IGOR EFTIMOVSKI
Independent researcher
Resen, North Macedonia
eftimovskii@gmail.com

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FROM GOLDSMITHS TO DEMIURGES? EXPLORING SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE LION-HEADED SERPENT FROM HELLENISTIC JEWELRY TO LATE ANTIQUITY

Abstract. – The paper explores possible symbolic and iconographic parallels between the Hellenistic gold hoop earrings with lion protomes and the lion-headed serpent that appears in later magical and syncretic religious traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean during Late Antiquity. Through a comparative analysis of their morphology, function and symbolic connotations, the study considers whether these motifs may reflect elements of a broader symbolic repertoire. It further examines related imagery and symbolic concepts in Orphic, Gnostic, Mithraic, as well as Early and Medieval Christian traditions. While the evidence does not establish a direct historical continuity between these traditions, the recurring combination of leonine and serpentine elements suggests possible patterns of symbolic transformation and reinterpretation across time. The study proposes these parallels as a basis for further archaeological and semiotic research on cultural interconnection, rather than as evidence of a demonstrable line of transmission.

Key words. – Lion-headed serpent; Hellenistic jewelry; Chnoubis; Demiurge; symbolic transformation.

1. Introduction

"... I enclose an impression on paper of a whitened engraved stone, found in some old ruins not far from here by a mason who is no longer there. The impression has on one side, as it seems, a relief of a dragon standing spirally and upright, and on the other side the following inscription: ΧΗΟΥΒΙΣ ΟΘΜΟΥΗΡ ΓΙΓΑΝΟΠΛΗΚΤΑ. It is interesting perhaps because of the first two Macedonian names, which I cannot understand whether they mean anything in Greek."

This is how Dimitar Miladinov, a 19th-century teacher and folklorist from Macedonia, described an ancient engraved gemstone from the

vicinity of Kukush (Kilkis) in a letter written in 1858 to Pyotr Ivanovich Sevastyanov, a lawyer and antiquarian from Russia.[1] Although Miladinov could not decipher the inscription or identify the enigmatic creature depicted on the stone, his description provides an early account of a figure that can now be recognized as Chnoubis – the lion-headed serpent of ancient Greco-Egyptian magical traditions (T.I: 1 – 4).[2] Emerging from the religious and philosophical syncretism of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds in the Eastern Mediterranean, the figure of the lion-headed serpent also acquired particular significance within the complex cosmological and theological speculations of Late Antiquity, including those associated with "Gnostic" esoteric traditions.

At the most basic semiotic level, the iconography of the lion-headed serpent brings together two animals associated with complementary symbolic domains. The serpent, on the one hand, with the earthly and subterranean spaces, regeneration and cyclical renewal,[3] while the lion, on the other hand – traditionally associated with strength, sovereignty, fire, and the sun.[4] In depictions of Chnoubis, the lion's head is commonly complemented by radiating rays (in the form of a crown or halo), further emphasizing a possible solar, stellar or more broadly – luminary character. The resulting hybrid thus unites the chthonic and the celestial within a single body. Its spiral and upright posture could allude, on the one hand, to cyclical renewal, while on the other – to a kind of "axis mundi" that united the lower and upper zones of the universe.

In terms of magical function, written sources tell us that gems bearing the image of the lion-headed serpent were usually used as magical and therapeutic amulets, with their efficacy associated both with the material of the stone and with the engraved image and inscriptions. Green jasper and related stones bearing the lion-headed serpent were particularly connected with the treatment or prevention of abdominal and digestive ailments, while other forms were associated with breastfeeding and the protection of the uterus. Ancient medical and lapidary authors, including Galen (2nd century CE), describe the use of radiate serpent or lion-headed serpent gems specifically for stomach and digestive disorders, sometimes recommending that the amulet be worn so that the stone rested directly over the affected area.[5]

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[1] Traykov 1964, 51–55 (letter 17 = GBL, f. 269 No. 2341.27)

[2] Montfaucon 1719, 360, 361, Pl. CL, CLI, CLII; Bonner 1950, 54–60; Dasen and Nagy 2012; Tsatsou 2024.

