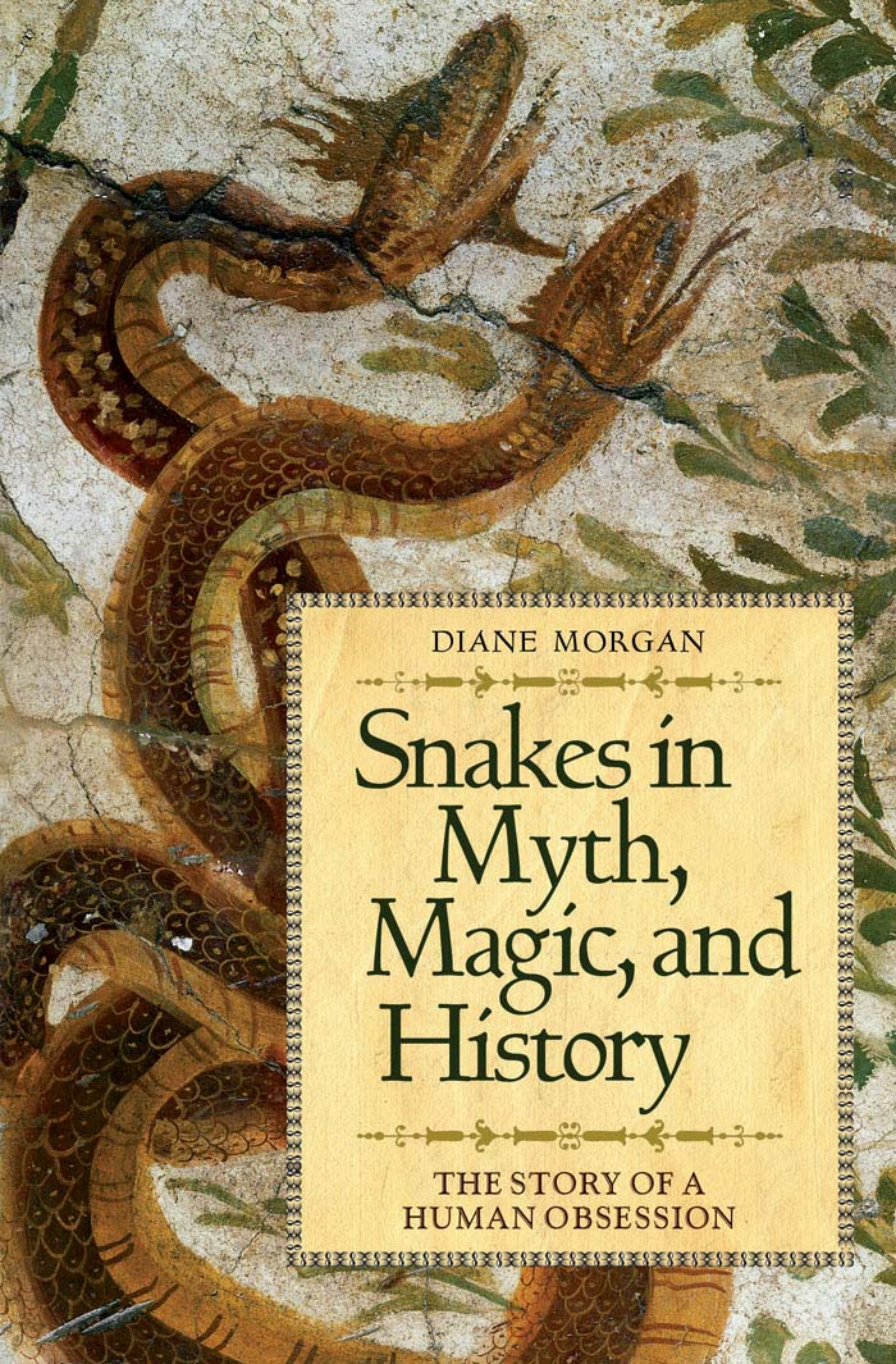
DIANE MORGAN
Snakes in Myth, Magic, and History
THE STORY OF A HUMAN OBSESSION

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The Story of a Human Obsession

Diane Morgan

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In memory of Steve Irwin and his efforts to conserve the wildlife of the world.

