Saints and Snakes: Death, Fertility, and Healing in Modern and Ancient Greece and Italy

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In the modern village of Markopoulo on the island of Kephallonia in Greece, a strange migratory phenomenon occurs annually in the period 6-15 August when small, harmless snakes invade the local church dedicated to the Panagia (Virgin Mary). The snakes are said to appear on 6 August and disappear after the Dormition festival dedicated to the Panagia, which is celebrated on 15 August. They are thought to be healing, and several pilgrims come to be touched by the snakes, particularly on the eve of 15 August. In the Italian village of Cocullo, situated in the Abruzzi in the territory of the ancient Marsi, who were renowned for their magic arts and power over serpents, we meet a similar phenomenon: The Feast of Serpents in Cocullo is celebrated on the first Thursday in May. It is dedicated to Saint Domenico, patron saint of the village, who is credited with miraculous powers of healing, and pilgrims arrive at Cocullo to be cured on the Feast of Saint Domenico. In both villages, the snakes that are related to the dead protectors are also thought to signify good luck and prosperity.¹

The article will present the two festivals on which I have conducted fieldwork and compare them with ancient materials, since snakes also had an important healing function in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. They were also related to dead persons and thought to promote fertility.

¹ Since 1983, I have conducted several periods of fieldwork in the Mediterranean, mainly in Greece and Italy where I have also conducted research on religious festivals since 1987, cf. Håland 1990, 2007a. The topics discussed in the following article are examined there as well. I carried out fieldwork on several festivals at Kephallonia in 1992, mainly in Markopoulo and at the main sanctuary dedicated to Agios (Saint) Gerasimos. My fieldwork in Cocullo was carried out in 1987. In addition to the following descriptions of my fieldwork, this study is also based on secondary sources describing the festivals, mainly D. Loukatos for Markopoulo and A. di Nola for Cocullo, see infra. Concerning the island of Tinos (see infra) I have carried out fieldwork there on several occasions over the years (1990, 1993-1998, 2004-2010), while I attended the festival dedicated to Agia (Saint) Marina in 1992. The spelling of modern and ancient Greek follows the rules of the Nordic Library, Athens. Greek names are not Latinized with the letter c which does not exist in the Greek alphabet.
The article will focus in particular on the ambivalent relationships of the snake to gender, female/male, birth/death, and the idea of the snake as a symbol of transformation and boundary crossing.

**The Snakes of Markopoulo**

The village of Markopoulo is situated on the side of a mountain with a panoramic view over the bay. The village is famous for a phenomenon which coincides with the festival dedicated to the *Panagia*. Every year a strange migratory phenomenon occurs ca. 6-15 August: large numbers of small and harmless snakes appear around the church dedicated to the *Panagia*, which is built on a ravine. The snakes are said to appear on 6 August and to actually enter from small cavities in the Catholic styled bell tower situated on the edge of the ravine on the way down to the church.² Some people say that since the earthquake in 1953, they have entered from the stones in the same area, because the bell tower fell down and was rebuilt then. The snakes have a black mark like a cross on their heads. On Kephallonia most people talk about the “Snakes of the *Panagia*.” The pilgrims who come to the village during the celebration also call them the “Snakes of the *Panagia*” and pick them up without fear. In Markopoulo they call the church, “the Church of *Panagia* of the Snakes” (cf. Loukatos 1951, fig. 9). The snakes creep into the church, and wriggle up to the large silver-clad icon of the *Panagia* inside. According to some, this is a miracle, but others claim that the village is simply a way-station for the snakes, a migratory path to warmer climates. For the locales their appearance signifies good luck and prosperity. In connection with this, one may mention that according to the Greek scholar, D. Loukatos (1951), who was born on the island, echoing the older Kephallonean writer and scholar, Spyros Tassis, the snakes did not appear in August 1940, thus predicting the coming catastrophe: the German occupation during the Second World War. Others

² The festival is discussed by Loukatos in particular, 1981, p. 119-126, cf. 1951, p. 151-168. When I visited Kephallonia, I talked with people all over the island to learn their views regarding the snakes, including the inhabitants of Markopoulo, pilgrims coming to the festival, people working in the church, and people working at the town hall in Argostoli, the capital of Kephallonia. This is how I work in the field - by making enquiries of as many different people as possible.
say they did not appear at all during the occupation, nor in 1953, the year of a disastrous earthquake. According to some (Tsotakou-Karbelē 1991, 171-72), the snakes appear on 15 August, the same day as the *Panagia* (i.e. the celebration of the *Dormition* of the *Panagia*) either after the service or the celebrations which follow that evening. According to A. Tsotakou-Karbelē (ibid.), the snakes slither on people, and, in front of the surprised visitors, harmless snakes large and small enter the church, creep up to the iconostasis, slither around on the walls and circulate among the people, pass over feet, and let people touch them and take them into their hands without fear. If they do not come out one year, “things will not go well” (i.e. “*den to ’choun se kalo*”).

The above summary is based on information from secondary sources and various people from Kephallonia, particularly Markopoulo and Argostoli, the capital (cf. n1 f.). When I visited the village in 1992, however, the snakes were already present several days before the celebration. I arrived in Markopoulo on 6 August, the day of the Transfiguration, when the snakes usually start to come out. A poster at the bell tower announces the importance of the place both in Greek and English (Fig. 1):

> Virgin Mary’s Snakes. For centuries now these snakes appear [sic] at the foot of the old Bell Steeple from 6th to the 15th of August.

The church warden told me that the snakes would start to come out at 3 PM that afternoon. Afterwards, they would appear every evening when it became cool. Other locals reported that in the past they were out and creeping into the church all day. If someone carried them out, they returned to the church by themselves. When showing me around in the church, the church warden told the usual story that the snakes always appear; only twice did they not appear: in 1940 (the Second World War) and 1953 (the year of the earthquake). The icon depicting the *Epitaphios* (funeral) of the *Panagia* is not as important as the silver-coated icon depicting the *Panagia* and Child, which is displayed because it is a votive gift, according to the locals. The most important icon, however, on which the snakes especially like to slither is kept behind the iconostasis, where it will remain during
the festival, although people are permitted to enter and pay devotions to the icon. The church
warden sells postcards depicting this icon, the Panagia and Child, decorated with snakes (Fig. 2).

Visitors arrive continuously. Most of them are in groups of two and three. When the snakes
arrive, they are kept in jam pots, but according to the locals only a few appear this early. Most come
on the Panagia, which is 15 August. I also learned that on the eve of the festival, pilgrims bring
snakes into the church from 8 PM until 6 AM, because the act is thought to bring good luck.

In 1992 only four snakes appeared because of the traffic, which frightens them according to
the older black-clad woman caring for them in the church. She had put two of them into two jam
pots displayed on a table next to the candelabra where people put candles; the others (also in jam
pots) were kept on the altar table behind the iconostasis.

During the liturgy on 13 August, the priest officiates behind the iconostasis, with one pot on
each side. Everybody can see the two pots, but most people are preoccupied with the snakes in the
two pots outside, which are displayed by the woman who cares for the snakes in the church. Several
have video cameras, but most take pictures and touch the snakes. It seems that we have two
different rituals: one official Orthodox and the other popular. Another village, Arginia, also takes
pride in the snakes, but there they do not appear by themselves, according to people from
Markopoulo. Both villages compete with their snakes on the eve of the festival, when people in
Arginia display a sign over the road announcing their festival. Regardless of the competition, most
people coming from Argostoli do not take the road leading up to Arginia, but continue on to
Markopoulo, which is also the winner on the following day.