[3] In general on the symbolism of the serpent: Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1990, 867-879; Cirlot 1990, 285-290.

[4] In general on the symbolism of the lion: Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1990, 575–577; Cirlot 1990, 189-190.

[5] Bonner 1950, 54–60; Tsatsou 2024, 252–254.

The origins of Chnoubis remain debated, with proposed Egyptian influences including Kenmet, the first decan[6] of Leo, then the primordial serpentine deity Kematef (Kneph/Kmeph), the ram-headed creator god Khnum, and the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet.[7] Within the syncretic Greco-Egyptian cultural milieu, with the influences of Jewish traditions, and thus the rise of various esoteric teachings later characterized as "Gnostic", the image of the lion-headed serpent became associated with the demiurgic figure Yaldabaoth. In Gnostic literature, such as the *Apocryphon of John* (2nd century CE), Yaldabaoth is explicitly described as having the appearance of a serpent and a lion (or a lion-faced serpent) with eyes shining like lightning fire. As the Demiurge, he represents the "ignorant" and "arrogant" androgynous creator of the material world, who, in a sense, can be understood as an inversion of the biblical creator Yahweh of Jewish tradition.[8]

A new interesting direction in interpreting the origins of the lion-headed serpent has been opened up by Eleni Tsatsou, in regard to a Chnoubis amulet recovered from the tomb of a physician in the Roman cemetery of Pella in Central Macedonia (3rd century CE) (T.I: 4).[9] Namely, Tsatsou explores a possible "Macedonian connection" in the formation and development of Chnoubis imagery, drawing parallels with the serpent deities Agathodaimon and Glykon, the local Macedonian healing snake cult of Draco and Dracaena, and even Alexander the Great himself – particularly in relation to legendary traditions portraying him as serpent-born and his later deification and assimilation with Agathodaimon in Alexandria. She also addresses the wetland, swampy environment of Pella (and also of Alexandria) as a fitting context for snake symbolism, as well as for medicinal traditions associated with abdominal and digestive ailments.[10] These associations are particularly intriguing given the prominence of serpent symbolism in prehistoric and ancient Macedonia and the wider Central Balkans, as well as the close links between snakes, water and wetland environments, healing, protection and divinity.[11] Tsatsou's analysis therefore suggests that Chnoubis imagery may have participated in a broader symbolic tradition connecting Macedonia with the wider religious and magical world of the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean.

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[6] Decans were 36 groups of stars, i.e. small constellations in Ancient Egyptian astrology used to track time and measure the night sky.

[7] Davies 1981; Dasen and Nagy 2012; Tsatsou 2024, 252.

[8] Davies 1981; Rudolph 1987, 67–87.

[9] Tsatsou 2015, 117–119; Tsatsou 2024.

[10] Tsatsou 2024, 254–260.

[11] Šašel Kos 1991; Proeva 2014, 142-145, 176, 177; Eftimovski 2025, 114–134, with cited bibliography.

We would like to further explore this possible Macedonian dimension in the origins and development of the lion-headed serpent, in this case particularly in relation to the hoop earrings with lion protomes from the Hellenistic period, which were especially popular across Ancient Macedonia. Their distinctive combination of circular form and leonine imagery raises the question of whether they might represent an earlier manifestation of a symbolic repertoire later expressed in the motif of the lion-headed serpent. Their function as jewelry is also significant, given the use of magical gems as wearable amulets, while their usual funerary deposition finds a notable parallel in the deposition of magical amulets, such as the Chnoubis amulet from the physician's tomb at Pella.

