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Draco and the Survival of the Serpent Cult in the Central Balkans

(Tafel 13)

Religious credences which often have their origin in prehistory are deeply rooted in people's minds; beliefs and superstitions manifesting themselves in many ways are usually the last to disappear from daily life. Frequently they survive in a distorted form up to modern times, as anthropologists are well aware. This is certainly the case with the serpent cult which in its primitive form is almost as old as mankind and is attested more or less everywhere where snakes occur, not seldom showing striking similarities in areas quite distant from one another¹, due to the specific character of the snake. Although different peoples often displayed similar beliefs about snakes, it would nevertheless be misleading to regard Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman notions as having sprung from the same roots². The Greeks worshipped the serpent primarily as a chthonic deity and as a guarding power, sometimes as guardian of a water spring. It was either representing evil powers, like the Delphic Python, the Hydra from Lerna, and the Arcadian Echidna, but much more often a beneficent creature, a benevolent epichoric spirit, a spirit of ancestors and heroes, ἀγαθὸς δαίμων, like Cychreus, Cecrops, Erechtheus, Meilichius, Trophonius, and Asclepius, who was originally a local Thessalian demon. Progressive anthropomorphism undermined the importance of the serpent cult which certainly played a much greater role in the prehistoric period than it did later, during Greek and Roman antiquity. Its importance also differed in terms of region.

The cult played an important role in the central and southern Balkan as opposed to the northern regions where sun symbols predominated³, and it manifested itself in many different ways. It may even be postulated that the snake was the principal deity of the Illyrians and their guardian spirit, and, according to some scholars, the name Illyrian itself might derive from the name for snake⁴. The Enchelei, one of the most important tribes, attested in southern Dalmatia and in the northern Macedonian area around Lake

¹ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. Adonis, Attis, Osiris. Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*. London 1963, I 82 ff.; id., *The Dying God*, London 1963, 84 ff.

² Hartmann, RE 2 A 1 (1921) 509 s. v. Schlange (Mythologie und Kult).

³ A. Stipčević, *Symboles de culte chez les Illyriens* (in Croat. with a short summary in Italian), Publ. spéciales d'Académie des sciences et des arts de Bosnie-Herzégovine, t. 54, Centre d'études balkaniques 10, Sarajevo 1981, 16 ff. and passim.

⁴ K. Oštir, *Illyro-thrakisches*, Arhiv za arbanasku starinu, jezik i etnologiju 1 (1923) 109; id., *Beiträge zur alarodischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Wien, Leipzig 1921, I 67; cf. J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern, München 1959, I 299 f., who tries to explain the name *Illyrii* as being formed from the root



Ohrid, who settled in this region before the arrival of the eponymous Illyrians, were named after the “water snake”, the eel, in Greek ἡ ἔγχελυς⁵. They are said to have received the Theban heroes Cadmus and Harmonia who, according to the well-known legend, retired to southern Illyria at the end of their lives. The legend further tells us that the Enchelei made them their leaders in the fight against the Illyrian new-comers. Euripides was the first to mention this event (*Bacchae* 1330 – 1339), which means that by the 5th century at the latest, but most probably at a considerably earlier time, the tradition of Cadmus and Harmonia in Illyria had been well established. Their son Illyrius, who is mentioned by Pseudo-Apollodorus⁶ and in the commentary to Vergil’s *Aeneis*⁷, and is also known to some Byzantine writers⁸, is said to have been the eponymous ancestor of the Illyrians. Cadmus and Harmonia would have subsequently been turned into snakes and were

eis-, with the meaning ‘quickly moving’. Cf. J. Puhvel, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary*, Trends in Linguistics, Documentation 1, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam 1984, 358 f.

⁵ R. Katičić, *Die Encheleer*, Godišnjak 15, Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja 13, Sarajevo 1977, 5–82 (in Croat., with a short summary in German); M. Šašel Kos, *Cadmus and Harmonia in Illyria*, [forthcoming]. Names of other peoples, too, derive from various animals, see H. Krahe, *Die Sprache der Illyrier*. 1. Teil: *Die Quellen*, Wiesbaden 1955, 113; A. Mayer, *Die Sprache der alten Illyrier*, Wien 1958, II 36 ff., 45 f., 112.

⁶ Ps.-Apollodorus, *Library* 3, 5, 4.

⁷ Scholia Vaticana, ad v. 1, 243, p. 311 Lion.

