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‘Reddening the creature’s beard with purple drops’: the divine or monstrous nature of bearded serpents

Introduction

The unusual motif of the bearded serpent is used in a wide range of contexts throughout Greek art and literature. A beard of varying size and shape is often added to mythological serpents, be they the attributes or alternative forms of a god such as the theriomorphic Zeus Meilichios, or the monstrous opponents of heroes in pursuit of the object of their quest. The latter mythological monstrous serpents are divided into two categories based on their form. They are either pure serpents, meaning they are entirely serpentine in form like the Serpent of Colchis, or they are a minor attribute on a larger hybrid creature, as is the case with the Chimaira, who possesses a serpent as a tail. While this terminology is used to distinguish between the two types of snakes, they share the same common mythological role; namely, they are the opponents of heroes. It is important to note that the beard is not found consistently in

1 This article has been adapted from a paper presented at AMPHORAE IX, held in 2015. My thanks to all of those who read and critiqued both this article and the original presentation, in particular Dr. Diana Burton, who offered many insightful suggestions and opinions.
2 Also, see a selection of examples of snakes associated with Athena: LIMC Athena 29, 31, 42, 47, 49, 140, 175, 186, 187, 194, 351, 429; and the Erinyes: LIMC Erinyes 1, 6, 27, 41, 42, 45, 58, 68.
3 For examples see LIMC Jason 30, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 41; and LIMC Hesperides 7, 29.
4 The terms pure and hybrid serpents are commonly used to differentiate the serpent types by authors such as D. Ogden. I will be using Ogden’s terminology for the duration of this article. For examples of hybrid serpents see LIMC Chimaira 3, 22, 25, 87, 108; see above for references to a pure-bearded serpent, namely the Serpent of Colchis in the context of the myth of Jason.
every depiction of the figures discussed here. Rather it appears to be a stylistic choice made by the painter or author. However, when the motif is used, it appears only on those serpentine creatures that play a part in a mythological narrative or are associated with a hero or divinity. The motif is not found on ordinary ‘garden-variety’ snakes. This selective use implies that its addition to specific serpents holds meaning that needs to be better understood. This article will address the meaning of the addition of the beard in the context of pure and hybrid serpents with a specific focus on the explanation provided by Jane Harrison in her Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion.\(^5\) This focus on Harrison’s work is due to the widely cited nature of her interpretation. Despite the fact that her work was published in 1903, it continues to be cited as one of the main explanations for the addition of the beard in recent works, such as Daniel Ogden’s 2013 Drakōn.\(^6\) Therefore, this article will be divided into two major parts, the first being an explanation and critique of Harrison’s work, and the second outlining examples of bearded snakes that contradict her interpretation of the beard as an indicator of an anthropomorphic deity. Focus on Harrison’s explanation of the beard is to show that, while it may be applicable to a few specific snakes, it cannot be broadly applied to every occurrence of a bearded snake. Thus, the motif should be considered more broadly in order to explain its use in multiple different contexts.

**History of the motif**

The earliest artistic depictions of bearded snakes come from the seventh century BCE, specifically on the so-called Eleusis amphora.\(^7\) A total of ten snakes is shown attached to the heads and necks of the two living Gorgons. Of these snakes, only two are potentially represented with beards. The identification of these serpents as bearded snakes is complicated by the unclear

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5 Harrison 1959, 328.
6 Ogden 2013, 160; see also Bodson 1975, 74; and Gourmelen 2012, 339.
7 Eleusis Archaeological Museum, protoattic amphora (ca. 670 BCE), H: 1.42m; Richter 1959, 299; Ogden 2013, 155; *LIMC* Gorgo, Gorgones 312.
nature of the depiction and the feline appearance of the serpents. This uncertainty is characteristic of early representations of the bearded snake. Another early example can be found on a late seventh century BCE Corinthian alabastron depicting a male figure being swallowed or disgorge by a large serpent shown with something projecting from its lower jaw. However, the poorly preserved state of this piece makes the identification of the potential beard uncertain. It is not until the sixth century BCE that the beard becomes easily recognisable as an intentional addition to depictions of mythological serpents. From the sixth century BCE, the motif is used with increasing frequency until the third century BCE, when bearded snakes cease to appear in visual depictions of mythology and cult in Greece.