2. The Iconography and Symbolism of Hoop Earrings with Lion Protomes

Between the late 4th and the early 2nd centuries BCE, gold hoop earrings with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic protomes were produced and used across a broad area of the Hellenistic world. Their characteristic form consists of a circular or near-circular body, often made of twisted gold wire, terminating in a pointed end at the bottom, with a conical broadening at the top that was surmounted by a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic head. The earliest examples, dating mainly to the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, were generally made entirely of metal and are frequently distinguished by lion protomes, depicted either naturalistically or with fantastic elements (T.I: 6–8). Later variants, dating mainly to the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE, feature heads made of glass, amber, or colored stone, most commonly depicting canine or human heads. The latter are typically represented with dark skin, accentuated lips, broad noses, and curly hair, and have variously been interpreted as African, Ethiopian, pygmy, or more generally a dark-skinned human character. A smaller number of examples feature other zoomorphic or anthropomorphic heads or entire figures.[12]

The body of these earrings may be understood as a stylized representation of a rhyton, i.e. a vessel shaped like an animal horn, from whose opening or mouth, supplemented by floral motifs, emerges the aforementioned zoomorphic or anthropomorphic head. Its likely prototype was the so-called "Horn of Plenty" (cornucopia, Latin *Cornu Copiae*) – a paradigmatic symbol of fertility, abundance, wealth, prosperity, and nourishment. At the same time, the cornucopia can also be understood as symbolically representing both female and male reproductive organs (vulva or uterus,

[12] Higgins 1961, 160–164; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987, 68–73; Bitrakova-Grozdanova and Malenko 1997, 12–16; Blaževska 2013, 708. Additional examples from the Ohrid Lake region in Macedonia: Kuzman and Počuča-Kuzman 2014.

and the phallus).[13] Within the sphere of religion, the rhyton was primarily associated with mythical figures and deities, most often female, whose functions and domains were closely connected with these categories, particularly fertility and abundance.[14]

In ancient Mediterranean religions, the cornucopia was an iconographic attribute of the goddesses Gaia, Tyche, Fortuna, Isis, and related mythical figures with chthonic, fertile-bearing, or maternal characteristics, with whom these goddesses were frequently syncretized (such as Rhea, Demeter, and Cybele).[15] However, it should not be overlooked that the rhyton, including the cornucopia, was also associated with certain male mythical figures possessing fertile and chthonic aspects, such as Dionysus, Plutus/Pluto, Serapis, and Harpocrates.[16]

At the most general level, the iconography of this type of earrings can be divided into three elements, each of which encodes a particular symbolic meaning:

- the overall circular form, which presumably symbolizes cyclicity;
- the rhyton-shaped body, or "Horn of Plenty", which encodes fertility and abundance;
- the zoomorphic or anthropomorphic head, which represents an active entity that appears to emerge from the "Horn of Plenty" or in some way complements it.

As noted, in the earliest type of these earrings (4th–3rd centuries BCE), the head accompanying the cornucopia is that of a lion. In our previous studies, we have explored the relationship between female deities of the "Great Mother – Earth" type and lions understood as their zoomorphic representatives. We have argued that this represents a mythic paradigm widespread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean from the Bronze Age onward, continuing through the Iron Age and Early Antiquity. In this context, we proposed that lions symbolize the untamed principles and forces of nature governed by these goddesses. In that regard, we have also mentioned these earrings, which were commonly deposited in female graves. We believe that the association of lions with the "Horn of Plenty", as another paradigmatic symbol of female "Great Mother–Earth" type of deities, further reinforces the symbolic paradigm outlined above.

The deposition of such earrings in graves was probably connected with the deceased's hoped-for rebirth, which was to be enabled by the

[13] Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1990, 291; Cirlot 1990, 6, 62.

[14] Neumann 1963, 45, 120 (Pl. 2), 289; Čausidis 1994, 94–100.

[15] On the iconography of Gaia: Moore 1988; on Tyche: Villard 1997; on Fortuna: Rausa 1997; on Isis: Tran tam Tinh 1990.