⁸ Stephanus of Byzantium, s. v. *Illyria*; Eustathius, in his commentary to Dionysius Periegetes, 389, ed. K. Müller, *GGM* II 289.

worshipped among the southern Illyrians as their divine protectors. Eratosthenes in the 3rd book of his *Geography* (this note is preserved in Stephanus of Byzantium in his description of Dyrrhachium) wrote that their graves were shown along the rivers Drilon (Drim) and Aous (Vijosë / Vojuša). Phylarchus (3rd century B. C., in Athenaeus 11, 6, p. 462 b = FGGrHist 81 F 39) mentions a monument of Cadmus and Harmonia, most probably their funerary monument, shown in the vicinity of Kylikes, a famous town in the country of the Illyrians. The town, which must have belonged to the Enchelei before they disappeared under the collective name of the Illyrians, should almost certainly be identified with Procopius' Kilikai (*De aedif.* 4, 4, ed. J. Haury, add. et corr. G. Wirth, Lipsiae 1964, p. 117), a fortress in New Epirus in the neighbourhood of Scodra⁹. Lastly, Pseudo-Scymnus actually speaks about the sanctuary of Cadmus and Harmonia, thus leaving no doubt that the Theban pair enjoyed divine worship among the inhabitants, who in any case regarded snakes as divine animals.

In some regions known to have been settled by the Enchelei, the serpent cult is also attested archaeologically. Thus a special type of silver bracelets with ends in the form of snake heads, dated to the first half of the 5th century B. C., was found, e. g. at Trebenište and Radolište near Ohrid¹⁰, ancient Lychnidus, which in antiquity was known as having been founded by Cadmus (see the epigram of Christodorus, *AP* 7, 697: ... Εἶχε δ' ἀπ' εὐσεβέων προγόνων ἐρικυδέα πάτρην Λυχνιδὸν ἦν Φοῖνιξ Κάδμος ἔδειμε πόλιν). It may be deduced from the note in Polybius that the region around Lake Ohrid was once inhabited by the Enchelei who were, as we have seen, traditionally connected with Cadmus and Harmonia. He reports that in the war against Scerdilaidas in 217 B. C. Philip V, among other settlements, conquered Enchelanae by Lake Ohrid (5, 108, 8). In later times this population was known as the Dassaretii (Ptol., *Geogr.* 3, 13, 32 Δα(σ)σαρητίων Λύχνιδος; Liv. 43, 9, 7: *ad Lychnidum Dassaretiorum consedit* [Appianus Claudius]).

Very similar bracelets were discovered at Prilep¹¹, on the territory of the Paeonian tribe of the Deuopes, thus excluding the possibility of narrowly ascribing the origin of this ornament to a specific ethnicon. Garašanin is certainly right to assume that such bracelets do not merely reflect an ephemeral fashion, but are doubtless also evidence for religious credences¹².

Two small bronze plates representing a fighting scene also belong to the sphere of these credences. They were found in formerly Echeleian territory and are dated to the Hellenistic period; one is from Albania near Lake Ohrid, from the village Selcë së Poshtme near Pogradec¹³, the other from Gostilj near Skadarsko Lake in Montenegro¹⁴. On both a huge snake is rising behind a single group of soldiers as if to help them against the

⁹ See M. Šašel Kos, *Famous Kylikes in Illyris* [forthcoming].

¹⁰ M. V. Garašanin, *Bracelets à extrémités en têtes de serpents de la Macédoine*, *Artibus Asiae* 15 (1952) 268–276.

¹¹ Id., *Bracelets* (above n. 10).

¹² Id., *Bracelets* (above n. 10) 276.

¹³ *Shqipëria arheologjike*, Tirana 1971, fig. 47; N. Ceka, *Qyteti Ilir pranë Selcës së poshtme*, Tirana 1985, Tab. 69 and 70.

¹⁴ D. Basler, *Nekropola na Velim Ledinama u Gostilju (Donja Zeta)*, *Glasnik Zemaljskog Muzeja* n. s. 24 (1969) 9; 43, tab. 25, 126/3. The dimensions of the tablet are 11,9 × 6,2 cm.

enemy. It may be interpreted as a representation of Cadmus¹⁵, who was regarded as a heroized ancestor of the native population. Even if this interpretation should not be correct, these plates show beyond doubt that the Illyrian peoples were familiar with the conception of dead ancestors appearing in the form of a serpent¹⁶.

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence shows that the worship of serpents, which must have been widely spread in the central and southern Balkans, Greece included¹⁷, was particularly deeply rooted in certain regions, e. g. in the region of the Deuopes in Paeonia where the evidence of the snake shaped bracelets from Prilep is corroborated by a Greek inscription of the 1st century A. D. from this area. It is a votive inscription inscribed on a natural rock above the village of Trojaci near Pletvarje, not far from Prilep, set up by a veteran from the praetorian guard, Ti. Claudius Rufus, for a snake god venerated at this place.