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Introduction

While snakes have a fascinating natural history, their supernatural history is equally strange and powerful. Natural history tells us the truth about snakes. Our notions about them tell the truth about us. This odd creature, of only moderate economic or ecological importance, is the very stuff of myth and legend and has wound its long way into the deepest recesses of the human psyche. Indeed, serpents are the cornerstones of our foundational myths. From the primeval Paradise of biblical lore to the plumed serpent of the Aztecs, from the sky-enfolding Cosmic Serpent to the invisible Kundalini coiled in the spine, the cult of the snake pervades every human culture. In India and Egypt, this iconic serpent is the cobra. In Europe it is the viper. In Africa it is the python. In the Americas it is the rattlesnake. Over and over, myths both ancient and modern, reflect our complex, ambivalent attitude toward this most powerful, most magical, and most terrible of all creatures.

Snakes are charmed by fakirs, slaughtered by exterminators, embraced by exotic dancers, kept by fanciers, tortured by sadists, and worshipped by millions. Their image is tattooed on bodies, emblazoned on flags, carved out of rock, rooted in myth, and torn out of nightmare. Their true kingdom, after all, is the realm of the human mind.

The closer one looks the harder it becomes to disentangle myth from reality or to know the "real" from the "imaginary." The tale of the serpent is a tangled coil worthy of the most serpentine among us. The serpent was in the Garden of Eden and has joined us in our long exile from it. He watched the birth of the human race. He will undoubtedly be with us at our end.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Natural and Unnatural History of the Snake

He has no legs, no ears, no sternum, no eyelids, no diaphragm, no shoulders, no bladder, no eardrums, and only one lung. (Perhaps as a concession to these deficiencies, he does have two penises.) He cannot run, jump, fly, howl, or even chew. He hears very poorly or not at all. He is immobilized by temperatures dipping below 55 degrees and goes positively stiff at 40. And despite his age-old reputation for wisdom, he is not even very smart. A mouse outranks him in the brains department.

Despite these drawbacks, however, the snake has managed rather well. He can swim, climb, and strike with remarkable speed. He can be all but invisible, yet has made his home on every continent except Antarctica. (Indeed, if you want to be assured of a snake-free environment, you are limited to Antarctica, the coldest parts of the Northern Hemisphere, and a few islands.)

Although we usually think of snakes as ground creepers, they can appear anywhere and are lords over all the elements—having been from earliest times and in all cultures associated with earth, water, air, and fire. They can dangle from trees and navigate lakes, rivers, and even the ocean. Sir Richard Owen, a well-known nineteenth-century anatomist, observed that the serpent could "outswim the fish and outclimb the monkey." And lest you think this is a bit of an exaggeration, it is well to recall that some snakes live upon fish and others dine on monkeys—so they have to be able to catch them. Some species even do a fair imitation of flying for short distances, a feat which has helped transmogrify them into the dragons of myth.

Although snakes exist almost everywhere on earth, and certainly everywhere in human myth, they live a famously secret (and secretive) life. They are at least as anxious to avoid our presence as we are to avoid theirs. Snakes that live near human habitations are more interested in our unwanted rodent companions than in us. Despite their shyness, however, snakes can appear a lot more often that most people would wish. They can pop out of holes, slither along fences, and

curl up under your porch. Many species are quite comfortable living in your attic, basement, or walls. Since the 1960s, numerous urban legends have circulated about snakes being found in coat pockets, usually a garment from the Burlington Coat Factory or other discount outlet. They are also periodically said to appear in roller-coaster cars. The fact that these tales are universally shown to be false hasn't stopped their constant resurrection. We know what we know. Besides, every once in a while, a snake does pop out of someone's toilet. That always makes the papers.

Even though snakes are quiet, unobtrusive, and come in a handsome assortment of colors, almost everything about them strikes fear or revulsion in the human heart—from the feel of their skin to their (literally) creepy locomotion to their bite.

