

JAAKKO ARONEN

DRAGON CULTS AND ΝΥΜΦΗ ΔΡΑΚΑΙΝΑ IN IGUR 974

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DRAGON CULTS AND ΝΥΜΦΗ ΔΡΑΚΑΙΝΑ IN IGUR 974*

The Greek expression *νύμφη δράκαινα* used of an Imperial freedwoman in an otherwise Latin – and very stereotyped – funerary inscription from Rome has been recently discussed by M. Leiwo in his paper ‘The Mixed Languages in Roman Inscriptions’, in: *Acta Colloquii Epigraphici Latini*, eds. H. Solin, O. Salomies, U.-M. Liertz, Helsinki 1995, 300–301. The whole text runs as follows:¹ *[---]Jae Tertiae Aug(usti) lib(ertae) / νύμφη/ δρακαίνα / coniugi sine exemplo, / quae vix(it) ann(is) XXVI, / diebus III, hor(is) XI, / [---]Jallus collib(ertus) maritus / et / [Ter]tius pater / infelicissimi.*

Leiwo’s approach to the problem is what he calls “sociolinguistic”. He wonders why *δράκαινα* ‘she-dragon’, which is “always something horrible and evil”, could be connected with the positive expression *coniux sine exemplo*. “Maybe the wife had been a real horror to her husband, but this is said with another language, so that it is not so evident,” ponders Leiwo. He continues: “Or is it meant as an affective name, which means the opposite what is said? . . . Or perhaps she-dragons were tender mothers and loving wives to their own mates?”

I think that the history of religions provides a more fertile starting point and I would argue that the expression derives from the sphere of esoteric cults widely spread in the Roman Empire. Whether we should call them mysteries, mystic cults or simply Graeco-Oriental cults is not our concern here. Suffice it only to add that they were not restricted to cultic activities but included and caused theological-philosophical speculation in various circles (especially in the “underworld of Platonism”²: the so-called Chaldaean Oracles, Hermetism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonic authors, to mention some examples). These cults and the speculations used predominantly Greek as their language.³ Accordingly, the use of an established Greek cultic term in the inscription, although Latin was the language of the family in question, does not seem so strange. When speaking of oriental cults Latin writers frequently resorted to Greek forms of ritual terms and exclamations.⁴

If *νύμφη δράκαινα* is engraved in the inscription alongside *coniux sine exemplo*, it is clearly an indication not of a negative concept but of an honorific one, most probably denoting the woman’s membership in a religious association.

This is not the place for an exhaustive survey of the use of the dragon in Hellenistic-Imperial cults. Some examples may suffice to attest to the manifold applications of dragon imagery. As to the negativity of the dragon, it must be straightaway noted that various terrifying effects were part of the game, and that in esoteric contexts what for the outside world was completely terrifying could acquire ultimately positive symbolic meanings. Actually we cannot even say on a general level that the dragon was considered exclusively terrifying and negative in the Graeco-Roman world.⁵

* I wish to thank Prof. Gian Luca Gregori and Dr. Maria Letizia Caldelli (University of Rome “La Sapienza”) for kind assistance in preparing this paper. The latter lent me her yet unpublished contribution on CIL VI 30159 (to appear in *Tituli* 7). I am also grateful to Prof. Dr. Reinhold Merkelbach (Köln) for many useful suggestions and to my colleague Dr. Mika Kajava for some airing of ideas.

¹ I quote from IGUR 974. The text is also available in IG XIV 2036, CIL VI 27285/6 = 34179 and in ILS 8067. Ed. princeps: L. A. Muratori, *Novus thesaurus veterum inscriptionum* II, Mediolani 1740, p. 1014, No. 9.

² A term coined by J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, Cornell UP 1977, 384.

³ Cf. R. Turcan, *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*, Paris 1989, 13 (“la médiation de tous ces cultes était hellénophone”).

⁴ Cf. J. Kaimio, *The Romans and the Greek Language*, Helsinki 1979, 166.

⁵ Serpents and dragons (there is no clear distinction) could be *ἀγαθοὶ δαίμονες* as well. Due to their ability to shed their skin they often symbolize recurring time. See R. Merkelbach, s.v. *Drache*, *RLAC* 4 (1959) 227–228. In the course of this paper we are going to see that many dragons were objects of cults. Cf. also the classical work by E. Küster, *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion*, Gießen 1913.