The healing aspect of the festival is announced as soon as one passes the bell tower, by a
handicapped person selling pilgrim-candles. The path leading down to the church is lined with

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3 One of my informants stated the reason is probably that many snakes were killed by bulldozers when the bell tower
was rebuilt after the earthquake. Furthermore, the path is now covered with asphalt, and the snakes used to live among
the stones (although most of them lived in the bell tower as they still do). According to the late folklorist, Maria
Michaēl-Dede (personal communication) who published her account of the festival around 1975, there were 10 snakes
when she attended it.

4 Maria Michaēl-Dede also emphasizes that in Markopoulo they appeared by themselves, during her visit, and if
someone moved them from the icon, they returned immediately. In the other village (Arginia), however, people had to
fetch the snakes.
shops and booths, as a number of sellers travel from festival to festival, one of them a priest selling amulets. The volume of several cassette players is turned up high, playing the most popular disco music. The local priest is occupied blessing the tombs at the nearby cemetery. The pilgrims line up at the entrance to the court of the church, waiting their turn to enter. Outside, a begging mother has brought her handicapped child in a wheelchair. They represent the many beggars travelling from one festival to the next. Because of the crowd, the icon depicting the Epitaphios of the Panagia is moved into the court. After offering their lighted candles, people busy themselves with taking photos of the snakes. They then queue up to proskynēma, i.e. to perform the set of devotions a pilgrim makes upon entering the church, particularly the devotions before the silver-coated icon, in front of which all the tamata (metal plaques depicting a vow or request, which are votive offerings) are found. Next to the icon is a pot with basil, the Panagia’s special plant, along with other green herbs. People are eager to fetch several leaves, since they are considered to be effective amulets. All the three entrances to the church are open, and the pilgrims enter and leave continuously. The liturgy lasts until 10 PM, and the snakes in the jam pots decorating both sides of the most holy icon are the focus: the officiating priest holds one of the snakes in the same hand with which he holds his sceptre and a holy cloth (Fig. 3). Meanwhile, the pilgrims are busy with their cameras and video cameras. Many file to kiss the priest’s hand and be blessed. During the solemn liturgy inside the church, many people perform their own popular rituals outside, the most important of which involves displaying and posing with the snakes, while the photographers are busy taking pictures. Inside, an old man kisses the snake hanging from the priest’s hand, makes the sign of the cross, and is blessed by the priest. At the end of the liturgy the local priest photographs the two visiting priests as well, particularly the oldest and most important priest on the island. His final speech contains all the “historical” elements, from the ancient Olympic heritage to present-days’ “Skopje” (i.e. the Greek name of the new Macedonian Republic of 1992), Cyprus and Epirus, the most important topics generally emphasized in the speeches of the nationalistic Greek Orthodox Church. Many

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5 He might also be a monk, since in general Greek priests do not sell amulets. I thank E. Alexakēs for this information.
listeners swallow this obvious propaganda whole.6 The service ends around 11 PM, but newcomers are still arriving then, carrying their candles to perform devotions in front of the icon.

On 15 August, and as in other places after the harvest and threshing of the grain, we find the usual offerings of bread, but also wine and olive oil, neatly laid in huge baskets which are placed on the steps in front of the altar (Fig. 4). Several huge loaves of bread, decorated with white or yellow candles (to be lighted during the service) and flowers are placed on a table along with the usual written “letters,” (chartia) paraklēseis (prayer or supplication papers), on which are inscribed names of the dead to be blessed by the priest at the end of the liturgy. These letters are also written for the health of living family members, etc. Of course, pieces of the bread offerings are always given to the people when a liturgy takes place in the church. (The small loaves of bread that have been blessed are called prosphoro, pl. prosphora. This is bread that is “offered” to Christ). When a saint’s feast is held there are, in addition to the liturgical bread, offerings of oil, wine, and larger loaves of bread (called artos, pl. artoi, as opposed to psōmi, which is the term used for everyday bread), which are brought to the church to be blessed.7 The pieces of the artoi are distributed to the people after the liturgy as antidōro. Thus, according to the Christian faith, these are not “first fruit” offerings. On the other hand, artos was also used for Demetrian sanctuaries such as at Eleusis (cf. IG I² 76), especially after harvest and the threshing of the grain, and one may argue that this ritual has been absorbed by the new Christian religion, particularly when discussing the different levels of meanings given to a specific symbol.8

The service starts at 8 AM. Several beggars and handicapped persons are busy in front of the church, since the festival is an important income source for them. There is also enthusiastic activity in connection with two snakes, and the photographer is using a camera which can develop the

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6 This is not unusual during liturgies within the Greek Orthodox Church. Also on Tinos in 2009, the priest ended his final speech on the eve of 15 August, by reclaiming all the “missing parts” of Greece, and the congregation which was almost asleep, “woke up” and applauded enthusiastically. The official Orthodox Church and the nation-state are two institutions that traditionally have a very close connection in Greece, i.e. in a patriotic sense.
7 Pilgrims arriving at Tinos generally dedicate oil, bread, and flowers, but they also bring wine to the church in return for prayers and blessings, which are often sought for ill or dead relatives.
8 There is no space to give the whole argument here, see therefore Håland 2007a, chap. 5-6 (and chap. 4n.30 cf. chap. 3 and Stewart 1991) and my forthcoming b, chap. 5, cf. also 2006. IG I² 76 is also discussed by Brumfield 1981.
photographs right away. Inside the church and in front of the iconostasis, people holding their pilgrim-candles are queuing up to pay their devotions to the icon, while the officiating priest says a prayer in front of the two jam pots, each of which contains a snake. The liturgy ends after the Eucharist at 11 AM., but people are still occupied with the snakes. It is particularly important to put them on the icon and take pictures. The snakes leave the next afternoon around 6 PM, according to my informants.

The aforementioned account from my own fieldwork in 1992 is not very different from D. Loukatos’s, although he visited the festival in 1923 and obviously had the opportunity to see many more snakes than I did. According to Loukatos (1951/1981):

When I first went to Markopoulo, I was fifteen years old. I already had a regular pew next to my father, who was a church cantor. He and I made up the right-hand side of the choir. The left was composed of Memas Leukokoilos and Karabias Georgopolous, from Mousata. I was happy for days that I would finally go to the famous village of Elios, which according to local legend was the home town of the famous traveller, Marco Polo (when Kephallonia was under Venetian (Italian) rule), and where the snakes came out.

Loukatos continues:

We entered the church, which was all lit up and full of people. The emotion shown by the womenfolk who were inside the church made me forget about the snake question for a few minutes; then suddenly they reminded me of it themselves. Two, three, five, seven, many snakes wriggled up and down the gold-painted wooden-carved reliefs of the iconostasis, the pillars, and the side doors. I looked at them bewildered for a long time; I was not thinking about going to my regular seat. A church warden came close and showed me a snake he was holding in his hand. It was sizeable enough to have wrapped itself around his arm like a bracelet. He moved it toward me so that I could caress it. I mustered some courage and placed my finger on its little head. Its skin was like velvet, its eyes shiny and it had a small mark like a cross on its forehead. Every now and then it opened its mouth and poked out a threadlike tongue. I was told that if I had looked more carefully, I would have seen a small cross on its tip.

