention that the Quetzalcoatl of the Mixtec codices and the Kulkulcan of the Chilam Balam are one and the same.

The two highest-ranking priests of the Aztecs ministered, respectively, to the war god and the god of rain. Both bore the title quetzalcoatl, or "feathered serpent", to elevate their status by association with the great god Quetzalcoatl and the Toltec god-king of that name. One was called "quetzalcoatl priest of our lord" and the other "quetzalcoatl priest of Tlaloc". Neither demanded human sacrifice.

It is very surprising how Quetzalcoatl, who is often called Kulkulcan, Gucumatz, in Guatamala, Viracocha to the Incas, is so wide-spread among all of the cultures of precolumbian Mexico. And all describe it the same, with only small variations. This god, that tormented Cortez with guilt and remorse, is considered the Christ figure of the precolumbian civilization, since he proclaimed the existence of only one god, and the refusal of sacrifices, which were typical of Mayan and Aztec religions.

Interestingly, this indian deity is described as having " white skin, with hair on the face and beautiful emerald eyes". In other words, Quetzalcoatl may have been Caucasian; Viking perhaps [from ancient memories]? Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, whose mythical achievements are interwoven with the Great Feathered Serpent, is credited as having infinite knowledge. He taught his people how to plant the maize and all plant life. Cotton and cacao trees are also attributed to him.

Quetzalcoatl legends seem to have spring from Tula, and traveled to the holy city of Cholula, and then in 987 CE they sailed across the Gulf of Mexico to the land of the Maya. Legends said that since the Great God came from the East, when he left he sailed East, and it was from the East he would return.

The tale runs something like this. There lived once in Tula a king called Quetzalcoatl. He had the name and qualities of the ancient feathered serpent, so he was called "Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin, "our prince". He was totally pure, innocent and good. No task was too humble for him. He even swept the paths for the rain gods so they could come and rain. Quetzalcoatl's cunning brother, Tezcatlipoca, was infuriated by his goodness and, with some friends decided to play a dirty trick on him. They gave Quetzalcoatl a human face and body. As soon as Quetzalcoatl looked in a mirror he felt himself possessed by all the worldly desires that afflict mankind.

But Tezcatlipoca wasn't done. He gave Quetzalcoatl wine, which he said would cure his malady. After including getting drunk on cactus wine which cause him to disgrace himself and bring calamities to the Toltec, he knew he must leave his people and go into exile. When he came to the eastern coast, he wove snakes together to make a raft. Then he sailed eastward and disappeared across the sea. Some say he ascended into heaven and became Venus, the morning star. It was said that Quetzalcoatl would return in the same year he disappeared, the year One Reed. Cortez landed in year One Reed.

Quetzalcoatl could transform himself into the shape of a man, and many pictures show him in both guises. His arch enemy was Tezcatlipoca, the god of darkness, which would lead us to connect Quetzalcoatl to the sun, as had Kulkulcan before him. After one especially difficult battle Quetzalcoatl fled to the eastern shore with the enemies right behind him. He sailed away, making a boat from the bodies of intertwined serpents, promising to return in triumph. When strange ships were seen coming from the east, with pale, shining men, it seemed that the prophecy had come true. It was not Quetzalcoatl, it was Cortes. End of Aztec civilization !

The Aztec also saw serpents as controlling the weather, especially the clouds and storms. The Cloud Serpent for the Aztec was Mixcoatl. This god created weather by conspiring with [having sex with ?] the Earth Serpent Goddess Coatlicue.

Coatlque is the mother of the Aztec creation story. She was first impregnated by an obsidian knife and gave birth to Coyolxauhqui, the goddess of the moon [again showing the association between the serpent and the moon]. She later gave birth to the fiery god of war who was aided in his efforts by a fire serpent

[a seraph?] The Aztecs believed that Coatlique was the earth itself. She provided for all their needs, and at death takes them back into her body.