[16] On Dionysus: Isler-Kerényi 2015, 205; on Plutus: Kerényi 1991, 31, 52, 152, 158, 165; on Serapis: Clerc and Leclant 1994; on Harpocrates: Tran tam Tinh, Jaeger and Poulin 1988.

aforementioned goddess. The "Horn of Plenty" thus can be understood as her instrument for achieving this purpose, while simultaneously functioning as a symbolic substitute for her maternal womb. The fate of the deceased was therefore understood as following the cyclical renewal of nature as a whole, which can symbolically be understood as the "birth" of the lions from the mouth of the "Horn". At the same time, it should not be forgotten that lions are representatives of the wild and untamed nature, which is responsible not only for creativity in the world but equally for its destructive forces. This dual, or rather complementary, aspect of nature reflects the essence of the cyclical principle, which is further emphasized by the circular form of the earring itself. The paired occurrence of the earrings, suspended on either side of the deceased's head, may further reinforce this complementary symbolism.

The chthonic aspect of the hoop earrings appears to gain further emphasis with the development of the two later types featuring canine and human heads (3rd–2nd centuries BCE). In the case of the dog-headed earrings, this meaning corresponds to the symbolism of the dog as a liminal animal, guarding the passage to the underworld or accompanying and guiding the souls of the dead into the afterlife.[17] The earrings featuring a dark-skinned human head emerging from the mouth of the rhyton have already been the subject of detailed iconographic and semiotic studies by Nikos Chausidis. According to his analyses, these figures supplementing the hoop earrings probably represented a chthonic divine figure conceived with black or dark skin.[18] In relation to the rhyton upon which the figure is placed, and from which it appears to "emerge", the most likely candidate is the god Plutus, son of the earth goddess Demeter, who himself personifies wealth, abundance, and fertility. Supporting this interpretation are depictions of the Earth goddess (Gaia) in which she holds a rhyton, or "Horn of Plenty", at whose mouth the infant Plutus is seated. These scenes have been interpreted as representations of his birth.[19]

In conclusion, it seems that the elements of the Hellenistic hoop earrings suggest a configuration in which symbolic themes such as circularity, leonine imagery, chthonic associations, bodily adornment, and funerary regeneration are closely interconnected. This configuration is particularly relevant to the present discussion because several of these elements reappear, in transformed form, in the later imagery of the lion-headed serpent. While these parallels do not in themselves establish a direct historical continuity between the two traditions, they provide a basis for examining their possible symbolic parallels. In the following sections, we

[17] Eftimovski 2022; Eftimovski 2025, 477–479.

[18] Chausidis 2009; Čausidis 2019; Čausidis 2019b.

[19] Moore 1988, 174 (no. 28).

will consider these interconnected elements to assess whether the earrings may represent an earlier expression of a symbolic repertoire subsequently reinterpreted in the case of the lion-headed serpent.

3. Points of Semiotic Parallelism

Having examined the iconography and symbolism of the lion-headed serpent and the Hellenistic hoop earrings with lion protomes, we now proceed to a comparative analysis of the two in regard to several points of symbolic parallelism.

3.1. Morphological Parallels

The first point of comparison concerns the morphology of the two iconographic forms. The most evident parallel is the lion protome, which appears in both the Hellenistic hoop earrings and the lion-headed serpent imagery. Although the earrings lack an explicitly serpentine body, their elongated, circular corpus, typically made of twisted gold wire, may be associated on a purely visual level with a serpentine form.

A further difference concerns the posture of the body: in representations of Chnoubis, the serpent is generally depicted in a vertically oriented, spiral configuration, whereas the corpus of the earrings forms an almost closed circle, with its pointed end, i.e. "tail" reaching the lion's muzzle. This circular arrangement, however, invites comparison with the Ouroboros, another prominent motif in the repertoire of Greco-Egyptian magical amulets.[20] Although the Ouroboros is conventionally represented as a serpent or dragon biting its own tail, a lion-headed variant from the 3rd century CE, found in the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM VII. 579–90),[21] presents a particularly close visual parallel to the morphology of the hoop earrings (T.I: 5, compare to 6–8, and to T.II: 4).

In some cases of hoop earrings, there are pronounced leaf-like or triangular segments pointing backwards, arranged around the back of the lions protome, i.e. around the mouth of the assumed rhyton, which can be compared to the radiant crown or halo at the leonine head of Chnoubis (T.I: 6, 7, compare to 1–4).