The motif of the bearded snake persists in several later literary works, ranging in date from Nicander’s second century BCE *Theriaca*, to Nonnus’ early fifth century CE epic, the *Dionysiaca*. In these literary examples, the serpent is commonly described in association with a divine or heroic figure and generally appears in the form of a large pure serpent with a beard. These works serve as an example of the continuation of the motif well beyond the third century BCE and as an example of its adaptation in later periods. Despite the fact that these literary examples are significantly later than the Greek iconographic tradition, they continue to show the bearded snake in the context of

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8 An in-depth analysis of the use of both serpentine and feline characteristics on the Eleusis amphora Gorgons is beyond the scope of this article, see Boardman (1998, 90); Osborne (1998, 60) and Ogden (2013, 155); for such analyses.
10 For a brief history of the use of bearded serpents in Greek art and literature see Ogden (2013, 155–9).
11 The artistic motif continues to be used in both Etruscan and Roman examples; see the Tomb of the Blue Demons at Tarquinia (late fifth century BCE), where bearded snakes are used in association with a chthonic demon and Vanth figures, and the House of the Centenary at Pompeii (first century CE), where a bearded snake is shown in association with Bacchus.
depictions, divinities and cult practices, in the same manner as the later Etruscan and Roman depictions. As such, these rare literary depictions can still be used to shed some light on the meaning behind the motif. While the physical appearance of the beard may change depending on the tradition, the use of the motif in association with divinities and heroes remains a connecting factor between the various artistic traditions and the later literary examples. This is apparent even in narratives that do not seek to tell an explicitly mythological tale, such as Nicander’s *Theriaca*, as they still associate the bearded serpent with the divine. Such an association implies there is a connection between the snake and the concepts of divinity and heroism; therefore, a contextual connection is evident throughout the history of the motif, from the Eleusis amphora down to Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*. Despite differences in media, the intentionality behind the motif remains an important consideration. In each of the examples, the beard stands as a purposeful addition to the depiction or description of the serpent and can thus be considered in similar terms.

The ‘frank anthropomorphism’ of bearded snakes

Jane Harrison provided one of the more detailed explanations for the addition of the beard in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Harrison asserted that the beard was ‘mainly due to frank anthropomorphism; the snake is in a transition stage between human and animal, and human for the artist means divine’.13 This argument contrasts with the only remaining ancient explanation of the beard. Aelian’s third century CE *De Natura Animalium* considered the beard solely as an attribute of masculinity due to its use on male human figures.14 In contrast, Harrison’s interpretation considered the beard more generally as a human attribute, largely ignoring the connotations of gender. The flaw in Harrison’s interpretation is the very narrow scope of her discussion, as she only considered the bearded snake in the context

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13 Harrison 1903, 328.
of anguiform deities or those snakes directly associated with cult figures.\textsuperscript{15} While the anthropomorphic nature of the beard cannot, and should not, be disregarded, the varied contexts in which a bearded snake may appear must be considered in greater detail in order for the meaning behind the unusual motif to be better understood.

The anguiform Zeus Meilichios was central to Harrison’s discussion of the bearded serpent.\textsuperscript{16} This particular form of Zeus is commonly presented either as a mature male with a coiled serpent nearby, or as a large serpent. The monstrously large, coiled serpent is the more common means of depicting Zeus Meilichios.\textsuperscript{17} The addition of a small beard to depictions of a serpentine Zeus Meilichios appears to be a relatively consistent feature.\textsuperscript{18} For example, a series of ten votive reliefs depicting Zeus Meilichios dating to the fourth century BCE were uncovered near a shrine in the Piraeus. Of these ten reliefs, eight show Zeus in the form of a large bearded serpent.\textsuperscript{19} The remaining two reliefs from this series depict Zeus Meilichios in his human form, enthroned with a non-bearded serpent located nearby.\textsuperscript{20}

Harrison used these representations of Zeus Meilichios to rationalise the addition of the beard by claiming that it had a foundation in reality. The crux of her argument was the identification of the type of serpent she believed these depictions to be based on.\textsuperscript{21} With the help of Dr Hans Gadow, a contem-

\textsuperscript{15} Harrison 1903, 326–9.
\textsuperscript{16} Harrison 1903, 328.
\textsuperscript{17} Lalonde 2006, 46.
\textsuperscript{18} Cook 1940, 1107.
\textsuperscript{19} For three examples of these reliefs of a bearded serpentine Zeus Meilichios see Athens, National Archaeological Museum 3329 and 1434, and Berlin, Staatliche Museum sk722. Ogden 2013, 273; similar reliefs have been found at sites throughout Attica, including the Athenian Agora, Amaroussion, and several unknown Attic findspots, see Ogden (2013, 274–6) and Lalonde (2006, 103–20) for more examples.
\textsuperscript{20} Harrison 1903, 328; see Lalonde 2006, 114–7 for descriptions of the votives depicting Zeus Meilichios found in the Piraeus.
\textsuperscript{21} Harrison 1903, 328; referred to as coelopeltis lacertina during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, now classified as malpolon monspessulanus.
porary ornithologist, she identified the *Coelopeltis lacertina*, more commonly known as the Montpellier snake, as the 'original' serpent.22 Harrison’s identification of the Montpellier snake was based on the shape of the serpent’s head, as the head of the Montpellier snake has a distinctive depression at the top, causing it to appear flat and lizard-like. Harrison believed that representations of the serpentine Zeus Meilichios featured such a depression.23 However, as the head of the snake in the reliefs is shown in profile and in shallow relief, it is impossible to tell if such a depression is an intentional feature of the depiction.24 Gerald Lalonde, in his 2006 monograph of the Athenian cult of Zeus, does not give any credence to this perceived link between the Montpellier snake and representations of Zeus Meilichios.25 Due to the significantly limited evidence presented by Harrison in support of her claim, rejecting her idea becomes credible.