The so-called mysteries of Glycon were presumably an artificial creation of a certain Alexander of Abonuteichos (2nd cent. A.D. on the Black Sea coast of Paphlagonia), an impostor and charlatan if we are to believe Lucian who described his activities in ‘Alexander or the False Prophet’. This was an oracular and soteriological cult concentrated on the figure of an enormous dragon (Glycon) with a human-like head.⁶ It included a temple, statues, religious personnel and various ceremonies of the mystery type (including initiation) which took place over three days annually; the second day was dedicated to a theatrical representation of the birth of the dragon from a goose-egg. In this cult various elements of the second century religious world were combined to form a new functional whole: the dragon was probably a re-elaboration and exaltation of Asclepius’ serpents,⁷ the mystery ceremonies were modelled loosely upon those of Eleusis. Oracular institutions were in a great demand in that period, and Alexander himself matches the typology of the ‘holy man’ of later antiquity. Perhaps some mysteriosophic-philosophical reflection was included.⁸ The mysteries (rather the mystery-type of cult) of Glycon were quite wide-spread and also found followers in Rome in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (even Marcus Aurelius was involved).⁹

In Tatianus’ *Adv. Graec.* 8 we hear about δράκων ὁ μυστικός for which no completely satisfying explanation has been found. Perhaps its habitat is the cult of Zeus Sabazios.¹⁰ The dragon appears together with a bull in a probably Dionysiac initiation formula: τὰ ὑρος δράκοντος καὶ τὰ ὑρου δράκων πατήρ.¹¹ A certain Cyprian (4th cent. A.D.) was said to have been initiated as a child into the “dramaturgy of the dragon” μνηθεὶς ἔτι νήπιος τὴν τοῦ δράκοντος δραματουργίαν.¹² Whatever the exact origin, all these examples derive from mystic cults which included an initiation. To keep within mystic doctrines, also the Gnostic movements of the Naassenes, Ophites (from ὄφεις ‘serpent’) and

⁶ Κεφαλὴ δράκοντος ἀνθρωπόμορφόν τι ἐπιφαίνουσα (Lucian., *Alex.* 12). Judging from the iconography (see n. 9 below) the head is an amalgamation of human and canine features with long hair.

⁷ Glycon himself claimed “Ἐγὼ Ἀσκληπιὸς νέος” (Lucian., *Alex.* 43). In Black Sea and Balkan areas there seems to have been an age-old veneration of serpents, which is probably another contributing factor. For serpent cults in the Balkans, see M. Šašel Kos, *Tyche* 6 (1991) 183–192. The idea of establishing a dragon cult occurred to Alexander during his visit to Macedonia (Lucian., *Alex.* 7–8).

⁸ F. Cumont, *RHR* 86 (1922) 202–210 speaks of Pythagoreanism. I think this is partly true but I prefer to refrain from putting any label on this milieu of eclecticism.

⁹ It is somewhat difficult to get a picture of this cult since the description by Lucian (*Alex.* 12–40) is heavily affected by his satiric approach. At least three statues of Glycon have been preserved. He appears also in inscriptions, on coins and engraved gems (mostly in Bithynia, Galatia and Paphlagonia but also Antiochia, Athens and Dacia). For the cult of Glycon in general, cf. M. Caster, *Études sur Alexandre ou le faux prophète de Lucien*, Paris 1938; L. Robert, *A travers l’Asie Mineure: Poètes et prosateurs, monnaies grecques, voyageurs et géographie*, Paris 1980, 393–421 (good reproductions of the most spectacular statue, found at ancient Tomis in 1963, and the coins); C. P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian*, Harvard UP 1986, 133–148; G. Bordenache Battaglia, *LIMC* IV.1 (1988) 279–283 (a comprehensive list of the archaeological evidence) and Turcan (n. 3), 253–256.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* II (3rd ed.), München 1974, 660–661; G. Giuffrè Scibona, in: U. Bianchi – M. Vermaseren (eds.), *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’Impero Romano*, Leiden 1982, 555; R. Turcan, in: Firmicus Maternus. *L’erreur des religions païennes*, Paris 1982, 251–252, 330. On the dragon in the cult of Sabazios, cf. also R. Fellmann, in: M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich*, Leiden 1981, 318–320.

¹¹ This is the form preserved in Firm. Mat., *De err.* 26,1; other slightly different variants: Clem. Alex., *Protr.* 2,16,3 and Arnob., *Adv. nat.* 5,21. Turcan (n. 10), 330, and in: *Hommages à H. Le Bonniec. Res Sacrae*, Bruxelles 1988, 434–436, opts for a Dionysiac sphere. Note that in Firmicus Maternus, a Latin author, the formula is quoted in Greek.

¹² Confessio S. Cypriani in: *Acta SS.* Sept. 26, t. VII, p. 205. The basic study is still Th. Zahn, *Cyprian von Antiochien und die deutsche Faustsage*, Leipzig 1882. More recently e.g. L. Radermacher, *Griechische Quellen zur Faustsage*, Wien 1927; M. P. Nilsson, *Harv. Theol.* 40 (1947) 167–176 = *Opuscula Selecta* III, Lund 1960, 106–116; A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégistos* I, 2nd ed. Paris 1950, 37–40, 374–383. The standard interpretation which from L. Preller, *Philologus* 1 (1846) 349–350 onwards connects the text with the Delphic S(t)epherion festival is not convincing. Could we have here an allusion to the cult of Glycon? The Confessio is not of course one of the most reliable sources of late antique cults but, on the other hand, it conserves memories of pagan rituals. There is an urgent need for a new edition and for a new evaluation of the text.