3.2. Dual and Complementary Symbolism

A further point of semiotic parallelism concerns the dual and complementary symbolism of the two motifs. In the case of the lion-headed serpent, the chthonic associations of the snake are combined with the solar and celestial attributes of the leonine head with a radiant crown or halo,

[20] Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1990, 716; Cirlot 1990, 246–247; Assmann 2019; Eftimovski 2019.

[21] Betz 1986, 134; Rudolph 1987, 223.

bringing together two complementary symbolic domains within a single hybrid body. In the case of the earrings, this duality may be expressed through the lion itself, which, within Eastern Mediterranean traditions, could embody various binary oppositions such as *chthonic vs. solar*, *female vs. male*, *life vs. death*, etc. These complementary dimensions were presumably represented through symmetrical pairs of lions flanking a central/axial element – a common iconographic paradigm in the noted region.[22] The paired arrangement of the earrings may therefore have reinforced their dual symbolism, while simultaneously creating a symmetrical configuration around the wearer's or deceased's head (T.I: 8).

3.3. Regenerative Symbolism

Another semiotic parallel concerns the regenerative, fertile-bearing and nourishing symbolism associated with both motifs. As noted previously, lion-headed serpent amulets were usually used in the treatment or prevention of abdominal and digestive ailments, as well as with breastfeeding and the protection of the uterus, thus linking their therapeutic function to processes of bodily regeneration and reproduction. A comparable symbolism may be discerned in the corpus of the hoop earrings, whose form has been interpreted as evoking the uterine "Horn of Plenty" – an emblem of abundance, nourishment, and fertility. Both the cornucopia and the lion were commonly associated with female regenerative, earth, and fertility deities, thereby bringing together the generative capacities of the natural world and the female body. When considered alongside the frequent deposition of these earrings in funerary contexts, their form and imagery may also have carried regenerative connotations, relating death to renewal, rebirth, and the continuation of life.

3.4. Functional Parallels

The bodily placement and functional roles of the two forms also show certain parallelism – both amulets and earrings were objects intended to be worn on the body, bringing their symbolic properties into direct contact with the wearer. Chnoubis gems functioned as protective and therapeutic amulets, and their placement on the body was therefore integral to their efficacy, particularly in relation to ailments of the abdomen and reproductive organs. The hoop earrings, although primarily items of adornment, likewise occupied a highly visible and symbolically significant position on the body, framing the face and potentially marking the status of the wearer through their leonine imagery.[23]

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[22] Eftimovski 2024.

[23] On lion jewelry as part of the 'elite' female dress in ancient Macedonia: Castor 2017.

This bodily function acquires an additional dimension in funerary contexts, where both magical amulets and hoop earrings could accompany the deceased as grave goods. The deposition of Chnoubis amulets in graves, including the physician's burial at Pella, suggests that objects originally associated with bodily protection could retain significance beyond life. Similarly, the frequent occurrence of lion-protome earrings in female burials may indicate that their significance extended beyond personal adornment to include aspects of identity, protection, or even regeneration. In both cases, therefore, an object worn upon the body could become a funerary object, potentially carrying its protective and regenerative symbolism from the sphere of lived experience into the ritual context of death.

3.5. Symbolism of Material Transformation

Perhaps the most esoteric parallel concerns the symbolic relationship between metalworking and cosmological craftsmanship. The hoop earrings were fashioned from precious metal through highly specialized artisanal techniques, transforming a raw material extracted from the earth into a carefully ordered and symbolically charged object. In many archaic and traditional societies, metalworkers occupied an ambiguous and often liminal position, their mastery over fire, metals and transformation sometimes being associated with ritual or priestly knowledge. Mircea Eliade, in his studies of archaic metallurgy, emphasized precisely this conception of the smith as a figure who participates in processes analogous to those of nature itself: through fire and technical knowledge, the smith accelerates, completes, or transforms processes occurring within the earth. In this sense, goldsmithing may be understood not merely as craftsmanship, but as a symbolic act of transformation in which the artisan assumes a quasi-cosmological role.[24]

This provides an intriguing conceptual parallel with the Gnostic notion of the Demiurge, particularly in traditions in which the lion-headed serpent is identified with Yaldabaoth. The Demiurge is, by definition, a craftsman or maker, responsible for ordering and fashioning the material cosmos, although in Gnostic thought this creative activity is frequently presented as an imperfect or misguided imitation of the higher divine creation. The comparison should therefore be taken into consideration at the symbolic level: in both cases, the figure of the maker stands between raw or primordial matter and an ordered form, exercising transformative power through craftsmanship.