The importance of Harrison’s identification of the ‘original’ snake lies more in her use of the idea as a potential indication of how the motif developed from a reflection of nature into a symbolic motif, than in the identification itself. Harrison’s explanation focused on the positioning of the fangs and the mandible of the Montpellier snake. Based on these characteristics she claimed that the mandible must be dropped to a significant degree in order for the fangs, located at the back of the mouth, to be effectual.26 It is this dropped jaw that Harrison considered to be responsible for the origin of the beard. Thus, Harrison believed that the beard developed from an ancient misrepresentation of the Montpellier snake’s mandible and eventually became an anthropomorphic symbol in its own right. Such an explanation is difficult to accept as it presupposes the positioning and style of the beard to be consistent across contemporary depictions of Zeus Meilichios, at the very least.

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22 Harrison gave little reasoning for this, simply stating ‘Dr. Gadow believes [the snake] to be the species known as *coelopeltis lacertina*’. Harrison 1903, 328.
23 Harrison 1903, 328.
24 The relief mostly discussed by Harrison (1903) is the one housed in Berlin.
25 Lalonde 2006, 46 n. 31.
26 Harrison 1903, 328–9.
However, the style, size and positioning of the beard varies, as there does not appear to be one standard means of depicting or describing the motif. It most commonly appears as a simple pointed line in both sculpture and vase painting.\(^2\) Alternatively, it may be significantly more defined and larger in size.\(^2\) A third type of beard, which does not appear in the context of Zeus Meilichios, consists of a series of connected dots, creating a more globular beard shape.\(^2\) Of the stylistic variations, this is the sole type that is consistently used in only one context, namely in Lakonian depictions of bearded serpents, implying that it may be a regional stylistic variation. Such variations show that there is little or no consistency in the appearance of the beard, suggesting that the position of the Montpellier snake’s mandible is unlikely to have influenced the creation of the motif.

Harrison’s argument is further hindered by her use of relatively late examples of bearded snakes. While the earliest examples known to us today date from the middle of the seventh century BCE, those cited by Harrison date to the first half of the fourth century BCE.\(^3\) The Zeus Meilichios reliefs that form the central point of her argument represent the final stages of the motif, with the exception of the few later literary examples.\(^4\) Admittedly, this is largely due to the early nature of Harrison’s work. For example, the earliest representation known today, the Eleusis amphora, was discovered in the 1954 excavations.

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\(^2\) As on the Berlin relief referenced above, note 19. Also common on smaller scale vase paintings, for examples see *LIMC* Athena 273, 551; *LIMC* ‘Gorgo, Gorgones’ 289, 293 (that also contains examples of more detailed beards), 331; *LIMC* Dionysos 311, *LIMC* Herakles 2003, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2033, *LIMC* Chimaira 25.

\(^3\) See the ‘goat-like’ beard on Zeus Meilichios, Athens, National Archaeological Museum 3329, pentelic marble votive relief (late fourth century BCE), H: 40cm, W: 23 cm; Mitropoulou 1977, 113.

\(^4\) As on the Rider Painter black figure Lakonian Kylix (ca. 550 BCE), Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cab. Med. 190; Typhon Painter black figure Lakonian kylix (ca. 550 BCE), Cerveteri, National Archaeological Museum 67658; Rider Painter black figure Lakonian kylix (ca. 550 BCE), Paris, Musée du Louvre E669; for other examples of Lakonian kylikes see Pipili (1987).

\(^5\) Mitropoulou 1977, 149; Ogden 2013, 155.

\(^6\) Ogden 2013, 158.
tions at Eleusis, some 26 years after Harrison’s death.\textsuperscript{32} Thus, this limitation comes not as a result of Harrison’s own analysis, but as a result of the more limited materials available to her. As the more recent discoveries differ from the bearded Zeus Meilichios both in terms of context and appearance, there is little reason for current scholarship to continue to believe that the reliefs cited by Harrison should serve as the connection between the perceived reality of the Montpellier snake and the origins of the iconographic motif. Instead, the range of beard styles present in the examples known today should be used to indicate that there is no single ‘original’ real snake that serves as the basis for the iconography of the snake, with or without the beard.