L. Heuzey, H. Daumet, *Mission archéologique de Macédoine*, Paris 1876, 326 No. 131 = M. G. Dimitsas, *Ἡ Μακεδονία ἐν λίθοις φεγγομένοις καὶ μνημείοις σωζόμενοις*, Athens 1896, 318 f. No. 282 (31), cf. R. Marić, *Antički kultovi u našoj zemlji*, Beograd 1933, 31, No. 2; N. Vulič, *Archaeologische Karte von Jugoslawien: Blatt Prilep-Bitolj*, Beograd 1937, 45, and S. Düll, 1977 (cit. not. 21) 137 f., and 406 (Tafel 13: L. Heuzey, H. Daumet, *Mission archéologique de Macédoine*, 326):

Τι(βέριος) Κλαύδιος Ῥοῦφος οὐ-
ετρανὸς ἐκ πραιτω-
ρίου Δράκοντι τῷ
ὧδε τειμω-
μένῳ δῶρον.

A snake rising above a bowl containing an egg is represented on the rock. Heuzey, who was the first to publish the inscription, mentions that the local inhabitants still believed in snakes as guardians of buried treasures¹⁸. Its chthonic character was certainly the most important aspect of the snake. The social status of the dedicant shows that the serpent cult was by no means disdained by the upper class.

Draco is also mentioned on an interesting Latin inscription from neighbouring Dardania, from the territory of Scupi (present-day Skopje), recently republished and revised by B. Josifovska-Dragojević, IMS VI No. 10. It is a marble altar discovered in 1872 by Noë Morten on the left bank of the Vardar opposite a place called by him "Vlascia". This toponym was wrongly identified as Blatsche (= Blace) in later publications, but, as Josifovska pointed out, Vlascia could only be the village Vlahčani (no longer inhabited) near the village Sopot, situated on the opposite bank of the Vardar. For some time the altar had been regarded as lost (Domaszewski could not find it) but it was found again by Lj. Kovačević and is at present immured in the threshold of the church of St. George

¹⁵ M. Šašel Kos, *Cadmus* (above n. 5).

¹⁶ See S. Stipčević, *Le culte du défunt héroisé dans la religion illyrienne*, Simpozijum Duhovna kultura Ilira (Symposium Culture spirituelle des Illyriens), Centre d'Etudes balkaniques 11, Sarajevo 1984, 215–221; cf. also id., *Symboles* (above n. 3) 50.

¹⁷ E. Küster, *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion*, RVV 13, 2, Giessen 1913.

¹⁸ L. Heuzey, ad. No. 131.

near Sopot. Its inscribed surface is almost entirely obliterated, so that no photograph of the inscription could be published. Fortunately its reading has been ascertained (I give it according to Josifovska, who cites all the older relevant references):

*Iovi et Iuno-
ni et Dracco-
ni (!) et Dracce-
nae (!) et Ale-
xandro Epi-
tynchanus s(ervus)
[F]uri Octavi[ani]
c(larissimi) v(iri) posuit.*

The copy made by Lj. Kovačević confirmed Domaszewski's identification of the senator with C. Furius Octavianus and not C. Furius Octavius, thus allowing the inscription to be dated to the Severan period.

The second part of the dedication is unique as the couple Draco and Dracena are not attested elsewhere. A female counterpart of Draco is not surprising as she sometimes also appears in Greece alongside with Zeus Ktesius, Zeus Meilichius or Philius, as, for ex., Ἀγαθὴ Τύχη¹⁹ (note also the feminine epithets Ktesia and Meilichia for female deities). All of them are former snake gods, important enough to be later assimilated into the supreme Greek god. In our case assimilation did not occur; the dedication is to Jupiter and Juno and to Draco and Dracena, thus revealing that the pair were locally important deities, probably more important to the dedicant than the first two mentioned gods from the official Roman Pantheon. The appearance of Draco and Dracena recalls the worship of Cadmus and Harmonia. It is interesting to mention in this context that it may be inferred from Dercylus that Harmonia had once been regarded, at least in some sources, as a daughter of a snake²⁰.

It is significant, too, that on several votive stelae in the area of Prilep and elsewhere in northern Macedonia one or two serpents appear: one of the most interesting representations is preserved on a trapezoidal stele from the vicinity of Prilep on which two snakes surround an altar with a bell shaped krater with an egg on its edge. It is dated by S. Düll to the first half of the 3rd century A. D.²¹ Equally noteworthy is the appearance of one or two snakes on tombstones from the same area²². It is thus obvious that serpent deities played an important role in the southern Dardanian and northern Macedonian regions.

¹⁹ M. P. Nilsson, *Schlangenstele des Zeus Ktesios*, *AthMitt* 33 (1908) 279–288 = *Opuscula selecta*, Lund 1951, I 25–34.

