



The Symbolism of the Snake

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

“The day you eat of the tree, your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods...”

So spoke the wily serpent to Eve (Genesis 3:5), thus setting into motion the downfall of mankind as recorded in the Old Testament. But this event would also bring about the downfall of the lowly serpent, which was doomed to become a symbol of evil and cunning ever after in Judaeo-Christian tradition. On the contrary, in other cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, the snake was revered and often elevated among the gods themselves.

The Egyptian cobra was the embodiment of the goddess Wadjet, protector of all Lower Egypt. The cobra thus formed the *uraeus*, part of the divine insignia for pharaohs and gods. Along with the vulture, the symbol for the goddess Nekhbet, protector of Upper Egypt, the two emblems symbolized ultimate dominion over the two lands by the pharaoh. Cobra amulets were also popular among commoners, bestowing the wearer with the protection of Wadjet. The Nile Delta city of Per-Wadjet was the cult center of the goddess, but the historian Herodotus reported that it was also the site of an oracle in honor of the Greek goddess Leto. Scholars believe that Leto was the Greek incarnation of Wadjet and that the ancient oracle of the cobra goddess may have given rise to the famed oracles of ancient Greece.

Snakes are rife in the lore of ancient Greece where they were frequently associated with Ge (Mother Earth) since they slithered along her surface and lived in burrows within her. Moreover, her offspring, such as



Pendant in the Form of a Cobra
Egyptian, Late Period/Ptolemaic, 664–30 BCE
Faience
Museum purchase (72.17)



Lovis Corinth (German, 1858–1925)
Der Sündenfall (The Fall of Man), 1919
Woodcut
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Small (73.260)



[Mask of Tutankhamun](#)

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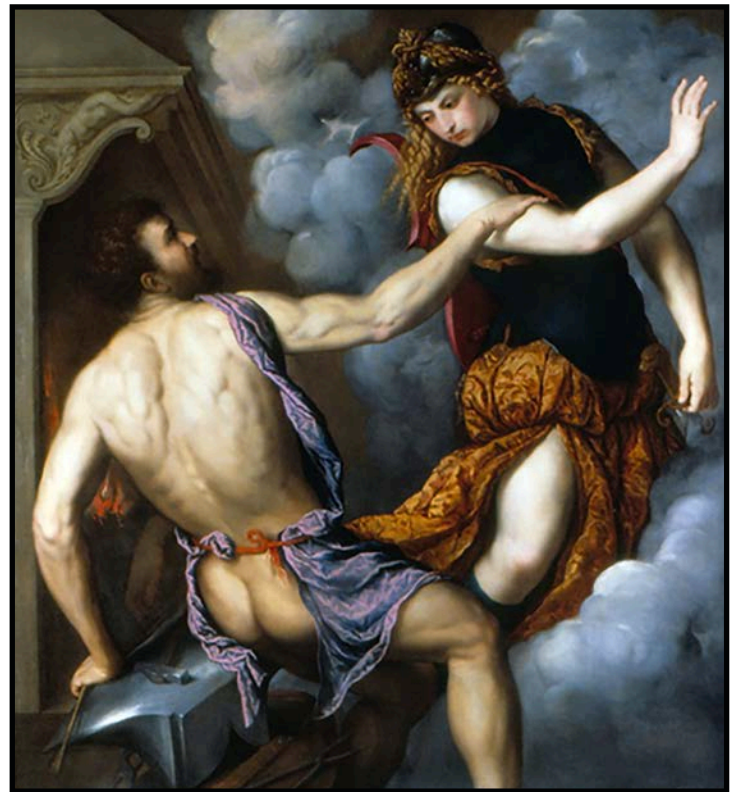


MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

some of the legendary kings of Athens, were often part snake. The circumstances that led to the birth of King Erichthonius from the earth are detailed in the painting *Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus* by Paris Bordone. Some ancient authors implied that snakes were spontaneously generated from beneath the earth, thus giving them *chthonic* or Underworld connections. It is therefore not surprising that they are commonly a feature of objects associated with death, such as one of the Museum’s cremation amphoras.



Neck-Handled Amphora (and rim detail)
Greek, Geometric, ca. 720–700 BCE
From Attica
Pottery
Museum purchase (58.3)



Paris Bordone (Venetian, 1500–1571)
Athena Scorning the Advances of Hephaestus, ca. 1555–1560
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation (61.78)

One of the more recognizable snake symbols from ancient Greece belonged to the healer god, Asklepios, a son of Apollo. That symbol, a staff entwined with a single snake, is still used for medicine today. To ancient Greeks, the snake was a symbol of rejuvenation because it shed its skin. Additionally, because snakes are cold-blooded and need to absorb heat, it was thought that they might absorb fevers and infections if they came into contact with the sick. When one visited a sanctuary of Asklepios seeking a cure, it may be that the suppliant was compelled to spend time with the “sacred snakes” of Asklepios, before other treatments were administered. The “calling up” of the sacred snakes by a priest at healing sanctuaries seems to have been part of the ritual but it is unclear how the sick may have interacted with them. Nonetheless, ancient Greek and Roman objects such as jewelry often featured snakes, which probably functioned as talismans



From MU School of Veterinary Medicine

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Coin of the Emperor Commodus with Asklepios (reverse)
Roman, ca. 175 CE
Mint of Apollonia/Sozopolis (Turkey)
Bronze
Museum purchase (72.193)



Bracelets with Snake-Head Terminals
Greek, Late Archaic, ca. 500 BCE
Silver and bronze
Museum purchase (64.68.1 & 2)



Finger Ring in the Form of a Snake
Greek, Late Hellenistic, 150–50 BCE
From Turkey
Gold
Weinberg Fund (85.46)



**Statuette of the Buddha
Calling the Earth to Witness**
Buddhist, 17th century
From Myanmar (Burma)
Bronze
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Eilenberg (65.163)

to safeguard health, or perhaps to enable fertility, since snakes were a symbol for the Great Mother herself. We should note that the god Hermes also carried a staff entwined with snakes, but these were two in number. That staff, known in Latin as the *caduceus* (Greek: *kerukeion*), has frequently been confused with the staff of Asklepios. The caduceus, however, is described as golden and endowed with magical powers such as the ability to hypnotize or induce sleep. The meaning of the snakes on the caduceus is unclear, but it may derive from ancient Mesopotamia, where a similar emblem was an attribute of the chthonic god, Ningishzida. Since Hermes also had a chthonic role as guide of the dead to the Underworld, the parallel with Ningishzida is noteworthy.

In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the cobra symbolizes the Nāgas (Underworld deities), which can be represented as wholly human, wholly snake, or half-human/half-snake, similar to some deities of ancient Egypt who took animal and hybrid forms. The Nāgas are usually benevolent protectors, and the Nāga king, Mucilanda, was said to have emerged from beneath the earth and spread his hood over the Buddha to protect him from a storm while he meditated. When the rain ceased, Mucilanda assumed human form, bowed before the Buddha, and returned to the Underworld in a state of happiness. This event can be depicted with a great single cobra or one with many heads. ■