Serpents in Art and Religion

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ABSTRACT

The symbol of serpent used by the medical profession today goes back to Moses who in Sinai was ordered by God to make a copper serpent so that the Israelites bitten by a snake could look at it and recover. The serpent was then used in Greek mythology as a symbol of medicine. In the Garden of Eden the serpent was the symbol of evil but it was the symbol of royalty in ancient Egypt and later became the symbol of commerce then wisdom. In Mexico it relates to myth and in China the dragon is a flying serpent. In India and in south east Asia the serpent is worshipped.

INTRODUCTION

It is strange that a reptile like a snake receives such a great attention in religion and in art. It was mentioned in the Bible, in the Koran, and probably in other religious books. It became the symbol of the medical profession, was the symbol of royalty in ancient Egypt, the symbol of people in commerce, and in the flag of Mexico. In India the serpent has a special place. In China is called a dragon. In some countries the serpent is even worshipped.

RECOVERY FROM ILLNESS

In the Old Testament in the Book of Numbers the Israelites spoke against God when in the wilderness out of Egypt they died because no water and no bread. For their sin the Lord sent serpents to bite the people and much people of Israel died. The people then prayed to Moses to take away the serpents. The Lord asked Moses to make a serpent of copper and set it upon a pole and that every one that is bitten, when he looked upon it, shall live (Figure 1). Incidentally, a copper serpent was found in Sinai (Figure 2). King Hezekiah later destroyed the copper serpent, which, by that time, had existed for many years, because it was worshiped (2 Kings 18:4).
In the New Testament Jesus delivers believers from death in the passage found in John 3:14–15 in which St. John draws a comparison between Jesus on the cross and Moses’ snake on the pole (Figure 3).
THE SERPENT AS A SYMBOL OF EVIL

In the Old Testament in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve’s sin for the disobedience of God in consuming apples from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was due to a serpent. This became the subject of many artists (Figure 4). In Revelation the symbol for the Devil was a dragon and a serpent. The Quran mentions that Satan, disguised as a serpent, repeatedly told Adam to eat from the Tree, and eventually both Adam and Eve did so, thus disobeying Allah.

Figure 4 - Typical paintings of Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden
ANCIENT EGYPT

Worshiped snakes
The Ancient Egyptians worshiped snakes, especially the cobra. It was associated with the sun god Ra and many other deities (Figure 5). It was used as a symbol of sovereignty and divine authority (Figures 6-8). The pharaohs believed that the cobra protected them. They were also referenced in the Book of the Dead, in which a Spell was made to help repel an evil snake in the underworld.

Figure 5 - Cobra associated with the sun god Ra

Figure 6 - The serpent of the Pharaohs
Winged serpent
The winged serpent (not to be confused with flying serpents) was illustrated in ancient Egyptians wall paintings (Figures 9 and 10). A model of a winged serpent was found in King Tut Ankh Amon grave (Figure 11-13).
Figure 9 - Winged serpents

Figure 10 - Winged serpent

Figure 11 - A model of a winged serpent found in King Tut Ankh Amon grave

Figure 12 - Gold amulets of serpents in King Tut Ankh Amon grave
Serpents on papyrus

Serpents were also found illustrated on papyrus (Figures 14-16).
Serpents were also illustrated on walls and as reliefs (Figures 17 and 18).

Wall paintings and reliefs
Serpents were also illustrated on walls and as reliefs (Figures 17 and 18).
Figure 17- Serpents illustrated on walls

Figure 18 - Serpents illustrated on walls as reliefs

Serpent as a guardian
An Egyptian example of Nut as tree goddess nourishes the deceased and serpent is a guardian (Figure 19).

Figure 19 - Serpent as a guardian while Nut nourishes the deceased
Cleopatra
It is interesting that Cleopatra chose to be bit by a serpent to end her life when she believed that it was futile for her to continue her rule of Egypt (Figure 20).

Figure 20 - Cleopatra committing suicide using a snake as illustrated by an artist

MESOPOTAMIA

In Mesopotamia the snake was the sacred symbol of the god Ningizzida who could heal disease for those who worshiped him devoutly. (Figure 21).

Figure 21 - Serpents in a Mesopotamia

ANCIENT GREECE

In Greek myths snakes were often used in healing rituals. The Rod of Asclepius is a serpent-entwined rod wielded by the Greek god Asclepius, a deity associated with healing and medicine (Figure 22). From about 300 BC onwards, pilgrims flocked to the healing temples called Asclepieia to be cured.
ANCIENT ROME

The statue of Laocoön (Figure 23), was excavated in Rome in 1506 and placed on display in the Vatican. It shows the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons being attacked by sea serpents. Pliny attributes the work to have been in the palace of Emperor Titus.

AZTECS IN MEXICO

Snakes were sacred to the Aztecs as they were the symbol of the serpent god, Quetzalcoatl (Figure 24). The Aztec double-headed Serpent made of oyster shells is now in the British Museum (Figure 25).
The Aztec Empire was centred around Tenochtitlan on an island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico was founded in 1325 became the capital of the expanding Aztec Empire in the 15th century until captured by the Spanish in 1521. Today its ruins are located in the central part of Mexico City. The wandering tribes were looking for a site for their city whose location would be signaled by an eagle eating a snake atop a cactus. The Aztecs saw this vision on what was then a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco, a vision that is now immortalized in Mexico's coat of arms (Figure 26) and on the Mexican flag adopted in 1823. Not deterred by the unfavorable terrain, they set about building their city.
INDIA

Snakes had high status in Hindu mythology. The snake primarily represents rebirth, death and mortality, due to its casting of its skin and being symbolically reborn. Over a large part of India there are carved representations of cobras. An important Hindu festival is associated with snake worship which takes place of the fifth day of Shravana (July-August).

CHINESE DRAGON

The Emperors of China used the dragon as a symbol of imperial power and strength. The Chinese dragon is a winged flying serpent and is a divine animal. The dragon was represented in first national flag of China adopted in 1889 (Figure 27).

MODERN TIMES

The modern symbol of medicine is the rod of Asclepius, a snake twining around a staff. This goes back to the time of Moses in Sinai Desert. The serpent is symbol of recovery from illness and is on the flag of World Health Organization (Figure 28). It is also a symbol of ambulances (Figure 29). The symbol of pharmacy is the bowl of Hygieia, a snake twining around a cup or bowl (Figure 30). Hygieia was a daughter of Asclepius.
Caduceus the Angel of Healing brings love and peace upon the earth and all of its inhabitants, is 3.6 m high bronze created by the American artist James N. Muir (Figure 31). From Greek "karykeion" meaning a herald's badge. In Latin the caduceus was worn by Roman surgeons.
SYMBOL OF COMMERCE

In Greek mythology or the Roman Mercury a short staff entwined by two serpents surmounted by wings is a symbol of negotiation sometimes confused with the medical profession (Figure 32).

![Symbol of commerce](image1)

![Froben symbol](image2)

**SYMBOL OF WISDOM**

The Swiss medical printer Johann Froben (1460–1527), depicted the staff entwined with serpents and surmounted by a dove (Figure 33).

**EPILOGUE**

For a modern observer it is strange that a reptile receives so much attention in human affaires and even it is worshipped by some people. It was a symbol of royalty in ancient Egypt. The symbol is seen today in many pharmacies and in the flags of World Health Organization and of Mexico.