The more significant flaw in Harrison’s interpretation of the beard is her focus on its nature as a human attribute, as she claimed that its addition to serpentine figures is a visual indicator of a god transforming from human to serpentine form.\textsuperscript{33} A more recent study by Gourmelen considered the motif in a broader context by discussing bearded snakes associated with divine and heroic figures in general, not just in the context of Zeus Meilichios. Due to this wider perspective, Gourmelen concludes that the beard should be seen as an intentional adaptation of reality that serves a symbolic purpose and is used to denote certain deities or mythological figures.\textsuperscript{34} Gourmelen effectively reworks Harrison’s explanation for the origin of the motif to include the idea of intent. Where Harrison’s claims stemmed from what she believed to be more of an accidental occurrence as a representation of nature that later developed into a more meaningful iconographic motif, Gourmelen argued that the motif was intentionally used from its inception to infer specific characteristics of the serpentine figure. In this interpretation, the beard serves to emphasise the characteristics of the associated figure by indicating their ambivalent or dual nature.\textsuperscript{35} This interpretation is particularly well suited to Zeus Meilichios,

\textsuperscript{32} Mylonas 1955, 62–3.
\textsuperscript{33} Harrison 1903, 328.
\textsuperscript{34} Gourmelen 2012, 339.
\textsuperscript{35} Gourmelen 2012, 340.
who is characterised by his nature as a chthonic deity who upholds social norms and has the potential to bring prosperity to his worshippers.36 These aspects initially appear to contrast with one another. As a chthonic deity, he appears in the visage of a monstrously large, potentially dangerous serpent, similar to the creatures defeated by the mythological heroes, yet when he is appeased through sacrifice he ceases to be the monster he first appears to be. Instead, he functions as a bringer of wealth and reconciliation. This duality has been argued to be reflected in his euphemistic epithet, 

μελάνθιος (‘gentle’ or ‘merciful’), as the name expresses the idea that worshippers desired the god to be propitious.37 This is best expressed in the closing chapters of Xenophon’s Anabasis, in which Xenophon encounters the seer Euclidean who informs him that his recent financial woes are due to his failure to sacrifice to Zeus Meilichios.38 Once Xenophon resumes his sacrifices, he is soon the recipient of increased wealth.39 In this context, the beard serves as a visual expression of the god’s dual nature, as it creates the image of something that is not entirely what it may seem upon first glance.

However persuasive Gourmelen’s argument may seem, it must be considered against the fact that he followed Harrison’s identification of the Montpellier snake as the basis for the iconographic motif of the bearded snake.40 Despite what both scholars argue, it is impossible to know if a snake exists in reality from which the image of the bearded snake developed. That being said, the very minimal reasoning for the identification of the Montpellier snake causes Harrison’s argument of the beard as being a misrepresentation of the snake’s mandible to be just as unlikely. Alternatively, the addition of the beard should be considered as a symbolic emblem that has no basis in reality, as there is

37 Larson 2007, 21; Bradley 2011, 288.
38 Xen. An. 7.8.4.
39 Bradley (2011, 306) argues that the involvement of Zeus Meilichios should also be read as an implied expectation of Xenophon to be restored to Athens due to the god’s associations with the purification of those who kill their kin; Xen. An. 7.8.5–6.
40 Gourmelen 2012, 338.
virtually no evidence to support the contrary. The remainder of this article will address the meaning behind the addition of the beard in various contexts, viewing the beard as an intentional iconographic addition, and not an adaptation of reality.

**Bearded serpents in literature**

While Harrison’s argument is flawed by her explanation for the motif’s origin, her interpretation of what the beard came to symbolise, specifically an anthropomorphic deity, can be seen to be accurate in some contexts. However, such contexts are few in number and there is commonly more meaning behind the representation than simply a visual indicator of a theriomorphic deity. The best examples of such bearded theriomorphic gods, which upon first reading seem to support Harrison’s argument, come from later literary examples. One of the two bearded snakes described by Nonnus in his fifth century CE epic, the *Dionysiaca*, provides the clearest literary description of a bearded anguiform deity that possesses the ability to transform from human form into that of a serpent.  