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[24] Eliade 1978. Also see: Budd and Taylor 1995. Previous studies have indicated that such a "metallurgical" aspect was symbolically more emphasized in the case of the hoop earrings with dark-skinned human characters: Chausidis 2009; Čausidis 2019; Čausidis 2019b.

4. An Orphic Connection?

The most influential Balkan and Hellenic philosophical and religious components in the formation of later Gnostic concepts should be sought in the writings of Plato and his conception of the Demiurge, as well as in the teachings of Orphism. If we accept the proposed influence of the latter, particular significance should be given to the Orphic understanding of the soul and the relationship between spiritual and material existence, which reflect forms of dualism that would later become significant within certain Gnostic traditions.[25] In this context, attention should also be given to the primordial Orphic figure of Phanes (Protogonos/Eros), who has been considered a possible source of inspiration for Plato's Demiurge,[26] and subsequently for the Gnostic Demiurge. In Orphic theogony, the first-born god Phanes emerges from the Cosmic Egg and is associated with blazing light, golden wings, and primordial creative power.[27] These attributes are of particular interest in relation to the solar and cosmogonic dimensions of the lion-headed serpent of later traditions. The marble relief from the Galleria Estense in Modena, dated to the 2nd century CE, provides an especially important visual parallel. At a time when the various syncretic and esoteric religious traditions were developing and interacting across the Mediterranean, the relief depicts a winged human figure associated with Phanes and Aion, supplemented by a lion's head on the chest and a serpent coiling around the body – as he is being born from the flames of the hatched Cosmic Egg (T.II: 1).[28] All of this is encircled by the Zodiac, evoking the circularity of time and, by extension, the cyclical nature of the cosmos and life itself. This conception of cosmic circularity is closely related to the cyclical journey of the soul, including its successive incarnations or transmigrations, as expressed in Orphic and Platonic traditions.[29] In a transformed form, the notion of the cyclical transmigration of souls also appears in some Gnostic teachings, although within an otherwise predominantly linear conception of the origin and ultimate destiny of the cosmos. As the material world was understood as a "prison" for the individual souls, their successive transmigrations were therefore part of a process of "purification" that would ultimately lead to their "liberation" from the material realm fashioned by the Demiurge.[30]

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[25] Rudolph 1987, 284–286; Stojčevska-Antić and Dragojlović 1990, 15–29.

[26] Santamaría Álvarez 2016.

[27] Kerényi 1951, 16–17; Stojčevska-Antić and Dragojlović 1990, 15–29; Christopoulos 2010.

[28] Vermaseren 1956, 253, 254 (no. 695); Le Glay 1981, 403 (no. 17); Papathanassiou 1991; Turcan 1994, no.1.

[29] Mitevski 2012, 45–51, 221–238.

[30] Rudolph 1987, 109, 195.

In this context, we should also mention the character of Chronos–Heracles from the Hieronymian Orphic theogony, which probably originated in the Hellenistic period. As the personification of primordial Time, Chronos–Heracles, together with Ananke ("Necessity"), generated the Cosmic Egg from which Phanes was brought forth. In this case, it is important to us that Chronos–Heracles was imagined as a dragon with three heads, one of which was leonine (the other being that of a man and a bull).[31] This composite being introduces a particularly relevant combination of serpentine and leonine imagery within a cosmological framework. We think that the combination of the dragon's body and the lion's head recalls, at a basic structural level, the hybrid form of the lion-headed serpent.