My own informants gave me the same information, and I must confess I did not verify it myself, although one of the snakes crept on my hands.

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9 The reason is that the important festival dedicated to the patron saint of the island, Gerasimos, starts the same evening.
10 Elios (cf. elia, i.e. olive). Kephallonia is one of the three main areas for olive growing in Greece.
11 Loukatos 1951, p. 151 f. discusses the Italian influence in the island and village from the 7th century CE, but he also indicates eventual Greek origins for the name of the village. We have much evidence of the snakes from approx. 15th century CE onward (i.e. from traveler’s accounts).
According to Loukatos the last snakes came at the end of the liturgy on 14 August. On 15 August they circulated during the liturgy, as during my own visit to the church nearly seventy years later, although there were only four of them compared to the many snakes he apparently saw. According to Loukatos (1951, 158), his informants reported that the snakes would disappear within forty days. As during my own visit, people kept them in closed bottles and glasses, preferably in jam pots. He also states that if a driver happened to kill one of the snakes that had crept into the road, the Panagia would visit the killer in a dream and demand a tama. This is the reason that one may find several silver or gold-plated ex-votos representing snakes in the church.

Loukatos (1951) ends his description, by asking:

What can one say about these snakes? If one believes in miracles, there is nothing to be said. But if one tries to find a natural explanation, one might assume that they are a non-poisonous variety of snake (let the herpetologists determine which) which thrived and multiplied in a region, first because the climate suited them, and second because the villagers never harmed them. Through heredity they became accustomed to man, as man did to them, so they do not fear each other. It is possible that around the 15 August festivities, their mating and egg-laying season occurs. That fact, together with the sounds of ringing bells and the noises from the crowd, may make them come out of their nests. Trustingly and without protest, they allow themselves to be handled by humans.

The weather is very changeable during the first days of August; these days are therefore considered a propitious time for weather forecasting. On 6 August, the day of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, the snakes appear in Markopoulo, and they disappear after the celebration of 15 August. In connection with that, Loukatos’ possible explanation regarding the season and a probable mating season for the snakes is interesting. The snake is also connected with the Panagia, since her heavenly sign is inscribed next to the Dragon (serpent), according to R. Triomphe (1989, 349).

According to people from Markopoulo this phenomenon is unique in the world, but it is not, since I have visited a similar festival in the Italian village of Cocullo.

From the Snakes of Cocullo to the Ancient World
Cocullo is situated in the Abruzzi in the old territory of the ancient Marsi. The Marsi claimed descent from Marsia, son of the witch Kirke, and they were renowned of old for their magic arts and their power over serpents. To this day, their descendants at Cocullo claim power over serpents, and hereditary immunity from serpent-bites (Fig. 5).12

The Festa di San Domenico Abate in Cocullo takes place on the first Thursday in May. It is celebrated in honour of Saint Domenico, patron saint of the village. Some areas in the Abruzzo were constantly threatened by snakes. Before his death in 1031, however, Domenico is said to have purged the fields of this threat. He is credited with miraculous powers: of healing the bites of dogs and serpents, but also hydrophobia and toothache, and pilgrims from all parts of Italy come to Cocullo to be cured on the Feast of Serpents, or Feast of Saint Domenico. On his departure from Cocullo he left his tooth as a token of his covenant with the faithful, and this, together with a mule’s shoe he once dropped in Cocullo, have been venerated as miracle-working relics ever since.

The festival is popularly called “La festa dei serpari,” which means The Feast of the Snake Charmers or Snake-Men. Prior to the festival, Cocullo snake charmers extract the snake’s teeth. Before the procession, the snakes are fed with milk kept in containers with crusca. The central action of the feast is the procession of the snake charmers in honour of Saint Domenico. The Serpari walk before and behind the statue of Saint Domenico (Fig. 6), carrying the coils of live serpents round their necks and arms and in their bare hands. The statue is also covered with snakes. The procession traverses the village, and serpents great and small are hung about the saint and coiled on his stand. The male population stationed along the route do homage by throwing live serpents to their patron saint. During the procession many believers approach the statue, touch it, kneel down and pray; some hang money over a colored ribbon fixed to the pedestal of the statue. Through the healing power of the saint, people are symbolically protected for another year.

12 For the festival at Cocullo and its meanings, see di Nola 1980. See also Håland 1990, a shorter version is described in my 1993. I visited the festival in 1987 when carrying out my fieldwork on seven religious festivals in Italy in connection with my M.A. thesis.
From this short account of the festival at Cocullo, I wish to draw attention to the following themes, which parallel topics in the modern Greek festival and also ancient realities. Like the Greek festival at Markopoulo, the festival at Cocullo is officially a saint’s feast for the dead protector of society. The saint cult in itself represents both a death cult and a fertility cult, because the person was born as a saint in the consciousness of the people by her or his death, or later. The concept of the saint evolved from the cult of the ancient heroes and heroines, traditionally represented as snakes in the ancient world (cf. Plut. *Cleom.* 39). Further, the Cocullo-festival is also celebrated on the passing from winter to spring, while the feast at Markopoulo takes place after harvest and the threshing of the grain, which is indicated by the bread offerings from the pilgrims, and announces the passage from summer to winter. In Cocullo, the central act is the procession through the village, which thereby is purified before the new season. In the procession, snakes are key symbols.

In Cocullo, the procession signifies the transition from winter to summer. In the festivals of the ancient world, the processions also purified the community for the approaching period. Regardless of whether this was a new season or not, the festival always signified the transition to something new. Festivals marking seasonal transitions such as the time just before sowing, sprouting, and harvest were particularly important within the agricultural year (cf. Håland 2007a). Other examples are the annual celebrations which were held on a god’s, goddess’s or the Roman emperor’s birthday. But other occasions, such as the new moon sacrifice, were also important.

The different symbols, particularly the snakes, can be related to other cultic aspects of ancient cults, such as cults of the exceptional in nature, natural forces, fertility, and healing. Therefore we are presented with different layers of cults, both in Markopoulo and in the modern festival of Cocullo. There are also many legends connected with Saint Domenico’s stay at Cocullo. There he

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13 There are theological differences in the way in which Mary is viewed in the Orthodox and Catholic churches. In the Orthodox Church, Mary is not seen as immaculately conceived and bodily assumed into heaven. In Orthodoxy, the virgin remains a human intercessor and a Mother. Cf. Dubisch 1995, p. 236.
14 Bread offerings are also important at Cocullo, where they are carried in the procession, and they have been seen as sexual symbols. See di Nola 1980; Håland 1990.
showed his healing powers, performed miracles, and promised immunity from the bite of venomous reptiles and mad dogs.

In the ancient Roman world, people replaced garlands on the imperial statues in order to obtain the old ones as remedies for diseases,\(^\text{15}\) in much the same way that modern people are eager to fill their handkerchiefs with “Saint Domenico’s Earth” from a heap of soil in one of the recesses in the church. A similar ritual is found at the festival of the Panagia at the island of Tinos in Greece, where pilgrims take holy earth from the hole where a miraculous icon was found (Håland 2007a, 2011). Here, people are also eager to touch or take parts of the altar and pulpit decorations (built on a platform) after the ceremony: they simply tear the whole construction down. In Cocullo, the snakes are kept in the homes of the snake charmers to ensure an ample supply for the following year: the belief being that the more numerous the snakes, the more abundant the harvest, thus paralleling the situation in Markopoulo, although here they are kept in the church.