²⁰ Cf. J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (above n. 1), III 84 n. 4. Schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 7 (ed. C. Müller, IV p. 387): Δέρκυλλος Θηβαίου τινός, Δράκοντος τοῦνομα, βασιλέως δὲ Θηβαίων, θυγατέρα τὴν Ἀρμονίαν εἶναί φησιν, ὃν φονεύσας Κάδμος ἔγημεν Ἀρμονίαν.

²¹ S. Düll, *Die Götterkulte Nordmakedoniens in römischer Zeit*, *Münchener Archäologische Studien* 7 (1977) 403 no. 257, fig. 30.

²² Ead., *Götterkulte* (above n. 21) 140 ff.

Draco occurs very rarely on the inscriptions. Our two inscriptions are the only dedications to the snake god called Draco in these parts of the Empire. This deity is otherwise attested epigraphically only on rare inscriptions from Africa and Rome²³.

A dedication to Alexander on a Latin inscription from the Latin speaking part of the Empire — although, it is true, next to the border of the Greek speaking world where dedications to Alexander are not exceptional — is probably also unique. There is, in my opinion, absolutely no doubt that the Alexander on the dedication should be identified with Alexander the Great, who was believed to have been conceived by a serpent god. Mommsen wrongly identified him with Alexander of Abonouteichus, and, consequently, Draco with the serpent god Glycon, a creation of the false prophet Alexander of Abonouteichus who had been active in the fifth and sixth decades of the 2nd century A.D. He was treated with ridicule and malice by Lucian (Ἀλέξανδρος ἢ Ψευδόμαντις), but had nonetheless had a great impact on his contemporaries, while Glycon exercised some influence even on posterity. Mommsen's opinion was accepted by several scholars who dealt with the inscription later on²⁴. There are several archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic attestations of Glycon, mainly from the eastern parts of the Empire²⁵. He is always represented with a human head and, whenever his name is given, it is always Glycon. The fact itself that two dedications to Glycon came to light in the neighbouring province of Dacia²⁶ is sufficient proof that Draco was a different deity. Moreover, there is no place for Dracena in Glycon's cult and in his mantic activity, which is described in detail by Lucian. Groag, who had disagreed with Mommsen²⁷, proposed a much better explanation for the appearance of Alexander on the dedication. He connected it with a passage from Dio (30 *epit.*, 18, 1–3)²⁸ mentioning for the year 221 that in Upper Moesia

²³ See CIL VIII 9326 (Caesarea): *Deo Manu (?) Draconis M. Junius Asclepiades v. s. l. a.*; 15247 (Africa proc.): *Draconi Aug(usto) sacrum*; 15378 (ib.): *Draconi Aug. [s]acru[m]*; ILS 3879 (= CIL VIII 17722, Ad Aquas Flavianas / Henchir Hammam, in Numidia): *Numini [Ny]mpharum et Draconi Abidius Bassus trib., cur(ator) m(unicipii) M(asculitani)*; cf. H. Devijver, *Prosopographia militiarum equestrum quae fuerunt ab Augusto ad Gallienum*, Leuven 1976, I 45, A 2; ILS 3896a (= CIL VI 143, Rome); *Carpus Aug. lib. Pallantianus sanctis Draconibus d. d.*; cf. also ILS 8067 (= CIL VI 27285/6, Rome): *...ae Tertiae Aug. lib. νόμφη Δρακαίνα coniugi sine exemplo, quae vix. ann. XXVI [mens.] ... diebus III, hor. XI, ... [Th]allus collib. maritus et ...tius pater infelicissimi*; and 1975 (= VI 2345, Trebiae in Umbria, originis urbanae): *D. m. Laetus, publicus populi Romani, aquarius aquae Annionis veteris castelli viae Latinae contra Dracones, et Flavia Dionysia fecer. sibi et Auliae Argyridi, filiae, vixit ann. XXIII, m. II, d. VIII, et lib. liber. posterisq. eorum H. m. [h.] e. n. s. Dolus malus abesto, et Calventiae [Pa]etinae itu aditum ambitu[m] ... [mon]umentum pertinent.*; CIL VI 30866: *[Ex] viso draco[ne]m C. Novius [Her]meros de s[ua pec]unia [ded]it.*; CIL V 6965 (Taurini): *... quaest(or), aedi[l(is)]. II vir qq. Dracon(um) auri p(ondo) I deae don(o) posuit*, Cf. also Diz. ep. s. v. Draco.

²⁴ For the citations see the commentary of B. Josifovska, IMS VI ad No. 10.

²⁵ See L. Robert, *Le serpent Glycon d'Abonouteichos à Athènes*, CRAI 1981, 513–530.