It is perhaps noteworthy that Orphism, or religious practices closely associated with it, were particularly connected with Macedonia – both on a mythological and an archaeological level.[32] More so, the ritual practices of ancient Macedonian women, described by Plutarch as "Orphic" and "Bacchic", are reported to have also incorporated snakes.[33] Such traditions were contemporary with the emergence and spread of hoop earrings and other jewelry with lion protomes in the Late Classical and Early Hellenistic period, which, as we noted, were very popular among Macedonian women. This type of jewelry also probably had a strong "Heracleian" dimension,[34] and given the prominent "ancestral" significance of Heracles in ancient Macedonian royal and religious traditions,[35] one should not neglect the possible relation with the "demiurgic" figure of Chronos–Heracles in the Hieronymian Oprhic theogony. Although this temporal and cultural proximity cannot be taken as evidence of direct causality or transmission, it nevertheless points to a complex Macedonian religious milieu that incorporated Orphic traditions, serpentine symbolism, and leonine imagery, which coexisted and perhaps influenced each other. This context can therefore be relevant when considering the possible symbolic relations between the Hellenistic hoop earrings and the later leonine-serpentine imagery discussed above.

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[31] Meisner 2018, 119–15

[32] On the mythological connections between Orpheus and Macedonia: Graf and Johnston 2007, 167; Proeva 2014, 156–158. On "Orphic" funerary gold tablets from Macedonia: Graf and Johnston 2007, 40–47. On the Orphic contents of the Derveni Papyrus discovered in Macedonia: Meisner 2018, 51–85.

[33] Plut. Alex. 2; Graf and Johnston 2007, 143; Proeva 2014, 117.

[34] Castor 2017.

[35] Price 1973.

5. Other Late Antique and Medieval Associations

The leonine-serpentine combination also continued to appear in various forms throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. A particularly relevant example is the Mithraic leontocephale, a lion-headed figure frequently represented with a serpent coiling around its body (perhaps some version of Aion?) (T.II: 2).[36] Although its connection to the synchronous characters of Chnoubis and the Gnostic Demiurge is very contentious,[37] the combination of leonine, serpentine, and cosmological elements provides another expression of a recurring symbolic repertoire which may have developed independently into similar, yet nevertheless different mythological characters.

With the triumph of Christianity, the lion and serpent were increasingly reinterpreted within a framework of Christian victory over evil and the forces of the "old pagan world", as expressed in Psalm 91:13 ("… *Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: The young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet*…"). This symbolism can be seen in the triumphal imagery of Christ in Ravenna, Italy, as well as in the baptistery of the Early Christian "Southern Basilica" at Plaoshnik in Ohrid, Macedonia, where the newly initiated Christians had to symbolically trample mosaic representations of a lion and serpents (T.II: 3). This psalm is also illustrated in the deaconicon's apse of the same "Southern Basilica" in Ohrid, where the lion and serpent are placed at both sides of a centrally placed cantharos flanked by two lambs drinking from it, i.e. a combination of Psalms 41 and 91.[38]

A much later manifestation of a similar idea may appear in the late 12th-century Ascension fresco at the church of St. George in Kurbinovo, near the eastern shore of the Great Prespa Lake in Macedonia. There we see a hybrid leonine figure with a serpentine tail (T.II: 5), positioned at the legs of the triumphant Christ, both of them placed together inside an aquatic mandorla filled with fish.[39] The regional context of Prespa is particularly intriguing given the region's possible Late Antique magical or "Gnostic" artifacts (a ring with an "Abrasax" inscription from Nakolec, as well as a glass Ouroboros from Golem Grad - T.II: 4)[40] and its later association with medieval dualist sects such as Bogomilism or similar.[41] These connections cannot establish direct continuity, but they provide a

[36] Dussaud 1950; Vermaseren 1956; Le Glay 1981, 405-409; Jackson 1985.

[37] Davies 1981; Jackson 1985.

[38] Tutkovski 2014.