Can we assume that the cult of intermediaries, such as the Panagia in Markopoulo and Domenico in Cocullo, represent two instances of a long-lasting mentality (the “structures of consciousness,” “the psychological equipment,” “the mental outlook,” i.e. the mentalité; cf. Le Goff 1974; Håland 2005), concept, or belief system which was employed by the new Christian ideology in order to be accepted by people? In other words, can we assume that the cult of an intermediary (living or dead) between men and the supernatural is a mentality - that the worship of holy men and women is marked by continuity and thus represents a mentality? If so, what has this to do with the cult of snakes? I have argued elsewhere (Håland 2004, 2008) for the importance of the death cult with regards to holy men and women, which is apparent in the ancient cult of heroes and the modern practice of sainthood in Christian areas, suggesting that it is related to fundamental beliefs, or long-lasting mentalities in the Mediterranean. In addition, rituals connected with snakes have traditionally been important, both in modern and ancient (particularly ancient Greek) contexts, as I will show in the next part of the article. Although I do not have any references regarding ancient

\(^{15}\) *Hist. Aug. Caracalla* 5.7. Emperor 211-217 CE.
antecedents in present-day Markopoulo, the cult of the snakes in that particular area (cf. n11) might very well have been a reality in the pre-Christian era as well. The modern rituals might therefore illustrate old rituals and symbols which are “reinvented” or “reused” in the service of the new Christian ideology to make it more easily accepted by the local common people. We have many other instances of ideological reuse of old popular symbols in the service of Christian ideology, such as water rituals (Håland 2007b), thus illustrating the interdependence of doctrinal and local religion as well (cf. Stewart 1991).

In Markopoulo, the officiating priest clearly illustrates the importance of the snakes, which decorate his staff during the liturgy on 15 August. The importance of the snakes is also emphasized by the German priest and scholar, Heinz Warnecke, in his lecture of 17 August, 1992, given in the library of Argostoli. As at Cocullo, where they have related the snakes to Paul (cf. di Nola 1980), Warnecke relates them to the same episode in Acts (28.3-6) when Paul is not hurt by the snake, although that story was not set in Markopoulos nor at Cocullo, but in Malta.16 As in Markopoulo, the saint’s feast at Cocullo represents two different belief systems which are partly autonomous, partly merged: the ecclesiastical liturgy takes place in its own right and independently of the content of the folk festival, and the survivals of the pre-Christian belief. Simultaneously, there are places where the two belief systems are unified, which might be an attempt to win the infidel over to “the true belief” more easily. In Cocullo, the local priest leads the mass following the rules of the Catholic Church, but he also includes special prayers to the saint. At the same time, people perform their own rituals in the church. These do not belong to the ecclesiastical liturgy, and are carried out as if the liturgy is not taking place. Examples might include the collecting of “Saint Domenico’s Earth” or ringing the sanctuary bell with their teeth, thus ensuring freedom from the toothache. The fusion of the two levels or belief systems, the ecclesiastical and the popular, is justified in the procession and in the various rituals. They are not denied, but are, on the contrary, considered with

16 The German researcher claims that Paul might have been on Kephallonia, because there are no snakes in Malta. He also sees relations between the Markopoulo festival and the following festival dedicated to Ag. Gerasimos i.e. on 16 August.
approval by the local ecclesiastics. Consequently, one might argue that the feast has never been subordinated to an ecclesiastically-led supremacy, despite the fact that, according to the letter written by Pope Gregory the Great to Saint Augustine in 601 CE, they should purge the old temples of “the cult of the devil” and consecrate them “to the true God,” while continuing to allow the people sacrifice. In brief, if you treat them softly, they will “more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit” (Wolf 1966, 103, cf. Bower 1897, chap. 6). Consequently, the fusion was supposed to occur consciously to win over the pagans, but it has not necessarily worked this way in practice.

The same pope, despite his own Christian ideology’s “thou shalt love thy neighbour,” once denied a monk burial as the result of his own mentality’s (or long-lasting pre-Christian belief system’s) need for honour and dignity. I would also like to mention the miraculous power attributed to the saints, which differs from the strict ideologies of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but is very important within popular cultures. This power is connected with magic and healing. The relationship between these two spheres, which represent two different religious “levels” or systems, might be seen as that between a new ideology and an older belief system or mentality which nevertheless are interdependent (cf. Stewart 1991; Håland 2007a). Accordingly, the festivals present rituals, which some within the official Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches still consider to be pagan. On the other hand, the festivals are situated within the religious and cosmological contexts of the same Churches, and they make extensive use of Catholic and Orthodox symbolism, faith and ritual practices. For the faithful among the common people as well as several priests who participate in the rituals, the popular rituals are as Christian as the official Catholic and Orthodox ideologies (see Håland forthcoming a for another example).

Although for people from the north of Europe snakes may seem a strange phenomenon to find in a religious cult, the house snake is a familiar figure in European folklore, and real, harmless

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snakes may still be seen being fed in houses in Balkan villages. The house snake has traditionally been important in Greek environments, such as in Thessaly.

From this detailed or “thick” description of two contemporary rituals, which has taken into account why and how they might have survived, I will proceed to the ancient context, in which snakes were also viewed as possessing an important connection to death, fertility, and healing. By seeing the modern rituals from below – or “from the grassroots” – as I have tried to do, they may perhaps help illuminate similar ancient popular rituals, since our ancient source material is very scattered.

**Ancient Snakes and their Cult**

In the earliest period of Greek history, the Minoan age, there were snake cults, as is illustrated by idols representing Goddesses with snakes. Snake worship has traditionally been a special case in Greece, and according to the Greek scholar Eleutherios Alexakēs (personal communication) it is the most important cultic animal in Greece. The reason is that there have always been a lot of snakes in Greece; it is the most common animal.

In the ancient world, snakes were a part of the household, a part of everyday life. They were commonly worshipped and often represented among the domestic animals, since people did not generally keep just dogs and cats, as today, but snakes as well. They were also hunters of mice and rats, as well as guardians of one’s health.

For man, the most unsettling creature is the snake; it appears without warning and vanishes as swiftly as it comes. In ancient Greece, it often came to lick libation leftovers. The snake is particularly important in the Athenian cult, since Kekrops, the first mythical king of Athens, was half-snake, half-man (cf. Fig. 7). His three daughters were entrusted by Athena with the carrying of a sacred basket (i.e. *kistē*), which they were forbidden to open. Aglauros and Hersē could not

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18 Alexakēs 2005 discusses the “snake-woman spirit” of the house, while Alexakēs 2008, p. 174 f. discusses the snake in connection with protection and fertility rites in the modern Greek context. See particularly Knight 1995, which is a significant study for the importance of the snake and its symbolism, while Küster 1913 treats the ancient Greek context.
restrain their curiosity; one night, by the light of Athena’s lamp, they opened the holy basket. Inside they saw the mysterious child Erichthonios and one or two snakes. In horror, they leapt to their deaths off the steep northern slope of the Akropolis (Apollod. 3.14.6; cf. Paus. 1.18.2; Eur. Ion. 269-274, cf. 18-24). Erichthonios was begotten by Hephaestos, who while chasing after Athena discharged his seed on the virgin goddess’s thigh. After Athena had wiped off the seed with wool, she flung the wool to the earth, which gave birth to the Earth Child, the phallic snake god, Erichthonios. Erichthonios was fostered by Athena, who probably was his actual mother. A vase-painting (ARV 1218.1) also illustrates Athena and Erichthonios with snakes in the basket.