In the epic there are two instances where a bearded serpent appears, both occurring at crucial moments within the narrative of Dionysos’ life and achievements. The first of these serpents appears in 6.155–68, as an alternate form of Zeus, who uses the serpentine form to sneak into Persephone’s bedchamber (Nonnus, *Dion. 6.155–68*):

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\text{Παρθένε Περσεφόνεια,} \\
\text{οú δ’ οú γάμον εύρεις ἄλυξαι,} \\
\text{ἀλλὰ δρακοντεῖοίσιν ἐνυμφεύθης ἱμεναῖος,} \\
\text{Ζεὺς οτὲ πουλυέλλικτος ἁμειβομένου προσώπου} \\
\text{νυμφίος ἰμερόντι δράκων κυκλούμενος ὀλίχῳ} \\
\text{εἰς μυχὸν ὀρφανοῖο διέστηξε παρθενεάων.}
\]

41 Nonnus, *Dion. 6.155–68*.  
42 Shorrock 2001, 7.
Ah, maiden Persephœnia! You could not find how to escape your mating! No, a dragon was your mate, when Zeus changed his face and came, rolling in many a loving coil through the dark to the corner of the maiden’s chamber, and shaking his hairy chaps: he lulled to sleep as he crept the eyes of those creatures of his own shape who guarded the door. He licked the girl’s form gently with wooing lips. By this marriage with the heavenly dragon, the womb of Persephone swelled with living fruit, and she bore Zagreus the horned baby, who by himself climbed upon the heavenly throne of Zeus and brandished lightning in his little hand, and newly born, lifted and carried thunderbolts in his tender fingers.  

The child, Zagreus, is later reborn as Dionysos after his death at the hands of the Titans, causing him to be considered as the ‘chthonian Dionysos’, whose rites were reportedly practised at night. This chthonic association reflects both the nature of his mother, Persephone, as well as the chthonic connotations of the serpentine form adopted by Zeus during this narrative. This particular version of the conception of Zagreus features two types of serpents that take on two vastly different roles. First, the anguiform and bearded Zeus;

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43 Nonnus, Dion. 6.155–68.  
44 Cook 1914, 398; Diod. Sic. 4.4.1
second, the guardian serpents who are not explicitly described as possessing beards, thus causing them to be seen as non-bearded. These non-bearded serpents are seen to be fulfilling one of the traditional roles of mythological pure serpents. They appear as divinely appointed guardians. Outside mythology, snakes are generally considered to be guardians of houses, sanctuaries, temples and tombs.\(^{45}\) In a mythological context, this role is expanded and serpents commonly serve as the protectors of specific objects and locations, such as the spring of Ares that is guarded by the Serpent of Ares. It is through this role as a guardian that the mythological serpent comes into conflict with a hero.

The quest or journey trope of a hero’s story frequently features the hero attempting to gain access to a specific location, such as Kadmos’ attempt to take water from the spring of Ares,\(^ {46}\) or to retrieve a specific object, such as Jason’s quest to obtain the Golden Fleece.\(^ {47}\) In literature, the guardian serpent fulfills a very specific function as it often serves as the final opponent to the hero’s quest. In the narrative trope discussed above the serpent is generally slain, or in the case of Herakles’ eleventh labour, avoided by the hero in order to obtain the object of his quest.\(^ {48}\) Even when the hero attempts to avoid direct conflict with the serpent, as Herakles does, the overall features and outcome of the narrative remain the same: the hero must find a way to retrieve an object or gain entrance into a place guarded by a monstrous serpent. Serpents such as the Serpent of Ares, the Serpent of Colchis and the Serpent of the Hesperides function in this role of divinely appointed guardians. They protect the objects and areas that are sacred to those who appointed them and

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46 Apollod. Bibl. 3.4.1; Ap. Rhod. Argon. 3.1179–82; Paus. 9.10.5; Ovid, Met. 3.28–94.
ward off unwelcome visitors. Essentially, the hero only comes into conflict with such serpents because he threatens the locations and objects they guard. It is these mythological guardian serpents that are on occasion presented as bearded. However, in the case of Nonnus' narrative, the reader is presented with examples of guardian serpents that are distinguished from the anguiform Zeus by their lack of a beard, effectively highlighting the lack of consistency with which the beard may be portrayed.

Nonnus’ narrative, quoted above, presents the reader with serpents that fulfill this role of divinely appointed guardians. The non-bearded snakes are intended by Demeter to be the protectors of Persephone, meaning they function in the same manner as those snakes described above.\(^49\) However, the narrative differs from the expected trope of the guardian serpent in that they do not come into conflict with a traditional mythological hero. Instead, Zeus usurps the role and form of a serpent in order to sneak past the non-bearded guardian serpents.\(^50\) It is only the inclusion of a beard on the anguiform Zeus that distinguishes the guardian serpents from the deity. However, the guardian serpents are only ever mentioned in passing, as Nonnus describes how Zeus took on their form. Their physical appearance is given little attention; therefore, it is unclear as to whether or not these particular snakes should be considered bearded. In contrast, Zeus’ transformation into a serpent is central to the narrative; thus, he is described in significant detail, including the addition of the beard. This beard on the serpentine Zeus can serve as a visual indicator of his nature as a theriomorphic god. However, when the context of the narrative is also taken into consideration, the meaning of the representation develops into something that contrasts him with the other serpents he is described as being alongside. It shows him to be different from ordinary snakes or even the guardian serpents, there is more to him than first meets the eye. In the case of this particular snake, one that is clearly described as an alternative

\(^50\) Nonnus, *Dion.* 6.156–60.
form of Zeus, that difference is his theriomorphic nature.