²⁶ CIL III 1021 = ILS 4079 from Apulum: *Glyconi | M. Ant(onius) | Onesas | iusso (!) dei | l. p.* See also CIL III 1022.

²⁷ E. Groag, *Alexander in einer Inschrift des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, Wiener Eranos, Wien 1909, 251–255.

²⁸ ὀλίγον γὰρ τούτων πρότερον δαίμων τις Ἀλέξανδρός τε ὁ Μακεδὼν ἐκεῖνος εἶναι λέγων καὶ τὸ εἶδος αὐτοῦ τὴν τε σκευὴν ἅπασαν φέρων, ὥρμηθη τε ἐκ τῶν περὶ τὸν Ἰστρον χωρίων, οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐκεῖνη ἐκφανείς, βακχεύων μετ' ἀνδρῶν τετρακοσίων, θύρσους τε καὶ νεβρίδας ἐνεσκευασμένων, κακὸν οὐδὲν δρῶντων. ὠμολόγητο δὲ παρὰ πάντων τῶν ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ τότε γενομένων ὅτι καὶ καταγωγαὶ καὶ τὰ ἐπιτήδεια αὐτῶ πάντα δημοσίᾳ παρεσκευάσθη· καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐτόλμησεν οὔτ' ἀντειπεῖν οἱ οὔτ' ἀντάραι, οὐ ἄρχων, οὐ

and Thrace a spirit (δαίμων τις) appeared, claiming to be Alexander of Macedon. Accompanied by four hundred men he advanced through the country in the guise of a new Dionysus, living at public expense while authorities did not dare to interfere. The procession proceeded as far as Byzantium and hence by ship to Chalcedon where the spirit disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared. No doubt that the representatives of Roman government had removed him, thus ensuring that he would not cause further trouble.

Groag showed that Epitynchanus' master was the well-known senator C. Furius Octavianus²⁹, a contemporary of the mentioned event, known from the passage in Ulpian, *de officio praetoris tutelaris*³⁰, and from several inscriptions³¹. The family was related to the family of the Pontii; both owned large estates in Dardania and were probably involved in mining-business³². Thus Epitynchanus' dedication to Draco and Dracena, deities closely connected with earth, could perhaps so be explained. It seems plausible that the apparition of Pseudo-Alexander induced Epitynchanus to set up the dedication also to Alexander. Groag further suggested that the Alexander invoked on the inscription would either have been this Pseudo-Alexander, or else Alexander the Great himself. There is no doubt that the last possibility could be the right one³³. Even if we assume that the dedicant had this newly arrived "spirit" in mind when setting up the dedication, he obviously believed that it was a true reincarnation of Alexander the Great, as the impostor claimed to be. Given that on one hand the cult of Alexander was revived in the period of military campaigns in the East during the first half of the 3rd century A.D., especially under Caracalla and Alexander Severus³⁴, and that on the other hand the prophet Alexander of Abonouteichus was a rather ephemeral phenomenon, in any case much more than his creation Glycon, Gagé's suggestion that Epitynchanus would not distinguish between the two Alexanders seems most unlikely³⁵. The times were imbued by manifold manifestations of religious syncretism, but it seems to me much more probable that Epitynchanus had not even heard of the false prophet, who had died some 70 years earlier.

στρατιώτης, οὐκ ἐπίτροπος, οὐχ οἱ τῶν ἔθνων ἡγούμενοι, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἐν πομπῇ τινὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐκ πορρήσεως ἐκομίσθη μέχρι τοῦ Βυζαντίου. ἐντεῦθεν γὰρ ἐξαναχθεὶς πρόσεχε μὲν τῇ Χαλκηδονίᾳ γῇ, ἐκεῖ δὲ δὴ νυκτὸς ἱερά τινα ποιήσας καὶ ἵππον ξύλινον καταχώσας ἀφανὴς ἐγένετο. ταῦτα μὲν ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ ἔτι, ὡς εἶπον, ὦν, πρὶν καὶ ὁποῦν περὶ τὸν Βασιανὸν ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ γενέσθαι, ἔμαθον.

²⁹ PIR² F 580.

³⁰ *Fragmenta Vaticana*, c. 220, ed. Th. Mommsen (*Collectio librorum iuris anteiustiniani* 3), Berlin 1890, 69: *Memini itaque me suadente Alcimium libertum Furi Octaviani clarissimi viri praetorem in cura retinuisse, cum tutelam eius administrasset necessariusque ad res gerendas videretur; nam et liberti materni in pari sunt condicione.*

³¹ CIL III 8169 = Jahresh. Bb. 6 (1903) 28 (Morten's better copy). This inscription confirms Ulpian's notice. See also CIL VI 1423, cf. p. 3141: *Furiae L. f. Caeciliae matri piissimae Furius Octavianus co(n)s(ul) pontif(ex) fil(ius)*.