In Mexico, under the Aztec rule of Moctezuma, the second most important person in the ruling hierarchy was Cihyuacoatl, also called Tlacaelel, the snake woman who was seen as the incarnation of the earth and mother goddess who assisted Quetzalcoatl in creation. She was born on the same day as the emperor, Moctezuma (or Motecuhzoma) the Great. They had the same father but different mothers. This male character turned down the opportunity to become emperor and went on to serve three rulers as prime minister or Cihuacoatl, literally Woman Snake.

SOUTH AMERICA:

In Columbia There is a creator deity of the Chibcha culture named Chiminigagua, who lives as a serpent in a lake of serpents. In Brazil there is the goddess serpent Iara , who is also know as ' mae d'agua (mother of the waters) . According to myth, Iara was not a siren, but a water snake, also called mboicu =

mboi = serpent, and acu = big, in the Tupi language.

Even further south the Inca had Chalchiuhtlicue, the serpent mother goddess. She is a goddess of fertility. She is most often depicted with beautiful and magnificent robes, made of shell mosaics and serpent skin edged with small white feathers. The Peruvian Incas had a god called the 'Weeping god'. This god holds two snakes as part of his cosmic image.

In Paraguay, the Guarani peoples have a divine serpent called Mboi-Tu'I, the snake-parrot. This is an enormous, divine serpent with the bill, or complete head of a parrot. This god is the protector of aquatic animals, amphibians, dew and the flowers, and is seen as a friendly god. As a general observation, we might state that most of the serpent divinities found in Central America appear to be benevolent and beneficent. The few exceptions are either tricksters or ambivalent.

Oceana

On the way from the Americas to Asia we can stop off in Oceana. Throughout the circum-Pacific culture zone the great serpent, the cosmic divine serpent, as spouse of the goddess and as a variously manipulated motif in art is a prominent feature.

In the Solomon Islands. Here we find a great serpent god Aguna, who is the paramount god of the area. So important is Aguna that all other gods are considered to be only aspects of her. She is the supreme force and divine influence. The first coconut from each tree is sacred to Aguna.

Also in The Solomons we find the great serpent god Kahasusibware,. We are not sure of the relationship between the male Kahasusibware and the female Aguna.

This divine serpent can also be found in the Admiralty islands.

On the island of Fiji we hear about a god named Degei. sometimes called Ndengel, a serpent god who lives in the Kauhadra hills and who appears to be the supreme god of the island group. The story is told of how in the beginning, the snake god lived alone, without friends or companions, and the only living creature he knew was Turukawa the hawk. Although the hawk could not speak she was the constant companion of the god.

When the hawk , who was feminine eventually laid eggs which when hatched produced two tiny human beings. Degei nurtured these creatures and taught them how to cultivate bananas and root crops. From there on the story sounds like the story of Adam and Eve.

When a person dies, his soul faces a long journey from the sunny land of the living to the cold, misty land of the dead. Upon the soul's arrival, Degei will interrogate it. Idle men, recognized by their long nails, will be punished. Industrious souls will be rewarded. When the soul is judged, it is thrown into a deep lake. It will sink for a long time until it reaches Murimuria, a sort of Purgatory. There some will be rewarded and others will receive punishment. Only a few are chosen by the god to go to Burotu, the land of eternal life and joy.

Also on Fiji we find Ratu-Mai-Mbula, the snake god who is ruler of the dead. Elsewhere in Polynesia, we find a legend about a monster snake [or perhaps here an eel] among the Tuamotua peoples. The symbol of the serpent can often be depicted as an eel, a creature more familiar to island people than the water snake and certainly more common than any land snake.

The same sort of god found in the Gilbert Islands is called Riiti . Hina, who can still be

seen in the moon was the wife of the monster snake Te Tuna [the 'phallus'] She ran away from him and became the wife of Maui, who then killed Te Tuna, and on the advice of her mother, planted his head, from which grew the first coconut tree.

The Daribi people, who live in the highlands of New Guinea have legends which present snakes as superior to humans. The snake shed its skin and so they rejuvenate themselves, whereas human skin ages and shows the mark of mortality. These same people and these legends are also found in New Britain.