With this serpentine Zeus, it seems as if the bearded snakes in Nonnus’ Dionysiac would, at the most basic interpretation, support Harrison’s explanation of the beard as a marker of an anthropomorphic deity. However, the second bearded snake to appear has no such alternative form, suggesting there is more to the addition of the beard than simply an indicator of the god’s transformative capabilities. The next bearded snake appears in the second of two narratives that serve as the aetiology of wine. In this narrative, the reader is told that the grape vine originated as a drop of ichor that fell from Olympos. Dionysos discovered this heavenly vine after witnessing a large bearded snake drinking the juice from the grapes on the vine. As this passage functions as an aetiology, the liquid is heavily emphasised as it trickles out of the serpent’s mouth and stains its beard (Nonnus, Dion. 12.319–23):

άμφι δὲ μιν σκολήσι δράκων δινωτός ἀκάνθας
λαρὸν ἐυροθάμμαρος ἀμέλγετο νέκταρ ὀπώρης,
καὶ βλυσμαῖς γενέσθαι ποτὸν Βασχείον ἀμέλξας,
βότρυος οἰνωβέντος ἐπιστάζων πόμα λαμψῆ,
πορφυρή ὄασθάμη γι δράκων φοίνιξ ὑπήνη.

A serpent twisted his curving backbone about the tree, and sucked a strong draught of the nectar trickling from the fruit; when he had milked the Bacchic potation with his ugly jaws, the draught of the vine turned and trickled out of his throat, reddening the creature’s beard with purple drops.

Unlike the previous bearded snake described by Nonnus, the inclusion of a beard on this serpent does not serve to denote an anthropomorphic deity.

52 Nonnus, Dion. 12.319–23.
This serpent has no clear connection with a specific deity, until Dionysos decides to associate himself with the vine. Even then Dionysos does not directly associate himself with the serpent, but becomes connected with this snake indirectly, as both the snake and Dionysos become associated with the vine. In this particular context, the addition of the beard can be considered a means through which Nonnus emphasises the unusual and otherworldly nature of wine and the vineyard, as it shows the serpent to be a creature that does not exist in the real world. Instead it shows the serpent to be a creature from the realm of myth and gods.

The addition of the beard to these two snakes in the *Dionysiaca* presents a more nuanced reading of bearded serpents than simply being representative of theriomorphic gods. Here they reflect the themes of chaos and disorder that are apparent throughout the epic and underline the mythological nature of the narrative.\(^{53}\) When considering the *Dionysiaca* as a whole, these themes can be noted in the structure and content of the tale. The seemingly structureless narrative and the ‘stream of consciousness’ style employed by Nonnus aid in creating a world where the reader’s expectations are subverted.\(^{54}\) This sense of disorder is further strengthened by the frequent metamorphoses and the ever-changing gender roles that act as narrative devices showing that not even the expected norms of gender and humanity can be relied upon in this chaotic world crafted by Nonnus.\(^{55}\) This disrupted sense of reality is again expressed through the combining of animal and human features on the two bearded snakes. When the episode of Zeus’ transformation into a bearded snake is viewed as a single episode, removed from the context of the wider narrative, the addition of the beard can indeed be argued to be a sign of his transformative capabilities, as Harrison argued.\(^{56}\) However, when the beard-
ed snakes are viewed in the wider context of this world of subverted expectations and norms, the addition of the beard becomes a means through which Nonnus effectively links the seemingly ordinary serpents with the transformative and uncertain powers of the gods. Hence, they remain associated with divine power and specific deities, but they are not always seen as the anguiform embodiment of said gods.