The Arrēphoroi were little girls who lived on the Akropolis and served Athena for a year. They got their name – “Bearers” (cf. Paus. 1.27.3) or “maidens who carried the symbols of Athena Polias (i.e. “of the city”) in procession” – from the fact that they carried closed baskets (kistai) containing secret objects. An underground enclosure under the Akropolis was the scene for a nocturnal ritual performed by the Arrēphoroi during the annual festival dedicated to Athena. From the top of the Akropolis they descended to a shrine of Eros and Aphrodite. The ritual concluded the year the Arrēphoroi lived on the Akropolis. The mission of the young Arrēphoroi becomes obvious from Pausanias’ (1.18.2, cf. 1.24.7; cf. Eur. Ion 21-27) account of the snake in the kistē that Athena made dwell with Kekops’ daughters, because it may indicate that the “basket” had to be opened, just as the virgin must be opened and fertilized. The death of the “Kekropids” may reflect the ending of the Arrēphoroi’s duties and their journey underground. The young girls’ way of life had to end, and at the conclusion of their term of priestly service for the virgin goddess, the priestess sent them away to Eros and Aphrodite beneath the earth. The encounter with death, ending the sheltered life of the “virgin,” may be interpreted as an initiation ritual. When Athena and Erekhtheus were worshipped together (cf. Il. 2.546-551 and Paus. 1.24.7), he was represented as a snake or phallus.

The statue of Athena in the Athenian Parthenon has the head of Medusa on her breast. The Gorgon or Medusa head was bordered with snakes. Athena also has a shield at her feet and a snake.
beside the shield; the snake might be Erichthonios (Paus. 1.24.7), the guardian of the Akropolis (Fig. 8). According to Herodotus, the Athenians said that the Akropolis is guarded by a great snake, which lives in the temple; indeed they believed so literally in its existence that they put out regular rations for it to eat in the form of a honey cake (Hdt. 8.41).

The Medusa head on Athena’s aegis (shield), bordered by fearful serpents or (“hair”) snakes, symbolizes the female genitals (ABL 151.21). The reason is that the Gorgon head shows that hair equals snakes equals phallus (Barb 1953, 209, 235n265). Since the female Gorgon head is surrounded by male phallic snakes, we have a sacred wedding (hieros gamos).

The snake, which belongs to Athena (cf. ARV 1268.2), is terrifying and yet fascinating. As we have learned from Herodotus, it was said and believed that the snake was an epiphany of Erichthonios-Erekhtheus (Håland 2007a, chap. 5), and at Akropolis the “house-guarding snake” was offered honey cakes. As already indicated, the snakes were a characteristic feature of the house cult in Greece (Burkert 1985, 140, 29-30, 48); the snake was the guardian of the house, as illustrated in the actual Erichthonios-Erekhtheus myth. Athena has also been connected with the former Snake Goddess, the alleged House and Palace Goddess of the Minoan King at Knossos on Crete. These female idols, round whose shoulders a snake curls, are found in the house sanctuaries. They might also be related to the prototype of Kybele cult in Asia Minor.

In ancient Greece, the central act of the rites during the festivals dedicated to Mother Goddesses was the descent of certain female participants into underground caverns or “rooms” (megara), which were thought of as the entrances to the womb of the earth, or a fertility goddess. They brought back fertility symbols formed as female and male sex organs, secret objects that are made from wheat into representations of snakes and male shapes, which were thrown or carried down into the chasms and, after being on the altars for a while, were mixed with the seed to ensure the harvest. The ritual symbolizes a fertility rite a – sowing and reaping – and the festivals were celebrated for the generation of crops and the procreation of men. Snakes were also believed to be
the guardians of these innermost underground sanctuaries. During the ritual, the women entered into contact with the subterranean, with death and decay, while at the same time phalloi, snakes, pinecones, and piglets (a common substitute for female genitals, sexuality, and fertility) are present (cf. Ar. *Thesm.* 289 and Golden 1988, 6). These fertility symbols were placed in an underground cavern and left there for some time in contact with the forces of fertility which pervade these regions and are personified by the snakes thought to live there. They symbolized manliness and were seen as guardians of the sacred rooms. They were also illustrated by the representations of snakes and male genitals, which the women bring up after three days. The snakes represented the fertility and the chthonic regions, as do the pigs.

The serpent was also an important element at several ancient mystery cults, including the Eleusinian Mysteries, since it was the ritual symbol of Dionysos Bassaros in the covered baskets, the *cista mystica* (Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.19P). The phallic snake, then, was important in the Eleusinian cult (ARV 1446.1) and in the rituals in *megara*. It was associated with Athena, Medusa, and the Dionysian *maenads* (see infra). All of them might be classified as virgins, and all were feared by the male members of society.

It is very fruitful to compare African folk models of fertility and the regeneration of life with modern and ancient Greek material. In connection with fertility from the wilderness and the domestication of female land, or killing as a source of fertility, the victim to be killed is vaguely associated with female fertility, that is, as far as this “wild sexuality” of women has not yet been domesticated. According to a myth from East Africa, the young woman on her way to her wedding stops at a river in the wilderness. There she gets pregnant all by herself, or with the collaboration of a python in the river. This wild, procreative power of the unmarried woman seems to represent the threat of a female capacity for generating life without male control. It carries connotations of “auto-fertilization” and becomes untenable for a male ideology claiming that female fertility must be

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19 See Schol. Luc. *Dial. Meret.* 2.1, Rabe 1906, 275.23-276.28, particularly 276.13-18 for the Athenian festival, the *Arrêphoria*. See also Paus. 1.27.3, these and other sources are further discussed in Håland 2007a, chap. 5 f. and b.
20 The following draws on Jacobson-Widding/van Beek 1990, p. 29.
conquered and domesticated by men in order to be of any use for the regeneration of life (social life). Once domesticated, female procreative power is considered as a life-giving source of blessing. Thus, domestication by marriage may transform dangerous female sexuality into blessing fertility. A similar way of thinking may be found in several Greek myths and legends describing the different aspects of the woman. The mythic hero, Peleus, conquers the sea-nymph, Thetis, who transforms herself into a monster with many snakes (ARV 115.2). During their fight, snakes from her hand attach him (being a magic sea creature, she had magic powers and could produce monsters or turn into one). During the hero Perseus’ first sexual experience he beheads (“castrates”) the pregnant woman, Medusa (Hes. *Th.* 276-283, cf. Paus. 2.27.3).\(^{21}\) From the decapitation, which is connected with blood sacrifice, killing and the male power of reproduction, new life bursts from the blood of her genitalized head (ABV 235.71). In the Greek context, a woman’s “auto-fertilization” is, to give one example, illustrated by the goddess Hera, who according to myth bore Hephaestos without union with Zeus, for she was very angry (Hes. *Th.* 927 ff.). A woman might also be assisted by nature, for instance, in the form of a snake, the way Alexander the Great was conceived (Plut. *Alex*. 2.3 f.). Herakles’ wife Deianeira’s first suitor was the monstrous river god Achelous, who appeared as a snake, a bull or a man (Soph. *Trach.* 9 ff.). We have also myths from the Near Eastern area, for example in connection with Isthar, who becomes pregnant by way of a snake (Devereux 1991, 39fig.).