The Philippine Islands are rife with serpent beings. The distinguishing traits are basically that of a snake or crocodile with scales, and the head of a fierce animal or bird. We find the birdlike serpents: baua and minokwa; the fishlike: baconauaua; the saurian = the buwaya and the pure snakelike = mameleu, marcupo. Macupo and sawa. This does not count the many dragons.

In the islands of Melanesia we find Koevasi, a snake goddess, and Walutahanga, a fire snake god. The people of New Guinea have a snake god among their pantheon, called Wunekau, and we also find a Kiribati sea snake god named Ruki

In the New Hebrides Islands we have a group of serpent spirits called the Mae These are serpents who can appear in other disguises, and are seen as guiding spirits of all who encounter them. If a young man returns home after a day of fishing, at sunset he might see a young girl sitting on a rock , her head covered with flowers . She will beckon him to climb the steep cliff and when he approaches her he will notice that she has the face of a girl from his own village. Afraid that she is a Mae he will look closer and see that her elbows and knees are on backwards; this betrays her true nature and the young man will run away. Should he, however, hit her with the leaf of the dracaena she will assume her true form and slip away as a snake.

East of Indonesia, Melanesia and Australia, throughout the island-studded triangle of Polynesia, which has Hawaii at its apex, New Zealand at one angle and Easter Island at the other, the mythological image of the murdered divine being whose body became a food plant has been adjusted to the natural elements of an oceanic environment. Snakes, by and large, are unknown in the islands. The role of divine serpent has to be played, therefore, by the closest possible counterpart of the serpent, a monster eel. The force of the serpent role has been greatly increased rather than diminished by this substitution.

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Plant origin legends abound using either the monster eel or another serpent figure. The breadfruit tree first appeared, for example, according to Hawaiian myth when a man named Ulu, who lived near Hilo, died of famine. He and his wife had a sickly baby by whose life was in danger from the famine. The baby was taken to a temple at Puueo whose resident god was a mo'o which is a Hawaiian word meaning reptile.

The only reptile in Hawaii is a harmless, even affectionately regarded little lizard that runs up and down the walls of houses catching insects. The manner in which the mythological system of the islands has magnified this innocuous little creature into the proportions of a dangerous, powerful divine serpent-dragon is a good example of the mythological process and the power of the serpent in divine symbolism.

ASIA:

China

In Asia we have one rich source and more leaner sources. China, for example, with its concentration on social ethics and personal behavior [Confucianism and Taoism] has little room for gods or goddesses. We do find reference to the AO or four Dragon kings; Ao Chi'in, Ao Kuang, Ao Jun and Ao Shun. [These four main kinds of Lung had alternate names: Tien-Lung, the Celestial Dragon, who protects the places of the gods, Shen-Lung, the Spiritual Dragon, who controls the wind and the rain, Ti-Lung, the Earth Dragon, who controls the rivers, and Fut's-Lung, the Underworld Dragon who guards precious metals and gems] The commander of all the River Dragons is Cien-Tang, who is blood red, has a fiery mane and is 900 feet long. These great serpent/dragon kings were the faithful servants and guards of Y-Huang-Shang-Ti, the "Father Heaven, the supreme Emperor of Jade who ruled all. One time, according to legend. When the land was enduring famine because of drought, the dragons appealed to the Jade Emperor for rain. The emperor stalled and the dragon, upset, carried water to the people in their mouths. The emperor was furious at the disobedience of the dragons and had them imprisoned under four mountains. Determined to do good for the people forever, they turned themselves into for rivers, which flowed past high mountains and deep valleys, crossing the land from west to east until finally emptying into the sea.

And so China's four great rivers were formed: the Heilongjian [Black Dragon] in the far north; the Huanghe [Yellow River] in central China; the Yangtze [Long River] farther south and the Zhujiang [Pearl] in the very far south.

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Also, related to to Ao, we find Lung, a benevolent serpent bringer of rain, who is held in high regard. Fuxi, a creature with human top and serpent bottom is seen as the father of mankind. He is the first of the "Three Sovereigns" and the inventor of the trigrams used in Chinese divination.