This use of the beard to show a connection with the divine can also be seen in the bearded snake described in Nicander's Theriaca. Nicander's second century BCE text details many different types of venomous creatures, including snakes and scorpions, along with the remedies for the poisons of such creatures.⁵⁷ The inclusion of a bearded snake in this particular work may, at first, seem to support Harrison's claims regarding the origin of the motif by implying that the bearded snake was a naturally occurring creature. This is due to the Theriaca's apparent attempt to convey factual scientific observations and information. However, rather than being a purely factual scientific text, Nicander frequently incorporates poetic aspects into his descriptions and remedies.⁵⁸ This fusion of the real and poetic is particularly evident in his descriptions of several remedies where the specific ingredients and measurements seem to not matter as much as would be expected of an accurate scientific work.⁵⁹ Throughout the Theriaca, Nicander claims that ingredients that are notably exotic or difficult to obtain can be swapped for more easily obtainable herbs, as can be seen in 557–61, where items such as basil and marjoram can be used in place of the membranes of the brain of a domestic fowl. Thus, a certain degree of ambivalence appears to be favoured over scientific accuracy. The Theriaca presents the reader with a blend of everyday and exotic flora and fauna, reflecting Nicander's intentions as a poet to present something

son 1903, 328.
57 Gutzwiller 2007, 140.
58 Overduin 2009, 92.
beyond the ordinary.\textsuperscript{60}

The bearded snake stands out among the other various deadly snakes described by Nicander, not only due to its beard, but also because of its association with Παέων (Paeon), a cultic epithet of Apollo.\textsuperscript{61} This particular snake and its abilities are only briefly described (Nic. Ther. 438–47):

Φράζεο δε χλοαόντα δαις κύαινον τε δράκοντα, ών ποτε Παίηων λασίη ἑνεθρέψατο φηγή
Πηλώ ών νυφόντι Πελεθρόνιον κατά βήσαν.

ήτοι ον’ ἀγθαύος μὲν ἐεἰδεται, ἐν δὲ γενειψ
τρίστοιχοι ἐκάτερθε περιστιχόωσιν ὁδόντες
πίονα δ’ ἐν σκυσιόσιν ὑπ’ ὀδύματα, νέρθε δὲ πύγων
αῖεν ὑπ’ ἀνθεβεών χολοβαφος. οὐ μὲν ον’ αῦτος
ἐγχρίμψας ἠγνύνε καὶ ἴ ἐκπαγὰ λαεφθή
βληρον γὰρ μνός οἰα μυληβόρον ἐν χροὶ νύχμα
ἐειδεται ἄμαιςθέντος ὑπὸ χραντήρος ἁραιοῦ.

Learn and consider the green and bark-blue dragon, which once on a time the God of Healing fostered in a leafy oak upon snow-capped Pelion in the vale of Pelethronius. Radiant indeed does he appear, but in his jaw above and below are arrayed three rows of teeth; gleaming eyes are beneath his brows, and lower down beneath his chin there is ever a beard of yellow stain. Yet when he fastens on a man he does not hurt as other snakes, even though his rage be violent, for the wound upon the skin of one whose blood is drawn by his slender fang seems slight as that of a meal-nibbling mouse.\textsuperscript{62}

This snake is unique among Nicander’s serpents in terms of its abilities, na-

\textsuperscript{60} Overduin 2009, 86.
\textsuperscript{61} Nic. Ther. 439.
\textsuperscript{62} Nic. Ther. 438–47.
ture, appearance and divine association. The association with Apollo Paeon and the serpent’s inability to cause serious harm shows this serpent to be of two natures. Much like the guardian snakes of mythology, this bearded serpent possesses the ability to be both a threatening creature and a protective symbol. It threatens violence in its attempts to cause pain by biting, yet its connection to the god of healing implies the ability to overcome such pain.

It is through this seemingly contradictory idea that this bearded serpent is shown to possess a level of duality. It is a symbol of both the danger of a snake, as well as of the healing of the bite from such a creature. This is further implied by its inclusion among an array of other deadly serpents. Nicander makes use of other snakes such as the cerastes, and various types of vipers in order to vividly describe the types of wounds and pain snakes can inflict. By presenting this particular snake as bearded, Nicander visually distinguishes it from the ordinary snakes in the Theriaca. The beard shows this snake to be something different and more closely associated with mythological serpents than the ‘garden-variety’ snakes it is described alongside.

**Hybrid bearded snakes**

While the beards of anguiform and pure serpents can be seen to represent a transformative capability or indicate a divine association, the same cannot be said for the numerous monstrous serpent hybrids that are also shown with beards. These hybrids are often shown with a serpent as a small part of their anatomy, such as the tail of the Chimaira. As these monstrous creatures do not have an alternative human form, the beard cannot be considered to be an anthropomorphic attribute to the same extent as it is in the context of anguiform deities. Unlike the bearded pure serpents discussed above, these hybrids

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63 Cf. examples of Nicander’s descriptions of other serpents: the viper, 128–44; the asp, 161–89; the sepedon, 320–33.
64 Ogden 2013, 345.
65 Nic. Ther. 258–81.