Although Greek men see female genitals and pubic hair as erotic, they have an ambivalent relationship to them and regard them with as much terror as they do the women. Therefore, several tales tell about brave women exposing their private parts to ward off enemies (Plut. *Mor.* 246a, 248b). Their gentials serve the same purpose as the gilt head of Medusa the Gorgon with its fringe of snakes, i.e. the apotropaic importance of the female sex organ on the south wall of the Athenian

\(^{21}\) The myth might be compared with those outlined by Fontenrose in his 1959 comparative study of combat myths, starting with Apollo’s combat with the dragon Python, the origin myth of Apollo’s Delphic shrine. Behind the stories in which gods or heroes struggle with monsters and dragons may be discerned an archetypal combat myth, according to Fontenrose, who also stresses that the champion fought both male and female enemies, the latter being the most terrible. See also infra for Tinos and Poseidon. See also Burkert 1985, p. 209 for oriental motifs such as the serpent with seven heads, etc. in connection with Herakles. For Calame 2009 however, there is no archetypal myth.
Akropolis (Paus. 1.21.3) to frighten away the enemy. The Medusa head on Athena’s aegis and the snakes had bewitching properties but were also protective (Paus. 1.28.2). Herakles, the super-hero, also had a Medusa on his shield (ABV 136.49). In addition, Athena (with her Medusa and snakes) was always in the background (ABV 360.2, 329.1).

According to an ancient Greek myth Athena gave Erichthonios a special gift—two drops of blood from the dead Medusa—which, according to Euripides, had miraculous power over the human body: one killed, while the other healed (Eur. Ion 999-1015). Therefore she was not only a source of death. There is in fact another blissful aspect of Medusa, and by comparing the common ambiguous presentation of her and of women in general in most of the written materials with sources such as Byzantine amulets with womb and snake symbols and late antique folklore, we meet the two characteristics of the “woman” (cf. also Hes. Th. 570-612). The general presentation of woman’s creative and destructive properties in human life is an andocentric view, since in general, the ancient sources were produced by men.

The snake is a chthonic symbol associated with the female and male sex, although it generally represents phallic impregnation in the Greek context, as it does in the myth about Olympia, the mother of Alexander the Great, and the way her son was conceived: a serpent was seen stretched out at her bed (Plut. Alex. 2.3-4 f.). She also participated in ceremonies in which numbers of large hand-tamed snakes terrified the male spectators (Plut. Alex. 2.5 f.). According to the most common version, outlined in HHD, the rape of Persephone was carried out by Hades or Pluton. The Orphic tradition, however, gives another version, according to which she was raped by Zeus and carried off by Pluton (Orph. Fr. 153, 195, 58, see Brisson 1993, 108, 128, 64-5). Clement of Alexandria is evidently influenced by the Orphic tradition when he states that during the rape of Persephone Zeus met her in the form of a serpent (Clem. Al. Protr. 2.14P). We also learn that the Bacchants, with

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22 A certain type of Byzantine amulet addresses the womb, which coils like a serpent, hisses like a snake. See Barb 1953, p. 210-212. See also Vermeule 1981, p. 196. See also infra.

23 His use of the word serpent instead of snake is most likely due to the fact that he is a Christian writing against paganism. One may claim that the once-sacred snake first becomes the object of curses in the Christian Bible, but it is
snakes twined round their hair, worshipped a consecrated snake, which was the emblem of their Bacchic orgies (i.e. Dionysos in the form of a snake) (Clem. *Protr*. 2.11P, cf. Eur. *Bacch.* 99 ff.; ARV 371.15). Along with other examples, the belief about the phallic snakes in *megara* might result from a male aspiration to acquire a “male role” in the earth, which is generally connected with the woman (cf. Håland 2007a, 400-01 for discussion). This might be the reason that many symbols, not only snakes, are seen as both female and male (Håland 2007a, chap. 6, cf. Harrison 1977, 282). Male ideology has often associated them with the woman when emphasizing dangerous and unruly aspects, as when the Furies or Medusa are associated with snakes. In contrast, when Zeus is represented as a snake, he is “the mild one,” *Meilichios* (Burkert 1985, 201). Clement of Alexandria (*Protr*. 2.14P), however, gives another representation of Zeus in the form of a snake, as mentioned above. That our culture generally associates the snake with the female in a negative way might result from an androcentric reading which parallels Classical male ideology, such as when Orestes perceives the Furies as Gorgons wreathed with snakes (Aesch. *Cho.* 1048-1050).

Beneath the Areopagos, the cliff of Ares in Athens, was the shrine dedicated to the chthonic goddesses, the Furies, also called the *Erinues*, the daemons of death, who had snakes among the hair on their heads, or snakes in their hands. They were also seen as snakes themselves, and were called the Awful goddesses, portraying angry ghosts in snake form: the snake-*Erinues*. However, they were also worshipped as *Eumenides*, “Kind Spirits.”

In “the Voyage of Argo” (Ap. Rhod. 4.144-153), the witch Medea has the power to enchant the giant monstrous snake with her song, while Jason looked on in terror from behind her. Medea’s connection with snakes is also illustrated in a vase painting in which snakes coil around her head (ABV. 471,117), paralleling Medusa with her hair of snakes and two under her cheek (Fig. 9). In another vase painting, she holds in her hand a snake, the double of herself. Another relevant parallel

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also ambiguous in the pre-Christian texts – for example Aeschylus’. See infra. See also Leisegang 1955 for myths and mysteries in connection with the snake.

is the story told by Apollonius of Rhodes, concerning the episode when the goddess Hekate rises from the earth garlanded by fearsome snakes that coiled themselves round twigs of oak (Ap. Rhod. 3.1211-1215). The story might of course also be related to the ancient vase paintings depicting the head of a woman or a goddess of fertility rising out of the earth, which is being struck by Satyrs armed with great hammers. It is interesting to note that it is always an Earth Mother who rises up and thus brings fertility.25

An equivalent of the angry ghost in snake form is found in the snake symbolizing the world of the dead, of heroes and the subterranean gods, such as Asklepios, but also Zeus. In the worship of the subterranean Zeus, he was not seen as angry, but invoked as the mild one, Meilichios, and represented as a snake. His protecting power may appear as a house snake. Although they were already seen as parallels in antiquity, the house snake of the Romans as guardian of the penus (store-cupboard) is probably more familiar than the Zeus Ktesios of the Greek storeroom (or of household property). He appears in countless wall paintings, particularly from Pompeii. In one of them (Fig. 10), we have the façade of a house in temple form – the pediment decorated with sacrificial gear, a boucranium, a patera (a broad, swallow dish used for drinking, primarily in a ritual context such as a libation), and a sacrificial knife. Within the penetralia (the innermost parts of a building, especially the sanctuary of a temple) are the family sanctities. The great fertility snake in front, surrounded by herbage and approaching a small altar, is the genius (“the begetter”)26 of the house in animal form, while above is the head of the house himself, the human genius, and to either side of him a dancing Lar (“ghost of the dead”)27 holding a cornucopia.28 The snake in front of the household altar is a general topic in the Roman household cult. Zeus’ greatest Athenian festival, the Diasia, was dedicated to Zeus Meilichios and celebrated in spring, in the month, Anthesterion in the

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25 Cf. ARV 1472,4 “the Anodos (rising) of Aphrodite”, cf. 888,155, see also 1012,1 the Anodos of Persephone. Cf. Paus. 2.37.5, Semele. See also Harrison 1977, p. 416 ff.