The Chinese dragons were shape-shifters, who could make themselves as large as the whole universe or as small as a silkworm. They could also change color and disappear in a flash. The classic work, I-Ching, uses the symbol of the serpent to illuminate the truths of inner growth of the person, the society and the universe.

These Eastern dragons are usually portrayed as good, kind and intelligent. Oriental dragons have the most recorded history in the world, stretching back thousands of years. It has been said that the worst flooding in Asian history were caused when a mortal has upset a dragon. We can differentiate the Eastern dragons easily. The Chinese dragon, or Lung, always has 5 claws, curling from its feet. It has 117 scales, 81 infused with yang [seen as the good], and 36 infused with yin [here seen as evil]. The Korean dragon has 4 toes and the Japanese has 3. The Chinese dragon is an emblem of the emperor and the yellow dragon can only be worn by him.

We might take a small interlude here to describe other dragons. In China we find the "Musical Serpent" which is very serpentine, with even a snake's head, but has four wings. This dragon makes a noise like the musical stone. We also find the Chih Dragon, the dragon of the North, and the wingless pure serpent-like the Kua Shih. The Kung Kung is a serpent/snake with nine heads, and full of wisdom.

The Vietnamese dragon, called the Long, is a fabulous beast with the head of a camel, horns of a deer, eyes of a fish, ears of a buffalo, scales of a carp, claws of an eagle and feet of a tiger. Most important, however, is that it has the body and neck of a snake. A long barb hangs down on each side of its mouth, and a jewel adorns its tongue. Long has a crest of 81 scales running down the length of its backbone. It can live in the sky, the water or underground and is immortal. The "Giao Long", which are half lizard and half snake automatically become dragons after 1000 years. The dragon is a symbol of power and nobility to the Vietnamese, and is the special symbol of the emperor, who was considered to be the son of heaven. Vietnamese dragons can have either five toes [reserved for the emperor] or four toes [for lesser dignitaries]. The symbol was always worn on official court dress.

In Asian calendar astrology the dragon correlates to the western sign Aries.

The dragon, a mythological creature has been worshipped in the Orient since primordial times. The serpentine dragon is a creature of much power. The year of the dragon is a time of ambition, power and daring. Events seem as if they were magnified threefold with increased intensity.

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Dragon years are excellent times to start a business, marry, have children and take incredible risks. On a global level, we could expect extreme earth changes, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tidal waves.

There are five dragon years in a cycle: The green, red, yellow, white and black dragons. The next scheduled dragon year is the year of the white dragon, from February 5, 2000 to January 23, 2001.

In addition to the dragon years [and I would point out that oriental dragons are serpents]

there are serpent years.

The Chinese Serpent goddess Nu Kua formed the first people from yellow clay from the banks of the Yellow River. This serpent is also associated with the gods who help women in childbirth and bless children.

The year of the serpent is a time of introspection, planning, and seeking answers. People will ponder and think before they act. Goo taste will prevail in fashion, theater, film and all the arts. Serpent wisdom influences contributions in the sciences. There are five serpents, like the five dragons; the blue, purple, gold, silver and gray serpents. The next serpent year will be the year of the Silver Serpent, from January 24, 2001 to February 11, 2002.

Comparing these serpentine "good" dragons with others around the world we find similarities and differences. The Mexican winged dragon, known as an Amphitere, has the tail of the serpent but the wings of the quetzal bird. The Polynesian dragon is a trickster, whose name means "great sea creature" and who steal and move oysters to different lands. There is of course the famous Scottish serpent known as "Nessie", the Loch Ness Monster. On the other hand, the Welsh dragon has two wings and two, or four legs. This beast is usually considered a Wyvern, and has little serpentine qualities. The dragon of Greek mythology had three heads, a lion's head, a goat's head on its back and a serpent's head at the end of its tail. This is not the Hydra which had all of its heads sprouting from necks.

The earliest European dragons were all giant serpents and are best described by using the German name for these creatures, the Lindworms. The most familiar dragon symbol, however is not a serpent. This combination of a lion and an eagle, with the face of a man sometimes, is well known in Western mythological art. It may have the tail of a scorpion at times.