Jaimie Mundoch  Reddening the creature’s beard with purple drops
do not function in the role of a guardian. Rather than guarding the object of a hero’s quest, the hybrid creature often appears as the object of the quest itself. This is the case with Kerberos, who is taken from the underworld as the object of Herakles’ twelfth labour. Such creatures are defined by their role as the mythological opponents of heroes, albeit in a slightly different context to the pure guardian serpents. Where the pure serpent functions as a divinely appointed guardian, the hybrid functions in a role that is defined by its bestial and threatening nature. They more commonly serve solely as the rampaging beasts that must be defeated for order to be restored. Kerberos stands as an exception to this due to his role as the guardian of the entrance to the underworld. In this particular instance, the hybrid functions as a divinely appointed protector that is brought into conflict with a hero due to this specific role.68

In the context of these hybrid creatures, the addition of the beard to the creature’s serpentine attribute may be seen as a way in which the artist further emphasises the creature’s ambivalent nature as a hybrid. These serpents and their beards are not the central aspect of the creature; rather they are one small aspect of a composite of various features. The beard, as a human feature on an animal, further indicates that such creatures are an amalgam of various different ‘everyday’ animals that, when compiled into one creature, become dangerous mythological beasts. The ambivalence in their appearance lies in the fact that they are not one single creature, but a collection of various different features. The Chimaira, for example, appears as the body of a lion, with a goat protruding from its back and a tail in the form of a serpent, which is on occasion bearded.69 The beard is one more ordinary feature that aids in creating the image of a monstrous hybrid. That is not to say that in the context of bearded hybrid serpents the beard cannot be read as an indicator of a divine connection, as these creatures do, on occasion, have an association

67 Apollod. Bibl. 2.5.12; Hom. Od. 11.623–6; see further Gantz 1993, 413–6; LIMC Herakles 2595, 2603, 2614; LIMC Kerberos 15.
68 Ogden 2013, 104.
69 LIMC Chimaira 3, 22, 25, 77a, 87, 108; LIMC Chimaira (in Etruria) 34, 35, 36, 39.
with a divinity.\textsuperscript{70} However, this connection is less explicit than in the context of the bearded pure, serpents discussed above. In both of these contexts the addition of the beard essentially serves to distinguish such serpents from snakes that occur in nature. It establishes such serpents as creatures that function in a mythological context, particularly as an opponent of heroes, be it as a protector of the sacred or as a rampaging beast.

\textbf{Concluding remarks}

Due to the complex nature of the snake and the many different contexts in which one may appear, it is simply not possible to give a single blanket explanation for the addition of the beard, as Jane Harrison attempted to do. The beard is seen on pure serpents, such as the Serpent of Colchis, on monstrous hybrids, such as Kerberos, and on the serpentine forms of specific deities, such as Zeus Meilichios. These are just three of the contexts in which the motif is used; the other contexts and their unique meanings are a matter for future discussion. In the context of anguiform gods, the beard may imply the creature’s anthropomorphic nature, as Harrison suggested. However, in the context of pure and hybrid serpents, the beard can be seen to emphasise the mythological and bestial aspects of the creature. The very inclusion of a human feature on these creatures causes them to be removed from the ‘real’ world. It shows them to be neither wholly human nor entirely bestial. The corruption of this human attribute through its use on an animal thus becomes an emblem of monstrosity and serves to clearly mark such creatures as something out of the ordinary standing outside the boundaries of civilisation and order.

This interpretation contrasts with Harrison’s claim that this amalgamation of human and bestial features, when presented on any pure serpent, shows the creature to be a representation of a theriomorphic deity. While this is true

\textsuperscript{70} cf. the Chimaira, child of Echidna: Hes. \textit{Theog.} 319–25.
for some figures, such as Zeus Meilichios and Nonnus’ anguiform Zeus, such anguiform gods should be seen as the exception, not the rule. In the case of pure serpents depicted with a beard, the additional feature more often implies the dual or ambivalent nature of the creature, rather than explicitly serving as a marker of a theriomorphic god. This concept builds on the common role of the serpent, with or without the beard, as a guardian or protector. This role is one that is defined by duality. When the serpent serves as the protector of a specific location or object it only comes into direct conflict with a hero as a result of this protective role. Thus the serpent only becomes a threatening creature when the object or location it guards becomes threatened. By creating an amalgamation of serpent and man, the addition of the beard serves as a visual indicator of the creature’s duality, reflecting its nature as a threatening and protective creature. The addition of the beard to both pure and hybrid serpents adds another dimension to what is already a complex animal. It marks out mythological beasts that stand as potentially threatening and wild creatures that may also be closely associated with a deity. In its most basic interpretation, the inclusion of a beard can be said to denote a mythological creature due to the motif having no clear natural precedent, despite Harrison’s argument to the contrary. It is in essence a stylistic and symbolic feature added to the image of the snake in order to visually represent the nuanced characteristics of the serpent and its associated figures.
Bibliography