26 The attendant spirit of every man/guardian angel/inborn power. In family cult one genius was honoured in each household – that of the paterfamilias.

27 Lar/lares: originally deities of the farmland, later guardians as well. Lar/lares are used like penates (the dwellers in the store-cupboard, penus), as a metonym for “home,” “house.”

28 See Harrison 1977, p. 301 f. She cites (300) Denys of Halicarnassos concerning his observations of analogies between Greek and Roman religions.
beginning of March, just after other annual rituals dedicated to the dead. The vessels of the Bronze Age house and snake cult later appeared in the cult of the dead (Burkert 1985, 195), and cult implements such as the snake tubes of the Mycenaean Age are later confined to the cult of the dead. The ancients thought that the deceased might appear in the form of a snake, and according to Plutark (Cleom. 39) the appearance of the spinal cord of a dead man suggested snakes. Especially in iconography, the death snake is a convenient and almost omnipresent motif.

On the other hand, and as already indicated above, the snake is one of the symbols possessing an ambiguous character. Although it is connected with death, it is also connected with fertility (Paus. 1.24.7, cf. Burkert 1983, 152; Knight 1974, 21) and healing (Paus. 2.28.1).

The snake and the staff are phallic symbols. The staff then, is a symbol of power and fertility. It was also a symbol of the healing god, Asklepios, who had the power over life and death. The staff can also be seen as a shepherd’s crook or walking stick, since the god himself and his disciples were generally portrayed as walking. The bishop’s staff has a similar symbolism, as seen in Markopoulo. Its origin goes back to the Assyrian savior god Ningizzida (3rd millennium BCE). It seems that the double symbol came from ancient Egypt to Greece. Apart from these connections, there are others with ancient India and China. There, as in Greece, we find snakes associated with symbols of the sun early on, since we have ancient Chinese symbols of rebirth with snakes and a sun-wheel. Similar symbols are found in the Greek cultural area, for example in the Zeus-Asklepios temple in Pergamon, one of his principal sites.

**Healing and Malicious Snakes**

The principal symbol of Asklepios as a healer was his snake. Since prehistoric times, snakes have been the subject of myth and ascribed magical powers in many cultures. They were

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29 The two are related, however, since both in earlier times and now all over the world we encounter peasant societies where the living are dependent on the deceased mediator’s successful communication with other powers in the subterranean world to assure the continuity of their own lives through the fertility of the earth.
worshipped for their power over life and death (poisonous snakes).\footnote{See for example Bodson 1978 for the serpent symbolizing transmutation.} Noble Roman ladies used the cold blood of the snakes by wrapping them round their necks to cool themselves. The quick, legless movements of the snake seemed a mystery to the people of antiquity, while the periodic shedding of its skin was a symbol of rebirth and the preservation of beauty. It was also a symbol of eternal youth and immortality, which have always been among humanity’s wishes. This shedding also demonstrated the body’s regeneration after illness, and so was a symbol of medical cure. The snake was seen as a healer and a wise creature, and in myth it was a leading expert on therapeutic herbs. Thus it winds itself around the staff as a symbol of the supernatural power of the healing god.

The cult of Asklepios, also called Doctor Asklepios (Paus. 2.26.8), came from Thessaly in the 5th century via Epidauros to Corinth, where we find a large quantity of votive offerings in the room of the Asklepieion representing healed limbs.

In statues, Asklepios is particularly recognizable by his staff with the snake coiled round it (Fig. 11). In Epidauros, the “home” or principal cult centre of Asklepios (cf. Paus. 2.26.8), he is seated on a throne holding a staff; he holds the other hand over the head of the snake (Paus. 2.27.1-3). The god also appears directly in the shape of the snake which is kept in his sanctuary, and in Epidauros the priests watched over the ancient ceremonies and looked after the sacred snakes. These were kept in the Tholos, a richly decorated round temple with sub-structures reaching underground (Paus. 2.27.3). All serpents, particularly snakes of a rather yellowish colour, are sacred to Asklepios and tame when interacting with human beings (Paus. 2.28.1). Since the snake was considered a prototype of the god, it can often be found representing him when a new temple was dedicated. When his sanctuary at Sikyon was established in the fifth century, for instance, “their god was brought from Epidauros on a mule-car in the likeness of a serpent” (Paus. 2.10.3). In the chronicle of the Athenian Asklepieion, the same process is described: the god “had the serpent brought from home,” i.e. from Epidauros, on “a chariot” (\textit{IG} II². 4960).
The “cure” followed a ritual, during which patients washed in a Sacred Spring, made offerings at an altar, then retired to the stoa (a porch or portico not attached to a larger building), where the mysterious process of incubation (εγκοιμησις, i.e. therapeutic sleep) was aided by incense from the altars (cf. Paus. 2.27.1 f.). This and religious excitement produced dreams, through the medium of which Asklepios was supposed to cure. The god was expected to give instructions in a dream or else to effect a direct cure, often by way of a snake licking the patient: the priest summoned the specially-trained temple serpents to lick the eyelids and ears of patients who were suffering from eye or ear complaints. Aristophanes gives a classic description, even if slightly distorted, in one of his comedies: commanded by the God, two enormous snakes appeared from the holy shrine. They went underneath the cloth covering the patient and licked his eyelids. The God and the serpents vanished in the shrine after the successful treatment (Ar. Plut. 653-695, 707-747). Several inscriptions also tell about the snakes licking the eyelids or ears of the patients, thus confirming the comedy. According to Hippocrates (Ep. 15) the healing Asklepios was followed by snakes, enormous specimens of serpents speeding along in broad coils, hissing horribly, as in the desert or in forest dells. Many ex-voto tablets to Asklepios and his daughter (who is named Hygieia, Health), have been found showing the portion of the anatomy treated. These were fixed to a wall or in the columns; larger votive stelai, some showing the god visiting sick patients in their sleep, were fixed to the stoa steps (Fig. 12). With only brief discussion of causation, these stelai describe the patient’s arrival, incubation, dreams, communications with the god or the snake, and their healing or recovery (cf. Paus. 2.27.3).

As already indicted, snakes were also important in ancient mystery cults, in which initiation and purification, cures, or healing in a broad sense, were essential elements: According to Clement of Alexandria (Protr. 2.14P) a serpent is drawn over the breast of the initiated, representing “the god (i.e. Zeus) over the breast.”