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Japan

In Japan we encounter one minor, but reasonably beneficent serpent god and one major, evil god. The minor god is Sarawati [borrowed from the Hindu Bneten] who is a river goddess. She is married to a serpent King. The Japanese people believed that the seas around the Japanese Islands were full of serpent people who had great powers.

The kami concept of Japanese religious thought also makes the snake a sacred person, but I am not considering this, only those who qualify as genuine divinities in and of themselves.

Japan has an important serpent divinity, and this one is evil. The Japanese serpent god Susa-No-Wo is one of the two main players in the chief drama of Japanese mythology.

It seems that one day Susa-No-Wo insulted the great sun goddess Amataratsu omi kami and made her very angry. She hid herself in a cave and refused to shine, whereupon the crops failed and famine set in. The other divine being, with the exception of Susa-No-Wo, lured AmataratsOu out of her cave and tied her to a tree with straw ropes. Especially helpful was a very bawdy dance performed by the god Ama-No-Uzume.

The importance of this story can be seen in that the Kanji [character] for Amataratsu Omi Kami added to the Kanji of the tree together are the Kanji for Japan, and Japan is called the 'Land of the Rising Sun'. The serpent king god is banished to the 'out islands' and becomes a non-persona in Shinto.

There is also the Great Eight-forked Serpent of Koshi. This enormous serpent had eight heads and eight tails. Its size was such, that as it crawled, it stretched out over eight valleys and eight hills. Its eyes were red, like the winter cherry. Pine trees and moss grew on its back, and firs sprouted from each of its heads. It was fond of devouring young maidens. After eating seven daughters of a king in seven years The serpent was killed. Rivers of blood flowed from its eight necks. A sword was found in its tail that is still in the great shrine of Atsuta in Japan. Japanese currency commemorates this serpent.

One additional story in Japanese Bushido legends tells of Yamato , the noble warrior. He was confronted, during his wanderings, by the ghost of the Great

Serpent. The serpent demanded the return of the magic sword, Cloud Cluster. Yamoto, protected by the sword, refused. Later, after leaving the sword with his lady love, Iwato-hime, he met the Great Serpent again. This time the serpent as able to kill Yamato, but as he died he turned into a white bird and flew away.

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India and S. East Asia

In Indian philosophy the paradigmatic character of the union of opposites [or, as I sometimes like to say- the wholeness of the result of the dialectic process] constituted one of the most significant characteristics of Indian religious thought long before it ever became an object of systematic theology.

In the Hindu sacred books there is a myth that appears frequently, of the gods and titans cooperating under the supervision of the two supreme deities, Vishnu and Shiva, to churn the Milky Ocean for its sacred butter. They took the World Mountain as a churning stick and the divine World Serpent as a twirling rope, and wrapped the serpent around the mountain. Then the gods taking hold of the head end of the snake and the demons the tail, they churned for a thousand years and produced in the end the Butter of Immortality.

The so-called Harappa stage of the great cities of Mohenjodaro, Chandu-daro and Harappa (ca 2500-1200 BCE) burst abruptly into view and showed many signs of inspiration from the earlier high centers of the West blended with native Indian traditions. The presence of serpents in the attitude of worshippers indicates that the well-known serpent, or naga motif that plays such a significant role in later Indian religion had already been evolved, probably from the primitive theme of the Great Serpent of the abyss. We find very early imagery of the god Vishnu reclining on the Cosmic Serpent, which is in turn resting on the Cosmic Waters. The supporting energy and substance of the universe, and consequently of all humanity. Is imaged in India in the figure of the serpent.

The a little later in Hindu history, The Aitareya Brahmana states that the serpent Ahi Budhnya is invisibly what Agni, [the 'furious serpent'] is visibly. In other words, the serpent is a virtuality of fire, whereas darkness is nonmanifested light. Again, when the sun rises at dawn, he 'frees himself from night ...just as Ahi frees himself from his skin'.