Perates practised some kind of dragon worship.¹³ A pictorial representation of a dragon cult is provided by an alabaster bowl depicting a circle of naked worshippers and in the middle a great serpent. The nudity and the Orphic verses engraved on the object point once more to an esoteric (initiatory?) milieu.¹⁴ It may be that some Christian legends referring to the destruction of a dragon cult echo real cults with dragon imagery.¹⁵

A text from the eighth century A.D. describing pagan monuments of Constantinople seems to refer to a public dragon cult: a δράκων χαλκοῦς παμμεγέθης, a cult object, stood near a bridge.¹⁶ In addition, epigraphical evidence attests dragon-cults in Roman Africa, e.g. CIL VIII 9326 *Deo Manu Draconis*; 15247 *Draconi Aug(usto) sacrum*.¹⁷ As regards the Balkan areas, M. Šašel Kos has recently republished and discussed an interesting Paeonian inscription which she dates to the 1st century A.D.: Τι(βέριος) Κλαύδιος Ροῦφος οὐ/ετρανὸς ἐκ πραιτω/ρίου Δράκοντι τῶ / ὧδε τειμωμένῳ δῶρον.¹⁸ Šašel Kos considers this as an indication of the continuity of a prehistoric worship of snakes in the central Balkans.

What about Rome? In a Roman inscription we find a dedication to *Sancti Dracones*.¹⁹ In another inscription from the environs of Rome we have the toponym *Dracones*.²⁰ Do these two occurrences refer to the same cult and is the place *Dracones* to be connected with the dragon cult *apud urbem Romam* mentioned in a Christian legend from the 4th century?²¹ From Rome comes also the following dedication: *ex] viso dracon[e]m C. Novius [Her]meros de s[ua pec]unia [ded]it*,²² which refers to the erection of a dragon statue in consequence of a premonitory or healing dream/vision.²³

If one had to name a deity with whom the dragon is most intensely associated, the choice would probably fall on Hecate. She was actually called δράκαινα in magical papyri and in speculations

¹³ Turcan (n. 3), 256–258.

¹⁴ The bowl is discussed by H. Leisegang, in: J. Campbell (ed.), *The Mysteries*. Eranos-Jahrbuch. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks, Princeton UP 1978, 194–196.

¹⁵ The legend of Pope Silvester (314–335) and the dragon has been preserved in two divergent versions of which one locates the cult of a *draco immanissimus* on the Capitolium and the other near the temple of Vesta in the Forum Romanum (see W. Pohlkamp, RQA 78 (1983) 1–100; J. Aronen, SMSR 51 (1985) 73–92, and in: E. M. Steinby (ed.), *Lacus Iuturnae I*, Roma 1989, 161–168). In the beginning of the 5th cent. A.D. a *draco mirae magnitudinis mechanica arte formatus, gladium ore gestans, oculis rutulantibus gemmis, metuendus ac terribilis*, a cult object, was said to have been destroyed by a certain monk *apud urbem Romam* (Quodvultdeus, *De prom. et praedict. Dei* 3,43; cf. Pohlkamp, 16–17; Aronen, 89–90). The *Passio* of St. Salsa attests the existence of a temple where a *draco fusus aere et auratus capite, oculis per ceraunea rutilantibus* had been venerated at Tipasa (Mauretania) in the beginning of the 4th cent. (*Catalogus codicum hagiographicorum Latinorum antiquiorum saec. VI, I*, Bruxelles 1889, 346).

¹⁶ A. Cameron – J. Herrin (eds.), *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, Leiden 1984, 85 (§ 22).

¹⁷ For further evidence and discussion, see M. Le Glay, in: *Hommages à W. Deonna*, Bruxelles 1957, 338–353.

¹⁸ Šašel Kos (n. 7), 186. First edited by L. Heuzey and H. Daumet, *Mission archéologique de Macédoine*, Paris 1876, 326, No. 131.

¹⁹ CIL VI 143 *Carpus Aug(usti) lib(ertus) Pallantianus sanctis Draconibus d(ono) d(edit)*.

²⁰ CIL VI 2345. The whole expression is *castellum viae Latinae contra Dracones*.

²¹ Note that *Dracones* need not necessarily be a cult place. Z. Mari, *Lex. Topogr. Urbis Romae I* (1993) 45 derives the name “da una fontana o da un’insegna di osteria”. For the Christian legend, see n. 15 above.

²² CIL VI 30866.