According to the Discovery Health Channel, snakes are listed as the Number 1 "extreme fear" by 25% of Americans. The terror most of us feel at the glimpse of one of our legless friends (or even at the mention of one) is immediate, powerful, visceral, and deeply embedded in the mammalian psyche. Monkeys, apes, dogs, and horses often react precisely the same way, so it appears we come by our revulsion naturally. Technically the fear of snakes is called ophidiophobia and is classed as a disease, which makes for a whole lot of sick people. However, even people who escape a morbid fear of the snakes are still unnerved by them.

Their sudden appearance (and their appearance is almost always sudden) makes our blood run as cold as theirs does. "But never met this fellow / Attended or alone / Without a tighter breathing / and zero at the bone," Emily Dickinson shivered in the poem usually referenced "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass." And she was just talking about an American Garter Snake creeping decently along at her feet, not a Black Mamba.

Even places that have no snakes have snake myths. Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii, while under house arrest in 1895, recorded the creation myth of her people, in *Hawaii's story by Hawaii's Queen*. Part of it centered on a "humpy lumpy" serpent with a "long and waving lengthy tail," who lived on "dirt and mire" and whose lifestyle consisted of eating, resting, and throwing up. There are, of course, no snakes native to Hawaii.

There are no native snakes in Ireland either, as everyone knows. This is not particularly surprising, since many islands are naturally snakeless. However, the Emerald Isle has a famous and beloved myth attached to its situation: St. Patrick drove away the serpents from the island at the same time he banished evil and heresy. He stood on a hill, raised his wooden staff, rather like Moses, and evicted them into the sea. Interpretations of the story suggest that snakes represented evil, and Patrick got rid of the evil, or alternately that snakes were sacred to many ancient pre-Christian religions, and Patrick got rid of them to foil the pagans. For the early Christians, pure evil and pre-Christian religions were pretty much the same thing.

According to one twist of the tale, a certain snake declined to leave. St. Patrick outwitted the serpent by constructing a small box and daring the snake to enter.

The snake insisted the box was too small, and an argument ensued. Finally, the stupid snake said, "Okay, I'll show you how tight this thing is." He crept in, and Patrick slammed the lid down on the box and threw it into the ocean. So much for the ancient wisdom of the serpent.

Evolutionary herpetologists give St. Patrick no credit. They blame the Ice Age and Ireland's subsequent separation from the mainland for the island's being snake-free. You can believe what you want. I am sticking with St. Patrick. It seems safer. Later Irish folklore claims that Irish air is so pure that no snake could live in it. And even today someone from Ireland can simply draw a circle around a viper to immobilize it. So they say.

However, we shouldn't be too tough on snakes; our fear of them is almost completely misplaced. They are not out to get us. Of the approximately 3,000 species of serpents on earth, not one considers a human being ordinary prey. In fact, doctors probably kill more people than snakes do. Putatively friendly dogs, horses, and cattle are each responsible for killing more Americans every year than is the wily serpent. Worldwide, mosquitoes cause millions of human deaths annually. I could say that animals in general have it in for us, but we kill a far greater number of them than vice versa. And in this country more people are injured by golf balls than by snakes. (Golf balls take their toll on snakes, too. Every once in a while a snake attempts to swallow one, probably mistaking it for a succulent egg. Without surgical intervention the hapless snake is doomed. In one case recently, a carpet python pocketed four of them, which were removed surgically and then sold on eBay.)

Still, no matter how often we are told that mosquitoes, lightning, and walking across the street are more dangerous than snakes, it doesn't matter. Snakes are scary and Fords are not. Everyone knows that. Even some herpetologists don't like snakes, preferring lizards and amphibians.

Yet snake terror is not, after all, completely irrational. The snake's killing potential is legendary. He can do it quickly with a single venomous bite or slowly by constriction—the only vertebrate who makes a regular habit of the latter practice. And snakes do kill people once in a while, usually in a particularly terrifying, spectacular, and painful way, involving lots of bleeding, tissue and cellular destruction, vomiting, spasms, paralysis, massive infection, and seizures. The fact that snakes attack us almost entirely in self-defense does little to relieve our fears. After all, who knows what a snake may find threatening?