[39] Hadermann-Misguich 1968; Grozdanov 2015, 31, 34, 58, photos: 242, 243; Lidov 2017, 165, 167 (ill.10); Gavrilović 2018, 255, 256; Eftimovski 2025, 125, 126, 360, 361.

[40] Eftimovski 2019.

[41] Čausidis 2003, 233, 234, 312–317, 349–361; Chausidis and Eftimovski 2023, 40, 41.

suggestive cultural background for the persistence and transformation of similar religious ideas. The possibility of earlier "non-canonical" religious remnants in the Kurbinovo fresco cycle is also indicated by other unusual imagery, notably the face seemingly incorporated into the mountain in the Descent into Hades, which may evoke contents from the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* (4th - 5th century CE).[42] It is also noteworthy that a comparable leonine-serpentine character appears in the even later medieval cave hermitage of Panagia Eleousa near Nivitsi (Psarades), on the southern shore of the Great Prespa Lake, which dates to the early 15th century CE.[43] This time, the figure consists of a distinctly leonine face with serpentine elements emerging from its mouth (T.II: 6), providing another local manifestation of the conjunction of leonine and serpentine imagery. Although its precise meaning remains uncertain (perhaps some kind of local water demon of the Prespa Lake?), its occurrence within the same broader cultural landscape as the figure from Kurbinovo is particularly intriguing and further demonstrates the persistence and transformation of the lion-serpent combination in the medieval period.

6. Concluding Remarks

The parallels discussed in the paper do not prove sufficient evidence for a direct connection between the Hellenistic hoop earrings with lion protomes, the lion-headed serpent Chnoubis of Late Antiquity, and later medieval leonine-serpentine imagery. Nevertheless, their recurring combination of similar iconographic and semiotic elements suggests a broader symbolic tradition worthy of further investigation and discussion. The Central Balkans, particularly Macedonia, provide an especially interesting context in which these motifs appear across different periods and religious traditions. Rather than proposing an uninterrupted line of transmission, these similarities may point to a long process of symbolic reinterpretation in which older motifs were adopted and then repeatedly adapted to new religious and cultural contexts. It is also possible that it is a case of similar symbolic ideas, some of them perhaps even archetypal, independently developing into comparable iconographic expressions. In any case, we think that these parallels offer a basis for further archaeological and semiotic research on cultural interconnection in the Eastern Mediterranean during Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

[42] Gorgievski 2015.

[43] Čausidis 1994, 388, T.LXXXVIII-6; Paissidou 2015, 306, 307, Fig. 4, Fig. 7.



T.I: 1, 2, 3. Various amulets with the image of the lion-headed serpent, Late Antiquity (after Montfaucon 1719); 4. Amulet with the image of the lion-headed serpent, Pella, Central Macedonia, Greece, 3rd century CE (Archaeological Museum of Pella / E. Tsatsou, after Tsatsou 2024); 5. Drawing of a lion-headed Ouroboros in PGM VII, Egypt, 3rd century CE (after Betz 1986); 6, 7, 8. Golden hoop earrings with lion protomes, Ohrid, N. Macedonia, 3rd century BCE (after Kuzman and Počuča-Kuzman 2014).



T.II: 1. Marble relief, Italy (Galleria Estense Modena, after Vermaseren 1956); 2. Marble statue, Ostia Antica, Italy (after Vermaseren 1956); 3. Mosaic floor, Baptistry of "Southern Basilica", Plaoshnik, Ohrid, N. Macedonia, Early Christian Period (after Tutkovski 2014); 4. Glass handle in the shape of an Ouroboros, Early Christian Basilica, Golem Grad Island, Prespa, N. Macedonia, Late Antiquity/Early Christian Period (after Bitrakova-Grozdanova 2015), 5. Detail from the Ascension of Christ, fresco painting, Church of St. George, Kurbinovo, Prespa, N. Macedonia, 12th century CE (photo: I. Eftimovski); 6. Detail of a fresco painting, Hermitage of Panagia Eleousa near Nivitsi (Psarades), Prespa, Greece, 15th century CE (after: Paissidou 2015).

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