²³ At least once Asclepius is named as dedicatee of a dragon statue: AE 1973, 680 = J. M. Reynolds, *Libya Antiqua VIII*, 1971, 43–44 Ἀσκληπιῶι Βαλαργεῖτι Ἰητρῶι [- - Λο]υκοῦλλος ἐπίτροπος Σεβαστοῦ . . . δράκοντα ἀργύρεον. Asclepius may have been meant also in the above quoted CIL VI 30866 since his cult included the *incubatio* practice and in general he was known for visionary appearances. In the 2nd cent. A.D. Aelius Aristides reported his Asclepius visions in ‘Sacred Tales’. The Asclepius cult was also one basic ingredient in the mysteries of Glycon, cf. above. An inscription from Augusta Taurinorum (Torino) records a *dea* as the dedicatee: CIL V 6965 *quaest(or) aed(ilis), Ilvir q(uin)q(uennalis) dracon(em) auri p(ondo) I deae don(o) posuit*.

deriving from the Chaldaean Oracles or a related system of thought.²⁴ In addition, she is constantly depicted as girdled with serpents and dragons²⁵ and she appears to her followers in the shape of dragon-headed phantasms: τὰ δὲ φάσματα αὐτῆς δρακοντοκέφαλοι ἄνθρωποι.²⁶ It is worthwhile quoting the description of Hecate handed down by the Byzantine author Michael Italicus (12th cent.) who draws from late antique mysteriosophy: λέγω τὴν . . . δράκαιναν καὶ δρακοντόζωνον· ἦν καὶ σπειροδρακοντόζωνον ἄλλοι παρασυνθέτως προσαγορεύουσι.²⁷

We know that Hecate had distinct esoteric cults in various parts of the empire (called μυστήρια, ὄργια, τελεταί in ancient sources) and also in Rome.²⁸ Sometimes she is included in the Mithraic context²⁹ and sometimes she is closely identified with Persephone, Selene and, above all, Artemis, to the extent that a clear-cut distinction between these goddesses cannot always be made.³⁰

In his paper Leiwo has found one passage by John Chrysostom where Artemis is characterized as δράκαινα, whereas Ἐκκλησία, the Christian church, as νύμφη, the bride of Christ.³¹ The church as bride is a very common image in Christian thought,³² but why is it linked here with Artemis δράκαινα? Could we have a subtle allusion to pagan religious terminology? There is of course no definitive answer to this question and to its pertinence to the expression νύμφη δράκαινα in our inscription.³³ In the light of what was said above about the link between Hecate and the dragons and her frequent identification with Artemis, it is in any case worthwhile noting the occurrence of an Artemis δράκαινα in this Chrysostomian passage. We may be reminded of the grove of Artemis in Phrygia, dwelling place of a δράκων θεῖος, μέγιστος τὴν ὄψιν³⁴ or of Medea to whom Artemis came ἐπὶ δρακόντων ὄχουμένη (“riding upon dragons”).³⁵ Neoplatonist Proclus advised invoking Artemis as σπειροδρακοντόζωνος (“girt with coils of dragons”),³⁶ the same rare epithet that we saw above as referring to Hecate.

To return to our inscription, it must be observed first and foremost that δράκαινα is not unparalleled in epigraphy. From the territory of Scupi (Moesia Superior) comes the following text (3rd

²⁴ PGM IV 2302; Michael Italicus, Epist. 17 (quoted below). Cf. Aronen (n. 15), 88–89. Actually, the imagery and terminology in the body of material traditionally called “The Greek Magical Papyri” is in many aspects similar to those of the secret cults. There is still much to be studied in this field. An introduction to the problem is provided by H. D. Betz, in: C. A. Faraone – D. Obbink, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, Oxford 1991, 244–259.

²⁵ Cf. Soph. Fr. 535 Radt; Ap. Rhod. 3,1214–1215; Artemid. 2,13; Lucian., *Philops.* 22; PGM IV 2805, 2861–2865; Orph. Argon. 982; Porph., Fr. 320 Smith; Psellus, *Epitaph. Ionn. Xiph.* p. 459 Sathas.

²⁶ Soud. s.v. Ἐκάτη.

²⁷ Michael Italicus, Epist. 28 (p. 190 Gautier). Printed also in: *É. des Places, Oracles Chaldaïques avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, Paris 1971, 216.

²⁸ The most comprehensive list of cult places has been compiled by J. Aronen, in: J. Pentikäinen – R. Gothóni (eds.), *Mythology and Cosmic Order*, Helsinki 1987, 68 (to be added to SEG 1984, 258 from Sicily). Complete list of epigraphical evidence from Rome in Aronen (n. 15), 81–83. Hecate found her way also into theological-philosophical speculations of late antiquity, cf. J. Aronen, in: *Mythology and Cosmic Order* (above in this note), 64–67; S. I. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, Atlanta, Georgia, 1990, and S. Ronan (ed.), *The Goddess Hekate*, Hastings 1992, 79–148 (at times uncritical).

²⁹ Aronen (n. 15), 81–88; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras, Königstein/Ts.*, 1984, 234–235.

³⁰ Cf. Steuding, in: Roscher’s *Lex. d. griech. u. röm. Myth.* I.2 (1886–1890) 1896–1897; Th. Hopfner, in: *Pisciculi* (Festschr. Dölger), Münster in Westfalen 1939, 125–145.