³² J. Šašel, *Dardania, Furii e Pontii*, in: *Scritti sul mondo antico in memoria di Fulvio Grosso*, Roma 1981, 587–594 (Università di Macerata, Pubbl. della Fac. di lett. e filos. 9).

³³ Thus also N. Vulić, *Glas Srpske Kralj. Akad. nauka* 88, Beograd 1911, 159 ff. Cf. also id., *Spomenik* 98 (1941–1948) 33 No. 80.

³⁴ See J. Gagé, *Alexandre le Grand en Macédoine dans la 1^{ère} moitié du III^e siècle ap. J.-C.*, *Historia* 24 (1975) 1–16; cf. F. Becker-Bertau, *Die Inschriften von Klaudiupolis*, Bonn 1986, 35 ad No. 10 (IK 31); and W. Blümel, *Die Inschriften von Iasos*, T. II, Bonn 1985, 130 ad No. 620 (IK 28, 2).

³⁵ Gagé, *Alexandre* (above n. 34) 12.

It is evident from the dedication that the serpent cult must have been important to the dedicant, and it can be further assumed on the basis of the already mentioned evidence that it must have played a significant role in Dardania, as in northern Macedonia. This can be stated, however, irrespectively of Epitynchanus' origin; the name Epitynchanus cannot tell us anything about the origin of the dedicant, as the epigraphic evidence from Rome shows that it was a rather common name among the slave and freedmen population³⁶.

The serpent cult in this region, however, was known at a much earlier age. The origins of the worship of snakes can be traced in Dardania back into the earliest prehistory. At a neolithic site in Priština, Predionica, a late neolithic clay figure of a coiled snake was found in a house, symbolizing a protector of the domestic hearth³⁷. It is also interesting to note that such practices survived throughout the centuries of the Middle Ages and the modern era up to our own days.

Several survivals of the serpent cult have been noted in the central and southern Balkan region, some of which are attested also in other formerly Illyrian lands, notably in Dalmatia³⁸. The snake is sometimes regarded in southern Serbia as averter of evil, bringing health, as protector of fields, and sometimes also an animal which can aid fertility, if, for instance, a girl wears a woolen garment over which mating snakes have crawled. Not infrequently, however, anthropologists also note superstitions about snakes, in which serpents are perceived as dangerous and malevolent animals. Concurrent rituals were devised for defense against them, such as pouring boiling water on stones in a courtyard and around a house, or by other devices, often on certain days in spring, like St. George's Day or the Day of Forty Martyrs³⁹. Certainly these superstitions cannot be regarded as testimonies for a serpent cult. Nonetheless, survivals of a serpent cult in which a belief in snakes as benevolent creatures is reflected are disseminated over a vast area, but they tend to be concentrated in formerly Dardanian regions. Under the superstratum of Christian and Moslem beliefs, several features of the former snake cult still exercise a great influence on local imagination and religious observances. Snakes are still regarded in many Albanian villages in the region of Kosovo and Metohija as protecting hearths and graves, their magical powers bringing health. A snake is sometimes built as a sacrificial

³⁶ H. Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom. Ein Namenbuch*, Berlin, New York 1982, II 791 – 793; cf. also III 1360.

³⁷ R. Galović, *Predionica*, Priština 1959, 25, Pl. 5, fig. 4. Similar snakes from the same period were also found at Lisičići near Konjic in Bosnia and at Krivač near Bribir in Dalmatia, see A. Benac, *GZM* n. s. 10 (1955) 59, Pl. 12, fig. 15; P. Korošec, *Diadora* 6 (1973) 167 – 171. Clay snake coils were also discovered in a house from a later period at Mycenae, see W. Taylour, *New Light on Mycenaean Religion*, *Antiquity* 44 (1970) 270 – 280.

³⁸ At Sutomore (on the former Enchelean littoral) it brings bad luck to kill a snake-like lizard, called *blavor* in Croatian, a word related to Rumanian *balaur*, a pre-Slavic Balkanism meaning dragon, which probably indicates a continuity with the serpent cult of the autochthonic inhabitants in Dalmatia, cf. R. Katičić, *Encheleer* (above n. 5) 44 n. 62. St. Hilarion saved the inhabitants of Epidaurum (present-day Cavtat) from the huge serpent Boas in A. D. 365, see Sancti Hieronymi *Vita S. Hilarionis eremitae* c. 39 (Migne, *PL* II); Farlatti, *Illyricum sacrum* VI 3 – 4, 47 – 50. Cf. R. Katičić, *Encheleer* (above n. 5) 42 – 44, n. 62.