The Greek fabulist Aesop (sixth century B.C.E.) attempts to explain the age-old enmity between human beings and serpents. Once upon a time, there was a snake that used to lurk around the front door of a farmer's house. One day the snake struck the farmer's son, biting him on the foot and killing him at once. The boy's parents were filled with sorrow, and the anguished father took his axe to deal the snake a lethal blow. However, he missed and managed only to cut off the tip of its tail. The terrified man then regretted his action and offered the snake traditional gifts of cakes and water and honey and salt. (The man might have made out better had he offered the snake a dead rat or two.) In any case, the snake was unappeased

and hissed, "Man, do not trouble yourself any longer: there can be no possible friendship between you and me. When I look upon my tail, I am in pain. The same is true for you whenever you look upon the grave of your son. Never will we be able to live in peace." The moral is *no one can put aside thoughts of revenge as long as he sees a reminder of the pain that he suffered*. To this day, snakes and humans have been at odds.

Snakes don't have to be very big to be effective in the "scaring humans" department. They don't even have to be real. Here is a case in point, according to widely circulated news stories. In Austria, hardly the snake capital of the world, travelers were getting sick and tired of the pervasive stink of urine in local rest stops and highway restaurant parking lots. It appears that human males had been urinating in the bushes rather than walking a few steps to the free toilets. Officials solved the problem by simply sticking up a few signs in Polish, Czech, German, and English, which read, "BEWARE! MORTAL DANGER! SNAKES!" accompanied by a picture of a cobra. Franz Perder, manager of a motorway restaurant, said happily, "We tried other signs, but they were useless. These signs, though, have really worked. You see men coming up to bushes, getting ready to have a pee and then quickly zipping up their trousers again when they see the signs."

Despite, or because of, the terror and respect we have of each other, snakes and people are old companions. In Brittany, at Carnac, a name which means "hill of the serpent," winds an 8-mile long sinuous prehistoric "snake" made of stones. The aboriginal Australians portrayed more realistic but equally impressive Water Pythons (*Liasis fuscus*) and Death Adders (*Acanthophis antarcticus*) in their strange and powerful "Dreamtime" paintings. The Olmec Indians created a pair of enormous sculptures, probably representing a rattlesnake, of green serpentine rock and buried them in the La Venta ceremonial ridge. Similar snake-shaped structures were the stone "serpent clubhouses" erected in Middle America, which became over time large religio-military centers.

Pictographs of serpents appear in Utah, Texas, and other North American locations. In Adams County, Ohio, there is a massive snake, 400 yards long, of yellow clay and stones, created more than 2,000 years ago by people of the Adena or Hopewell cultures. Its tail is coiled, and it appears to hold an egg, the universal symbol of rebirth, in its mouth. It could also, however, be eating something. The ambivalence of the Ohio structure may even be deliberate, as the same ambivalence, the tension between snakes as death dealers and snakes as eternal life bringers, occurs in much serpent myth and art all over the world.

Among the first written references to snakes occur in the Rig-Veda, the oldest and most sacred text of Hinduism. Here the serpent is the powerful demon Vritra, who was defeated in battle by Indra, the thunderbolt-wielding king of the gods. This same Vritra had particular charge over the watery deep, which of course represents life as well as death. (Water is as complex a symbol as the snake, and it is not surprising that both are considered life and death forces.) Vritra was especially despised because he held back the waters under his control and caused terrible droughts in the land. According to the Rig-Veda, Book 1, Hymn xxxii,

"Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vritra, worst of Vritras." (A little redundancy is the norm in epic verse.) When the snake was dead, Indra opened its belly, and the pent-up waters poured out. However, I should mention that according to at least some texts, Indra himself suffers for the murder of the primal serpent, is nearly killed, or is forced to give up his throne. In a case of life following myth, in many parts of India it was traditional for one who killed a snake, even accidentally, to pay a penance or be ritually unclean for a period following the incident. The killed snake had to be cremated with honor on a funeral pyre, just like a human being.