³¹ *In laudem S. Joannis theol.*, PG 61,719.

³² Cf., e.g., Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v. νύμφη A.

³³ To be sure, dragons have always a highly negative value in Christian religion (e.g. Apoc. 12, cf. Merkelbach, n. 5, 238–250) so that it could be used merely as an abusive term to denote something representing pagan religion. But, on the other hand, the first Christian theologians were well aware of the terminology of pagan esoteric cults, see J. D. B. Hamilton, *Eph. Theol. Lovan.* 53 (1977) 479–494.

³⁴ Claud. Ael., *De anim.* 12,39.

³⁵ Diod. Sic. 4,51,4. But in all other sources Medea’s tutelary goddess is Hecate.

³⁶ As reported by Psellus (10th cent.) in a text printed in: *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs VI 62,4*. The whole context shows that a very Hecate-like Artemis is meant, cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Univ. of California Press 1951, 305–306, n. 76.

cent. A.D.): *Iovi et Iuno/ni, Dracco/ni et Dracce/nae (sic) et Ale/xandro Epil/tychanus s(ervus) / [F]uri Octavi[ani] / c(larissimi) v(iri) posuit*.³⁷ It would seem plausible to connect the inscription with the cult of Glycon (cf. above) since alongside the dragon and she-dragon the dedication also included the prophet Alexander, the founder of the cult.³⁸ However, this opinion has been called into question by some scholars. Šašel Kos connects the dragons with local serpent cults especially with the Illyrian cult of the Theban heroes Cadmus and Harmonia who, according to some mythical versions, were turned into dragons and retired to southern Illyria.³⁹ She follows Groag's theory that Alexander, for his part, is actually Alexander the Great or, more properly speaking, his alleged spirit.⁴⁰ According to Cassius Dio in 221 A.D. a certain δαίμων, accompanied by four hundred men, appeared in Upper Moesia and Thrace claiming to be Alexander of Macedon and behaving in a Dionysiac manner (βακχεύων).⁴¹ Do we have here another "false prophet" calling himself Alexander or must we suppose a confusion in Dio's piece of information and conclude that it probably concerns the expansion to this area of the Glycon cult created by Alexander of Abonuteichos?⁴² I think it is wisest to leave the matter open here.⁴³ Of utmost importance for the present theme was to attest a δράκαινα, although in a transcribed form, in an undoubtedly cultic context.

Another transcribed δράκαινα occurs in a badly mutilated inscription from the Roman Forum: *[---] veste adv[---] / [---ne]bride cinctu[---] / [---]jiti dracen[a--] / ---?*⁴⁴ The lacunae notwithstanding, the editors agree on the religious character of the text. We owe to Buecheler the completions *ne]bride* and *dracen[a* and, in addition, the following observation: "videtur ad sacra carmen pertinuisse mystica".⁴⁵ *Nebris* is a Greek word denoting the fawn-skin used especially in the cult of Dionysus. Another highly interesting suggestion of Buecheler is to read in the last line *triodyjiti*,⁴⁶ if one keeps in mind that this was one of the names of Hecate due to her close connection with crossroads.⁴⁷ If Buecheler is right, it is important to note the use of Greek religious terminology (*nebris*, *triodytis*, *dracena*) although written in Latin characters.

In her new edition, Caldelli tentatively attributes the inscription to the cult of Bacchus.⁴⁸ This solution has its advantages but, at the same time, the term *dracena* still lacks convincing interpretation. Caldelli thinks that the dragon comes from the religious sphere of Sabazius. The feminine form is never

³⁷ CIL III S. 8238 = I.Més.Sup. VI 10.

³⁸ This connection has already been postulated by Th. Mommsen, Eph. Epigr. 2 (1875) 331. Cf. also the then nineteen year old Franz Cumont, in: *Mém. couronnés Acad. de Belgique* 40 (1887) 13–50.

³⁹ Šašel Kos (n. 7), 187–189. For the metamorphosis, cf. M. Rocchi, *Kadmos e Harmonia: un matrimonio problematico*, Roma 1988, 118, 131–134. There are variants of the metamorphosis motif: Illyria is not always mentioned, according to Nonnus (Dion. 46,364–367), the dragons were of stone, some sources speak of one two-headed dragon (Ov., *Metam.* 4,600; *Stat.*, *Theb.* 4,555).

⁴⁰ E. Groag, *Wiener Eranos*, 1909, 251–255. See also Caster (n. 9), 96.

⁴¹ Dio 79,18,1 Boissevain.

⁴² The cult of Glycon was quite widely diffused. See n. 9, especially the articles by Robert and Bordenache Battaglia.

⁴³ Bordenache Battaglia (n. 9), 280 thinks that Alexander is Alexander of Abonuteichos but the dragons derive from "un sincretismo provinciale molto confuso".