³⁹ M. Zlatanović, *Verovanja o zmiji na jugu Srbije* (Superstitions about snakes in southern Serbia, summary in Russian only), *Vranjski glasnik* 21, Vranje (1988) 225 – 234 with other references cited.

animal into the foundations of a new house to avert evil. Its head likewise protects newly married couples against evil, and its teeth protect babies against the evil eye, disease, or magic⁴⁰.

In the village of Šušice (Shushicë) in Kosovo, two girls from the house of K. Metaj died from tuberculosis around 1950. Villagers believe that their grave is guarded by two coiled snakes⁴¹, perhaps a distant echo of the mentioned tombstones from the Roman period on which two snakes are represented.

The continuity of the serpent cult is particularly striking at the village of Orman near Skopje, Roman Scupi, on the site of which the dedication to Draco and Dracena of Epitynchanus had been discovered. This continuity was described shortly before the second World War by M. S. Filipović⁴², and in the beginning of the seventies by L. Spirovská⁴³. At the very beginning of spring, on March 22nd, the villagers of Orman gather to go to a hill called Zmijarnik ("Snake hill"), half a kilometer away from their village. There they wait for snakes to emerge from underneath the rocks, then some of them dance in a ring, while the others catch the animals and throw them inside the ring believing that on this day snakes do not bite and are not venomous. Young couples who wish to have children born to them put pieces of their clothing inside the ring in front of the snakes and incite the reptiles to crawl over them; thus their wish would be fulfilled. Spirovská writes that snakes were also believed to fulfill other wishes expressed by the owners of clothing who implored them for various types of help and remedies.

Bringing fertility, which is one of the manifestations of the chthonic deity, must have been one of the primary features of snake worship. The belief that a serpent can cause pregnancy or in some way assist in conception is currently attested among many primitive peoples in Africa and elsewhere, and is firmly rooted among the inhabitants of many Indian or Mediterranean villages⁴⁴. Thus, for instance, Greek women from the village of Promahi who cannot bear children go on a given day to a special stone, called Serpent Stone, near a deserted church of St. Ilarion, and walk around it three times, burning candles and leaving money on the top of it in hope that their barrenness will be cured⁴⁵.

The serpent worship practised at Orman near Skopje is probably unique in Europe. It is surely no coincidence that it is performed precisely where it had been attested in the Roman period, and where, broadly speaking, it has been known from the prehistoric period onwards; it can thus be assumed with great probability that it has survived from the prehistoric past. The ritual of its recent performance is the only means by which its former appearance and primary features may be approached. The element of a serpent

⁴⁰ U. Xhemaj, *Le culte du serpent dans la culture populaire albanaise*, Gjurmime albanologjike, Floklor dhe etnologji 13 (1983) 23–33 (summary on p. 33).

⁴¹ A. Stipčević, *Zmija kao čuvarica groba*, Zbornik za narodni život i običaje 49 (1983) 628 n. 9.

⁴² S. Filipović, *Kult zmije u okolini Skoplja*, Biblioteka Centralnog higijenskog zavoda, Miscellanea I (1937) 136–149 (non vidi). Cf. S. Stipčević, *Symboles*, (above n. 3) 180–182.

⁴³ L. Spirovská, *Le culte du serpent dans le village d'Orman, région de Skopje* (in Mac. with French summary), Makedonski folklor 7–8, Skopje 1971, 141–146. I am grateful to Mrs. M. Petrović, Skopje Museum, for this reference.

⁴⁴ J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, *Rječnik simbola*, Zagreb 1989³, 802 ff.

⁴⁵ G. K. Spyridakis, *Ἐκθέσις λαογραφικῆς ἐρεῦνης εἰς περιοχὰς τοῦ νομοῦ Πέλλης (Μακεδονίας) (29 ἰουν. – 18 ἰουλ. 1961)*, Ἐπετηρὶς τοῦ Λαογραφικοῦ Ἀρχείου τομ. ΙΓ'–ΙΔ', Athens 1960–1961, 382.

crawling over garments of the believers is also known from the cult of Phrygian-Thracian Sabazius⁴⁶. It is known from Clemens of Alexandria (*Protrept.* 2, 16; cf. also Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 5, 20 f.) that individuals initiated into the mysteries of Sabazius had a serpent drawn through the bosom of their dress (ὁ διὰ κόλπου θεός), which was regarded as an incarnation or manifestation of the god itself⁴⁷. Elements of similar content must have featured in various Graeco-Roman cults where serpents played a conspicuous role. Serpent cults in different parts of the Graeco-Roman world undoubtedly displayed different traits and different accents. The ritual at Orman helps us imagine how they have been.