It is in India where we again meet the significant divine serpent in many aspects. In India the cobra has long been considered sacred, and even those cobras used by 'snake charmers' are not injured in any way, not defanged, and when they are used for while they are safely returned to the wild. The "Naga" which is the divine aspect of the cobra is found in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In some passages, King Varuna is regarded as being among the most preeminent of the Nagas,

and he is included in the discussion of these mythical divine serpents. [Mahabharata 1.26.1. and 25.4] The 'naga' is a divine serpent who is a son of Kadru, the daughter of Daksha.

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The word naga is a Sanscrit word which means "serpent". Nagas are believed to live in palaces [Patala] in the underground city Bhogavati. They are considered the protectors of springs, wells and rivers.

The Naga brings rain [similar to the Chinese Lung dragons] and therefore fertility, but can also bring disasters such as floods and drought. In Malay myths nagas are many-headed dragons of enormous size. On Java and Thailand, the naga is a serpent-god, a ruler of the netherworld who possesses much wealth. In Java they are also called Sesas. In Thailand the naga can have five heads, much like the Hindu Naga Kanya.

Nagas are often divided into four classes: heavenly, divine, earthly or hidden, depending upon their function in guarding the heavenly palace, bringing rainfall, draining rivers or guarding treasures. They have the ability to make humans invisible in water, and female nagas may sometimes marry mortals. Nagas have been know to sing and dance. Some of them are many headed, like Muchalinda or the Naga Kanya. Sessa, the king of the nagas,

has 1000 heads and dresses in purple. We also find this 1000 headed naga in Buddhism under the name Ananta where his coils encircle the the basis of the world axis.

In Mexico we find the word "Nagal" which describes a class of serpent guardian spirits. The avenue leading to the main temple at Ankhor Wat is lined with seven-headed nagas. The Chinese claim to be able to speak Naga-Krita, the language of the serpentine gods. For a place that has no serpents, Tibet, the naga are still known in a symbolic sense and are called "Lu" which is the Tibetan translation of "naga". For example Nagarjuna is called Lu-truh in Tibet.

To begin; the god Vaskul is the naga-god of Mount Kailasha, which is also deemed to be the home of the god Shiva, on-third of the Trinity of Brahma aspects. We have pictorial and statuary representations showing snakes around Shiva's neck. These are naga bushana and they symbolize death, the power of which Shiva is beyond, and which he controls. They also represent that energy coiled at the base of the spine which yoga practitioners say is the base for all self-realization.

The Naga represents cosmic power; they are a manifestation of the Vedic god Agni, or fire, and as such becomes the 'fierce spirit' who is the guardian. The cobra/naga is a mount of Vishnu and as such represents knowledge, wisdom and

eternity. As Vishnu sleeps on the cosmic ocean, he sleeps on the coiled serpent on the primordial waters. Two serpents with downward and upward movement represent the divine sleep and divine awakening. The Naga and Nagni are serpent kings and queens, which are divine in their own right. They are depicted as either fully human, fully snake, humans with cobra heads and hoods, or as humans from the waist upwards and snake below that.

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The naga as a god is widespread and significant in all of Southern Asia. As far away as the Malay peninsula we find Raja Naga, or King Naga. Who is the king of all of the many sea snakes which populate the area. In India the chief function of the naga is apparent in temple architecture; they guard the doors.

The Great Naga Kanya, the most common friend/companion of Vishnu is this latter form. Naga Kanya can also be seen with nine serpent heads with expanded hoods. As the great god Vishnu sits his head and shoulders are protected by these nine serpent heads. Some say that this multiheaded snake is an animal counterpart of the sleeper himself.

Vishnu, the preserver aspect of the Trinitarian Brahma principle, is recognized as one of the most important and most revered of the deities of the Hindu pantheon. He is most often depicted as reclining on a the coils of the great serpent. The Great Naga, Ananta [the 'endless'], also called Sesha. Ananta has 1000 hooded heads which form a canopy for Vishnu.. Ananta represents the cosmic ocean.