⁴⁴ CIL 30159, cf. also Buecheler in CLE 1624. This is perhaps a metrical inscription. An additional larger fragment was announced in CIL VI, p. 4048, but was never published. Now the inscription is finally integrated and re-edited by M. L. Caldelli (to appear in *Tituli* 7). Unfortunately the new (superior) part is as mutilated as the already known part and does not help much in interpreting the text. Henzen (CIL) and Buecheler date the inscription to the 4th cent. A.D. Caldelli prefers the 3rd cent.

⁴⁵ Buecheler (n. 44).

⁴⁶ An opinion not included in the edition itself but expressed in a note.

⁴⁷ See Johnston (n. 28), Greek Index, s.v. τριodyτης (very often in the magical papyri; cf. n. 24 on their relation to esoteric cults). In Latin a common adjective used with Hecate's name is *trivia* (from *trivium* 'crossroad'). For more on Hecate and crossroads, see Johnston, *ZPE* 88 (1991) 217–222.

⁴⁸ Caldelli (n. 44).

attested either in the cult of Sabazius or in the cult of Dionysus. On the other hand, it is true that these cults were often intimately associated,⁴⁹ and, as Caldelli notes, *arb[or]* and *saxum*, two decipherable words in the first part of the fragment, and *ne]bris* in the latter part are central concepts in the Dionysiac imagery.

Perhaps we do not have to attribute to the whole poem elements of one cult only. In late antiquity esoteric cults could be freely associated, they could borrow from each other, and, according to an old polytheistic principle, one person could be initiated into many of them. E.g. at Cosa (Etruria) there was a building where people gathered for secret nocturnal meals in honour of, among other gods, Dionysus, Sabazius and Hecate.⁵⁰ It is noticeable that the archaeological documentation contains also a lot of “snakeware”⁵¹ (various ritual vessels featuring snakes). Then we have, to give another example, a considerable number of inscriptions of late 4th century Rome’s pagan élite which record for one person several memberships of oriental and mystery cults.⁵²

The fragment containing the word *dracena* was found in the Roman Forum near the temple of Vesta and the other part comes from the nearby Basilica Aemilia. This is quite curious since the Christian legend of Pope Silvester and the dragon speaks of *virgines sacrae in templo Vestae* who had to bring food offerings to a dragon: *Solebant enim virgines sacrae in templo Vestae omni kalendarum die ad eum (sc. draconem) descendere cibosque ei similaginis ministrare.*⁵³ The relationship between the temple and the dragon is repeated in the ‘Mirabilia Urbis Romae’ from the 12th century: *ibi est templum Vestae ubi dicitur inferius draco cubare.*⁵⁴ In addition, two obscure mentions from Christian authors allude to a cultic liaison between the Vestals and a dragon. Tertullian (*Ad uxor.*, 1,6,3) says of the virgins: *auspicia poenae suae cum ipso dracone curantes*, and these are the words of Paulinus of Nola (*Carm.* 32,142–143): *Vestae quas virgines aiunt quinquennes epulas audio portare draconi.*⁵⁵ The unsolvable problem is how to make enter the old Roman Vesta into this context. Perhaps our sources, all of late Christian origin, connected erroneously a rite that took place near the temple of Vesta with the activities of the Vestals. This can have been made possible by the fact that also the ministers of the dragon cult were women (*δράκαινα*?). It is clear that our *νύμφη δράκαινα* was not a Vestal since she was married. The words *cibos* and *epulas* in our sources may refer to sacred meals in the manner of the above mentioned cult at Cosa. On the other hand, they recall the famous “suppers” (*δειπνα*), the monthly (cf. *omni kalendarum die* in the legend of St. Silvester, above) food offerings to Hecate.⁵⁶

Even if we decide to be cautious and not to proceed to any hasty attributions, a comparison can be made between our three attestations of *δράκαινα*/*draccena*/*dracena*. In IGUR 974 the term clearly indicates a person, a member of a cult or a priestess. The same is possible in another Roman inscription, CIL VI 30159 (discussed above), if we read in the last line *dracena* in the nominative as denoting the dedicant. Unfortunately this is not a fool-proof reading. In CIL III S. 8238 from Upper Moesia *dracco* and *draccena* were those to whom something is dedicated. They can be deities and in this way not directly comparable to *δράκαινα* in IGUR 974. An alternative interpretation is to see in these

⁴⁹ For the dragon in the cults of Dionysus and Sabazius, cf. nn. 10–11 above. On the parallelization of these two cults, cf. S. E. Johnson, ANRW II.17.3 (1984) 1587–1588; Turcan (n. 3), 289–324. The possibility of a kind of *hieros gamos* between the initiand and the dragon in the cult of Dionysus-Sabazius will be discussed below.

⁵⁰ See J. Collins-Clinton, *A Late Antique Shrine of Liber Pater at Cosa*, Leiden 1977.

⁵¹ Collins-Clinton’s term (n. 50), 24.