It is, or has been, performed on March 22nd, the day of the Forty Martyrs. Spirovska concludes her report with a note that the Orthodox Church had built a church near the ancient site⁴⁸. She adds that by having done so the church has signified acception of this cult, which by being united with the church holiday of the Forty Martyrs has thus been saved from oblivion. Christian notions of the snake derive from Jewish and, generally speaking, eastern notions of the serpent, which have mostly retained such evil traits as are embodied, for instance, in the Eden snake. It must therefore be concluded that far from preserving the relicts of the serpent cult at Orman from oblivion, the building of a church at the site will probably decisively contribute to its final disappearance.

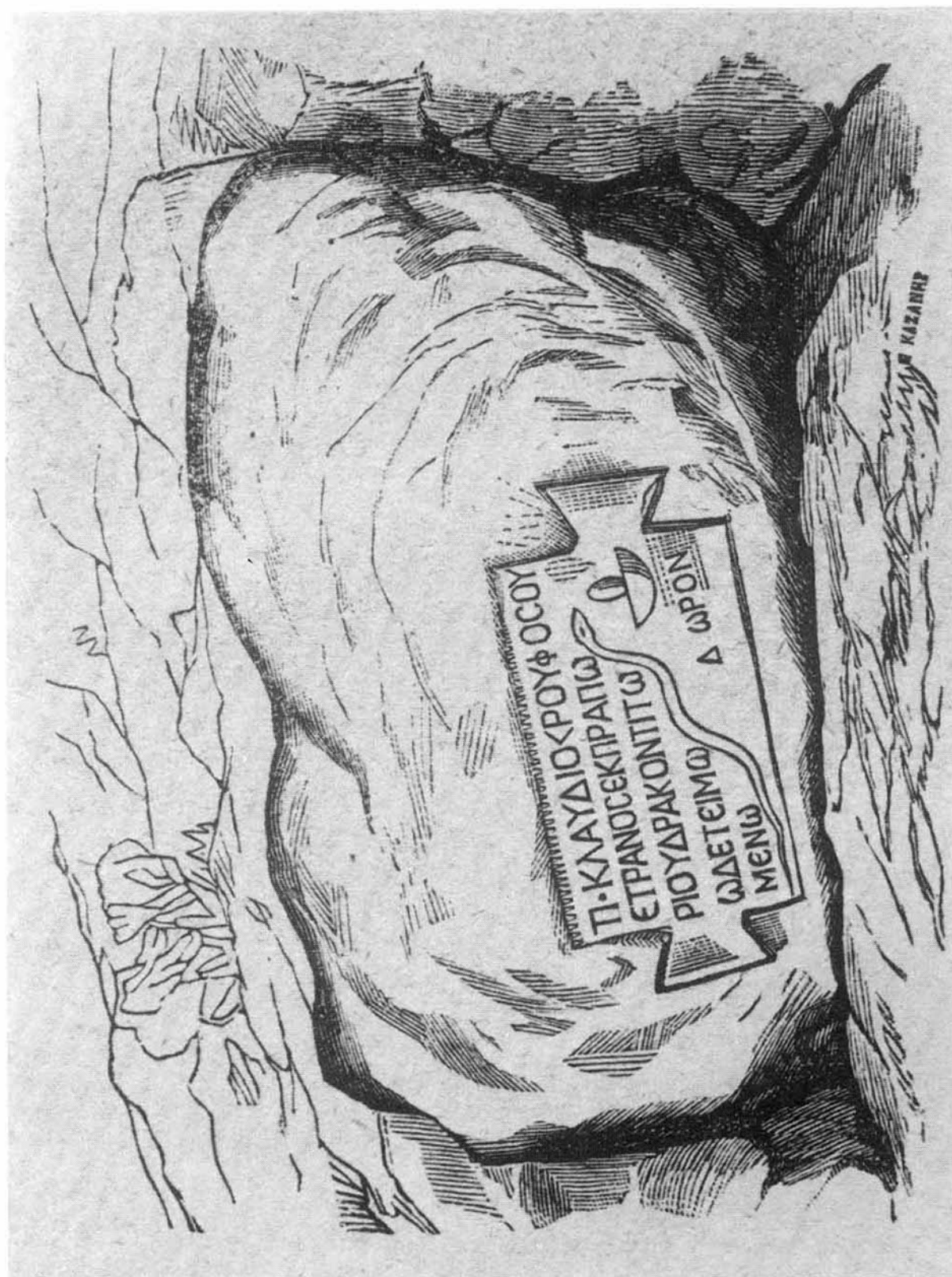
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⁴⁶ S. E. Johnson, *The Present State of Sabazios Research*, ANRW II 17. 3 (1984) 1583–1613, especially 1585 ff.

⁴⁷ See Theophrastus, *Characters* 28.

⁴⁸ Spirovska, *Le culte du serpent* (above n. 43) 146.



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