The symbol for water, in Hindu mythology, is the serpent [naga]. So that, not only the gigantic anthropomorphic form and the boundless elemental sea are Vishnu, but the naga is also Vishnu. He is man, ocean and snake. All are one. Springing forth from the navel of Vishnu is a lotus stem, and on the flower at the end of the stem sits the god Brahma who creates the world. Ananta spits out venomous fire at the end of each Kalpa [age] to assist Shiva in destroying the creation.

There is another image of a human resting upon a snake. There is the myth of the boy Naranua, a Hindu god of the spirit, who is depicted as a handsome youth, recumbent upon a coiled snake couch, lying with his toe in his mouth.

Nagas are recognized as superior to humans. They inhabit subaquatic paradises, dwelling at the bottoms of rivers, lakes and seas. A most important function of these divine serpents is their function as guardians. We find them at the doors of Hindu and Buddhist shrines. They can not only frighten ordinary human intruders with their dangerous aspect as cobras, they can as divinities, discern and repel any divine invader.

There are many legends in South-east Asia regarding the serpent. The myth of Indra and the dragon is an example. This tale casts the serpent in an evil posture, who swallowed Indra. Indra tickled its throat and leaped out to resume the battle which finally ended in a truce.

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Another legend tells of Krishna and the Cosmic Serpent. As an adolescent Krishna defeated the cosmic serpent by dancing on its head. This was one of the most important tests of Krishna's god-like powers. Krishna borrows on a text from the Rig Veda [II, 12, 1-5, 13] , which says about the god Indra:

" Who having slain the Serpent released the seven streams,

who drove out the cows by the unclosing of Vala,

Who between rocks has produced fire,

victor in battles: he, O men, is Indra.

Krishna tells Arjuna all about 'divine' serpents. [Bhagavad-Gita Ch. 11].

Finally, in Hinduism, Balaram is Lord Krishna's half-brother ,the avatar of Lord Vishnu's serpent companion whom some call Vasuki and others call Adhishesha. Lakshman, Prince Rama's brother, is also an incarnation of the serpent.

There is a festival which is kept annually in India called the Naga Panchami Festival. In 1997, this festival was observed on August 8th. His Holiness, Sri Swamiji gave a widely

circulated speech from which I should like to snip some fargments:

" Today is Naga Panchami. Pancha means five in Sanscrit. Five is auspicious. Naga means snake. Both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva have snakes with them. Vishnu has Adi Shesha as his bed while Lord Shiva has a snake around his neck.

In India Naga Panchami is celebrated by feeding milk to snakes....."

Sri Swamiji continues his speech with many tales of the interaction between divine serpents and two of the three persons in the Hindu tri-theistic godhead.

We find the serpent in Buddhism, including the Buddhist god, Magoraga, but the further Buddhism moved from its Hindu roots and the more philosophical it became the less room there was for any god, much less a serpent god. However, we do have this one story: After his period of sitting under the Bo tree [or Bodhi tree = Tree of Enlightenment] he sat for seven days under a great banyan tree. Then he left that tree and went to a tree called 'The Tree of the Serpent King, Muchalinda.' Muchalinda is a huge cobra who dwelt in a hole amongst the tree roots. As the Buddha meditated, unmindful of his surroundings, a large storm arose.

Muchalinda crept out of his hole wrapped himself seven times around the Buddha, and with his great hood, kept his head dry. The serpent represents a reconciliation between antagonistic principles. It symbolizes the life force that motivates birth and rebirth, and the concept of savior.

Even in the extremely ascetic off-shoot from Hinduism, the Jains have a serpent tradition. The founder of Jainism, Nataputta Vardhamana earned his honorific title Mahavira [or "Great Man"] by overcoming a great serpent who guarded the ford which Mahavira saw as " The Way".

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One final look in Asia before we leave. In Cambodia [Kampuchea] we have the legend that the kingdom was founded by a serpent king [or serpent kings]. I have not been able to research this to any depth as yet. We do have temple statuary and art at Angkor Wat showing figures with serpents.

Also, when the god Indra installed Duttabaung upon the golden throne as king of Burma he insisted that he take as one of his two queens, the Nagini Besandi, one of the Nagas or divine serpent spirits.