⁵² CIL VI 500, 504, 507, 510, 1675, 1779, 30966 (= IGUR 128), 31940; AE 1953, 238; 1971, 35 etc.

⁵³ For the legend, cf. n. 15 above with references. Pohlkamp (n. 15) dates the text to the late 4th or early 5th century.

⁵⁴ R. Valentini – G. Zucchetti, *Codice topografico della città di Roma III*, Roma 1946, 56. For discussion, cf. Aronen and Pohlkamp (n. 15).

⁵⁵ In the next line the Christian poet hesitates about the truthfulness of this hearsay: *qui (sc. draco) tamen aut non est –* and adds characteristically – *aut si est diabolus ipse est*. Cf. n. 33 above on the symbolism of the dragon in Christian religion.

⁵⁶ Demosth. 54,39; Aristoph. *Plut.* 594 and schol.; *Plut. Q. Rom.* 290d, *Q. conv.* 708f, etc. For discussion and further references, cf. Steuding (n. 30), 1888–1889; Aronen (n. 15), 78; Johnston (n. 47), 219.

dedicatees the (local?) leading officials of the cult appearing together with the holy man Alexander, founder of the cult (presuming that the cult of Glycon is that in question).

In every case, the comparison has demonstrated that *δράκαινα* when it occurs in an inscription is a cultic term. As regards *νύμφη*, some additional considerations must be made. The issue is if that word is part of the cultic denomination or if it is intended in the usual sense of ‘bride’, ‘newlywed wife’.

The unity of the concept *νύμφη δράκαινα* is evident: these are the only Greek words in the inscription and, in addition, written together on a separate line in the lay-out. Why *νύμφη δράκαινα*? Was the simple *δράκαινα* not enough? Was there any reason to mention the ‘bride’ status of the wife? According to statistics, Roman women married normally at the age of 15 or a couple of years later.⁵⁷ Our [---]a *Tertia* was 26 years old when she died. That is to say: according to the demographical patterns she would have been married to her husband some ten years by then. These kinds of calculations are, of course, generalizing and I do not deny that *νύμφη* could have been used in the traditional sense in the inscription, e.g. referring to the fact that as bride she had been a *δράκαινα*. This means that to have been one was important enough to be recalled on the tombstone.

There is also the common mythical and folk-tale motif which connects young girls with the dragon. The girl can be destined as a wife or an offering to the animal.⁵⁸ If the former case was ever realized on the level of actual cultic practices (e.g. in the form of a *hieros gamos*), is not, as far as I know, attested except for certain type of sexual symbolism in the cult of (Dionysus-)Sabazius: a snake made of metal was made to pass beneath the initiand’s clothes.⁵⁹ However, in the present state of comparative material it would be hazardous to maintain that *δράκαινα* should be understood as an adjectival form and translate the two words ‘bride of the dragon’.

Since the expression is set apart and written in Greek, it calls for another hypothesis. We are fortunate to have the exclamation *χαίρε νύμφε, χαίρε νέον φῶς*, undoubtedly deriving from a mystery cult.⁶⁰ Various cults have been suggested but nowadays the Mithraic origin is well established.⁶¹ In fact, one of its initiation grades was called *νύμφος*. Everyone agrees on the significance of the word *νύμφος* in this context: it describes the state of a neophyte, a newly initiated member.⁶² *Νύμφη* could be interpreted accordingly.

⁵⁷ S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, Oxford 1991, 400–401.

⁵⁸ The connection of the maidens with the dragons is evident in many Christian accounts (the legend of S. Silvester and Quodvultdeus in n. 15, the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* in n. 16). The cults of Bona Dea and Iuno Sospita (also the Vestals participated in these ceremonies) included the presence of dragons as a kind of virginity ordeal. I am not going to discuss these issues in this paper, cf. recently Aronen, in: *Lacus Iuturnae* (n. 15), 161, and A. Mastrocinque, *Romolo, Este* 1993, 44–48 with references. The story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius, notoriously containing mythical and folk-tale elements (see esp. G. Binder – R. Merkelbach [eds.], *Amor und Psyche*, Darmstadt 1968), suggests that Psyche’s husband could have been a monstrous serpent (*Metam.* 4,33; 5,17). For this kind of elements in fairy-tales and other mythologies, cf. also V. J. Propp, *Le radici storiche dei racconti di fate*, Torino 1972 (originally in Russian 1946), 400–404; L. Röhrich, *Enz. d. Märchens* 3 (1981) 792–794, 802.

⁵⁹ *Clem. Alex., Protr.* 2,16; *Arnob., Adv. nat.* 5,20–21, *Firm. Mat., De err.* 10,2, etc. In a Dionysiac myth Persephone was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a snake and she gave birth to Dionysus. This suggests that the rite re-enacted the begetting of Dionysus. For the dragon in the cult of Sabazius and for Sabazius’ frequent identification with Dionysus, see notes 10 and 49 above.

⁶⁰ *Firm. Mat., De err.* 19,1. Also a Greek phrase in the middle of the Latin text.