The pareias, the harmless yellow snake of Asklepios, which can grow to a length of 1.5 metres (cf. Fig. 12), is native to southern Europe. The Romans introduced it into the area of modern
Germany, which they occupied, and it can still be found there, in the Taunus (Schlangenbad) and in the lands of the Danube. Therefore, the snake of Asklepios is different from the healing snakes on present-day Kephallonia. Its size parallels that of the snakes at Cocullo, however, although the latter are not healing, since the healing aspect in this context relates to the power of the saint. The healing abilities of Saint Domenico, though, also have parallels in the ancient world. I have already mentioned the ancient Marsi (Strab. 5.241). Marsic magicians were famous for miraculous snake-bite cures. A grove sacred to the Italic goddess of healing, Angitia, stood in Marsic territory.

Therefore, they were not related only to the Greek witch and goddess Kirke. The ancient world had other healers of snake-bites as well: further east in the city of Parium in Asia Minor, Strabo related “the mythical story that the Ophiogeneis (‘Serpent-born’) are akin to the serpent tribe; and they say that the males of the Ophiogeneis cure snake-bitten people by continuous stroking, after the manner of enchanters, first transferring the livid colour to their own bodies and then stopping both the inflammation and the pain. According to the myth, the original founder of the tribe, a certain hero, changed from a serpent to a man” (13.1.14).

It is interesting to note that even if the healers we read about in the sources are men, be they snake-born men, priests or a god, certain female divinities, such as Angitia, Hekate and Kirke (the latter being perhaps more famous as witches), as well as Medea, who had the power to enchant snakes, loom in the background. One may also mention that, according to Euripides (Ion. 25 f.), it was the custom of Athenian mothers to protect their babies with golden amulets in the form of snakes. Although the aim of this article is not to do research into women, magic and healing, it is interesting to speculate whether it might be possible to find out more about women’s real connection with the healing of snake-bites by reading the male-produced sources in combination with comparative material from later periods and other cultures. With few exceptions, such as the snakes of the modern Panagia in Markopoulo and the ancient fertility goddesses, female divinities

31 Cf. also the La Barre 1962 for the study of a cult in the southeastern United States, in which the handling of poisonous snakes is the distinguishing feature.
are generally negatively perceived in connection with snakes, as if this suggests they use their power maliciously. Accordingly, and paralleling the ancient goddesses, the modern saint, Ag. Marina, inflicts punishment on those who do not respect her memory. If someone threshes his wheat on her feast day, 17 July, she might send “malevolent miracles,” destroying the crop about to be threshed, or else send scorpions and snakes bringing sickness, if she is not satisfied. As with the combat myth outlined by J. Fontenrose (1959, cf. n21), in which the enemy was a power of the death realm and the tale concerns conflict between order and disorder, chaos and cosmos, we encounter the same theme found in the Battle of the Gods and Giants or the annual fight against the weather gods during the dog days by the end of the threshing period, in which disastrous snakes play an important role in myths all over the eastern Mediterranean (cf. Robertson 1996). This is also the unstable period when the snakes appear in Markopoulo.

Ag. Marina has been especially worshipped in Athens as the protector against smallpox, but as mentioned above, she might also send snakes bringing sickness like other saints, thus paralleling the acts of ancient heroes/heroines and gods/goddesses when unsatisfied with their worshippers. Thus snakes are not only healing; they may also bring sickness. Snakes therefore play an important part in witchcraft in many cultures, thus paralleling Medea’s enchantments at the burial ground. Some African cultures make use of snake spittle, while poisonous snakes have been used for killing in Africa, as elsewhere.

Modern and Ancient Snakes: Some Conclusions

Throughout the world, physicians still wear the symbols of Asklepios, the staff and the snake, thus demonstrating the strength of tradition, and also magical symbolism. The snake, however, is still an ambiguous symbol: the modern equivalent of the ancient Medusa. The Gorgon was also the chief of the sea-queens, or sea-dragonesses, often represented with a split snake-tail or a great fish-tail. According to Emily Vermeule (1981, 196), her double aspect of destroying and healing has come to be represented by the figure of the Panagia Gorgona, the All-Holy Gorgon,
who on an icon might be depicted as riding a devouring sea-monster (Vermeule 1981, Fig. 20; Håland 2007a, chap. 6). Hekate’s (cf. *HHID*. 25) modern parallel, *Ag. Barbara*, who has been regarded as the protector of small children against smallpox, is also worshipped in caves, for example on Kephallonia, thus paralleling other contemporary “cave churches” (cf. Håland 2007b). Men’s general uncertainty regarding women is illustrated by several unpredictable female beings (for example, the ancient witch Medea) associated with snakes, as well as mother goddesses and the modern *Panagia* on Kephallonia.

For the modern pilgrims arriving to the sanctuary dedicated to the *Panagia* on Tinos, it is important to “come to the *Panagia* as a snake.” Accordingly, many pilgrims, particularly women, make their way the one kilometre from the harbor up to the church on their stomachs, crawling or creeping like a snake (Fig. 13). One may, of course, wonder whether this imitation of snake movements has to do with some sort of “sympathetic magic” (i.e. magic, that depends on a resemblance or perceived similarity between the object, substance, or action used in performing the magic and the desired effect) to be healed, since the pilgrimage is generally performed to cure sickness.

The ancient name of the island of Tinos was *Offiussa*, the island of snakes,32 probably because of the many snakes on the island. According to a myth, Poseidon sent a flock of storks to free Tinos from the snakes, which were connected with female divinities (cf. n21); however, there are still many of them on the island, thus paralleling the snakes at Kephallonia and at Cocullo, although those on Kephallonia are not dangerous, but healing.

The article has presented my field observations of two modern Christian rituals entailing snakes— one Orthodox and the other Catholic— followed by a survey of rituals and beliefs related with the snake in ancient Greece and Rome, also making connections with Asia Minor and modern Africa. By showing the complex symbolism of the snake and its connection with the female, and also the male, I have shown its importance within ancient and modern culture, and by comparing

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32 Cf. *Ophis*=snake, serpent; *oph*=eye. *Omma*=mati*=eye*. I thank E. Alexakēs for this information.
these two periods in relation to rituals and magic – which have always been important within the religious context – I have shown how they might shed light on one another.
References

*At the request of the author, a reference format that differs from this journal’s standard style was used.


Illustrations

Figure 1: A poster at the bell tower announces the importance of the place in Greek and English, Markopoulo, August 1992.
(All photographs: Copyright © author.)
Figure 2: A postcard depicting the icon of the Panagia and Child decorated with snakes, Markopoulo, August 1992.
Figure 3: The officiating priest holds one of the snakes in the same hand with which he holds his scepter, Markopoulo, August 1992.
Figure 4: Offerings of bread, wine and olive oil, neatly laid in huge baskets in front of the altar, Markopoulo, August 1992.
Figure 5: Saint Domenico, covered with snakes during the procession, Cocullo, May 1987

Figure 6: Serpari carrying snakes walking behind the statue of Saint Domenico, Cocullo May 1987.
Figure 7: Personified snake, New Acropolis Museum, Athens June 2009.

Figure 8: Athena Promachos (i.e. the War-Like) National Museum, Athens Autumn 1990.
Figure 9: Medusa with her hair of snakes and two under her cheek, New Acropolis Museum, Athens June 2009.

Figure 10: Wall painting, Pompeii, May 1987
Figure 11: Statue of Asklepios, National Museum, Athens Autumn 1990.
Figure 12: Ex-voto tablets to Asklepios, National Museum, Athens Autumn 1991.
Figure 13: A pilgrim “come to the Panagia as a snake” Tinos, August 2008.