AUSTRALIA:

Our final continent to be examined for the divine serpent is Australia. Australian aborigines have lived on this continent for more than 50,000 years according to most

anthropologists. In that time they have had little or no contact with peoples from the 'outside world'. Yet, here too, we find a divine reptile. The Rainbow snake, variously named: Julungul, Galeru, Ungur, Wonungur, Worombi, Yurlungeur, Kalseru, Langal, Ungud, Wullunqua or Mui. Depending upon which aboriginal tribe one contacted, was a character in the 'Dreamtime'. He was the creator of many of the things which are found in the landscape of the Australian outback.

The story is that in the beginning the earth was flat, formless and gray. The Rainbow Serpent wound his way over the surface of the land and his body pushed up mountains and dug paths for rivers. He was the biggest of all of the Dreamtime beings, all other creatures stayed well away from him. When he tired of shaping the earth, he dragged his body into a water hole and sank into its depths.

"Dreamtime" or Alchera, is the name given to that time also called the 'time when', at the beginning of time, before time really was counted, back when everything was created, when men and animals could converse, and when the gods walked the earth.

The Rainbow Serpent is one of the most powerful mythological figures for all aboriginal people throughout Australia. Characteristics of the rainbow serpent may vary from group to group and tribe to tribe, but the significance of the serpent is never questioned. Aboriginal people today respect and are the caretakers of the sacred sites where the rainbow serpent is said to reside. Often these sites are considered taboo, or too sacred for normal activities.

One tale tells of the time that the great serpent traveled through Australia, looking for his tribe. He traveled from North to South until he reached Cape

York. Goorialla, which was the name of this rainbow serpent, created animals, plant life and all natural features of the earth.

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There is a snake important in the rituals surrounding the making of a medicine man or shaman among the aborigine. Since the key prerequisite to becoming a shaman is to meet death and to return, able to speak to the god or gods, this ritual is important. The postulant is mourned as dead by his tribe. He goes to a water hole where two shamans cover his eyes and throw him into the 'jaws of the serpent' which swallows him.

The postulant remains in the serpent's belly for an indefinite time. Finally the other shamans bring two kangaroo rats as an offering to the serpent, whereupon the serpent ejects the postulant. This ceremony represents death and rebirth and was essential to becoming a shaman. The serpent was seen as a divine spirit, cooperating with mankind to make life better.

Mircea Eliade states that : " the ritual swallowing by the Snake is to be interpreted as a return to the womb- on the one hand because the Snake is often described as female, on

the other, because entering the belly of the divine also carries a symbolism of return to embryonic state.It represents not so much a ritual death followed by resurrection as a complete regeneration of the initiate through his gestation and birth by the Great Mother" .[Rites and Synbols of Initiation].

The hermaphrodite serpent aboriginal god, Ungud. of Northwest Australia is associated with this ceremony, specifically with the erection of the medicine man.

There is also a great snake worshipped by the Kabi people of Queensland. This snake called Dhakhan, appears as a rainbow with an end in each waterhole.

We have other snake gods in Australia. Bobbi-Bobbi is one of the ancient gods of the Binbinga people of Northern Australia. Bobbi-Bobbi once sent a number of flying foxes for men to eat, but these bats escaped. So the snake-god, underground, watching, threw one of his ribs up, where men caught it as a boomerang. They could use this serpent-generated weapon to catch game, and so be fed.

Ulanji is the divine snake ancestor of the Binbinbea people of the same area. And Yorlunger is the great copper python of the Murngin people of Northern Australia. Yorlunger's voice is the thunder, and his honor title is "Great Father". He is the center of a fertility cult, and the initiation from boy to man includes being swallowed and disgorged by Yorlunger. The Maori have a father god, who is also chief of all the reptile gods who bears the name Tu-Te-Wehiwehi. This god is the most important god in the Maori pantheon.

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We have, obviously, merely scratched the surface in our quest for the divine serpent. The road ahead may be longer, and more difficult than the road so far traveled. But, for now, it is time again to stop writing and begin research. There is a whole world of sea serpents, for example which needs to be plumbed.

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