⁶¹ For instance Turcan (n. 10), 296–297 and Merkelbach (n. 29), 91, attribute it to Mithraism; other opinions include the cult of Dionysus and the Eleusinian mysteries, see Turcan (n. 10), 296–297 with literature.

⁶² Merkelbach (n. 29), 88–90 has recently interpreted *νύμφος* as ‘chrysalis’ i.e. the intermediate stage between a larva and an adult bee. It would be the masculine form of *νύμφη* which really has that meaning (LSJ s.v.). The feminine *νύμφη* does not, of course, occur in Mithraism since women were excluded. The presence of a bee in some Mithraic monuments, zoological terminology and theologico-philosophical speculations offer support to this view which has not been subsequently rejected either by W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Harvard UP 1987, 99 or by Turcan (n. 3), 230, although the latter translates the word “Fiancé ou Jeune marié”. There are indications that in certain ritual occasions the Mithraic *νύμφοι* wore a nuptial veil so that the animal imagery was not exclusive. In every case the symbolism is always the same: the passage of an adept into a new, more advanced, status in the religious association (and in his existence in the soteriological perspective).

In this context mention should also be made of the following inscription from Syracuse (4th–5th cent. A.D.): Εἰρήνηα νύμφη / ὧδε κεῖται / κατὰ τοῦ μυστηρίου οὖν τούτου μή τῷδε ἄνύξη.⁶³ P. Orsi who took for granted the Jewishness of the epitaph saw the word νύμφη as indicating ‘celestial bride’ in a mystic sense.⁶⁴ In his new edition D. Noy prefers ‘girl of marriageable age’ (there is no mention of husband).⁶⁵ Now, since the Jewish origin cannot be regarded as certain and the inscription contains the enigmatic words κατὰ τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου, it is not impossible to see here a cultic title.⁶⁶

The mysteries of Mithras included seven initiation grades, the first two of which were κόραξ and the above-mentioned νύμφος.⁶⁷ The latter may be compared with νύμφη in our inscription if we want to give to that word a cultic meaning. But, in addition, κόραξ (‘raven’) as well as the fourth grade, λέων (‘lion’), are significant with regard to δράκαινα, in that they attest an animal name for a group of participants in an esoteric cult. There is also evidence of a mimic ritual where the ‘ravens’ and ‘lions’ dressed in animal guise.⁶⁸ Ritual theatrical presentations were typical of some secret ceremonies and we have seen above that they were also an important part of the Glycon cult. Whether our δράκαινα participated in ritual performances disguised as a dragon, remains, unfortunately, only a matter of conjecture.

In conclusion, I have tried to retrace the *Sitz im Leben* of the expression νύμφη δράκαινα. I am inclined to see in it a female initiate into an esoteric religious association, perhaps with some sacerdotal duties.⁶⁹ Many details remain naturally open due to the paucity of documentation. I think that in this situation putting together the scattered evidence, comparing religio-historically and posing the relevant questions was a better method than giving forced answers. That is why I refrained from naming the cult in question. One can hypothesize a dragon cult (one example: the mysteries of Glycon) or, in any case, a cult with intense dragon imagery (two examples: the mysteries of Hecate, the mysteries of Dionysus-Sabazius). It is not excluded that the association in question was devoted to several deities (one example: the shrine at Cosa with the presence of Dionysus, Sabazius and Hecate, all of them gods with whom dragons were associated). The language choice in the inscription is understandable since the technical language of esoteric Graeco-Oriental (and orientalizing) cults was usually Greek.

University of Helsinki

Jaakko Aronen

⁶³ D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe I*, Cambridge 1993, No. 151 (= CIJ I 651). The inscription has been usually interpreted as Jewish, but certain reservations may be due (cf. Noy ad loc.).

⁶⁴ P. Orsi, *RQA 14* (1900) 195.

⁶⁵ See n. 63 above.

⁶⁶ Besides, if the inscription really is Jewish, the use of Greek mystery terminology seems not unprecedented. In Noy, No. 114 (= CIJ I² 619b) from Venosa we find the title πατήρ πατέρων supposedly denoting the highest initiation grade in Mithraism.

⁶⁷ For a recent discussion of the Mithraic grades, see Merkelbach (n. 29), 86–133.

⁶⁸ Merkelbach (n. 29), 86–87; Turcan (n. 3), 230–231.

⁶⁹ A proper clergy attached to the cult place seems excluded, more probable is a *thiasos*-kind of association of worshippers and, in addition to Mithraism, a typological comparison may be made with, for instance, βάκχοι and βουκόλοι of the mysteries of Dionysus. On the social organization and coherence of esoteric cults, cf. Burkert (n. 62), 30–53. Cf. also the considerations in P. Pakkanen, *Interpreting Early Hellenistic Religion: A Study Based on the Cult of Isis and the Mystery Cult of Demeter*, Helsinki 1995, 47–48.