Vritra is not the only evil snake in the Rig-Veda. Indra also killed Arbuda, a demon serpent of the watery air, by "piercing him with frost" (Book 8, Hymn xxxii). However, although Arbuda is the very personification of evil in this hymn, later Vedas transmogrify him into a wise, powerful lord of the earth, son of the Himalayas, and the king of snakes. He is said to have rescued Nandi, the sacred bull of Shiva, from a chasm, and his sons are depicted as friends of Indra. These lordly beasts are called the Nagas, who have been worshipped since Dravidian times. Eventually the Nagas were fully anthropomorphized into kings. Indeed, Arbuda teaches the sacred "science of snakes" or *sarpavidya*, a science which is said to be as sacred as the holy Vedas themselves. And who better to teach this knowledge than the king of snakes himself? Although the text, if there ever was one, of the *sarpavidya* no longer survives intact, parts of it may be found in the numerous charms against snakebite in the Atharva-Veda, another sacred text. Indeed, in traditional Indian medicine, Ayurveda, *sarpavidya* is coexistent with toxicology. A *sarpavid*, or snake expert, is just the person to turn to in case of a snake emergency or indeed for any toxicological problem.

Turning evil demons into wise and benevolent gods marks an important switch in strategy in dealing with the supernatural power of snakes. Instead of trying to eradicate them, it seemed a much better idea to try to harness those very powers. The sacred snake lords of India took on special duties—protecting the house and its inhabitants, especially protecting the foundations of a home. They also purified the earth and protected their worshippers from the bite of harmful and less reliable snakes. Some authorities divided the supernatural snakes into three classes: yellowish "lord of earth" snakes were associated with Agni, the ancient Vedic fire god; white ones were the lords of the wind and atmosphere; and in a bit of cross-categorization that omitted any color references, the "overpowering heavenly ones" belonged to Surya, the sun god.

In Hindu myth, the most important of these eternal, beneficent snakes are the dark blue Anantas, literally the "endless ones," whose physical form was repeated, so it was claimed, in the island chains south of India. One of the Anantas' jobs was to help the gods churn up the seas. There is very probably a connection between the phallic shape of the snake, the resemblance between semen and foamy churned-up ocean water, and the idea of creation. Indeed, one Indian legend tells of the giant snake Vasuki, whose body was rolled around the world mountain Meru as the gods churned the primeval milky sea into butter.

The king of the Anantas is Shesha, the thousand-headed being who symbolizes eternity. He forms the couch of Vishnu, the sustainer god. Vishnu relaxes on this couch during the periods between the dissolution of one universe and the rebirth of the next. Perhaps this is what D. H. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote in a May 14, 1915 letter, "The world of men is dreaming, it has gone mad in its sleep, and a snake is strangling it, but it can't wake up" When Vishnu is asleep, and Shiva the destroyer god is at work, the cobra goddess Manasa rules the earth.

Shesha was a particularly devout Brahmin snake, unlike his "dull-witted" siblings. But he was just as dangerous, since he practiced his religious austerities with such devotion that he created a blazing heat all around him, so powerful it burned up everything and everybody in his path. The kind creator god Brahma asked him what his most "heart-felt desire" was, and the snake responded he just wanted to be rid of his awful brothers and sisters, so that he wouldn't have to see them ever again, not even after death. He figured the best way to do this was to become liberated. Brahma granted his wish and in return Shesha agreed to bear the earth forever in his endless, comforting coils. When Shesha stirs and yawns, his massive, gaping jaws cause earthquakes. A structure called Shesha's well still exists in Benares; it contains forty steps that lead to a stone door embossed with cobras. Behind the door? Patala, the underworld of serpents.

According to Book 12, Hymn iii, of the Atharva-Veda, divine snakes protect the four quarters of the world: Asita, the "black one," protects the East; Tirashchiraji, the "striped one," protects the South; Pridaku, the "adder," covers the West, and Svaja, the "viper," handles the North. The glory of snakes, therefore, covers the entire universe. Indeed, exclaims Book 6, Hymn lvi, "The serpents that are sprung from the fire, that are sprung from the plant, that are sprung from the water, and originate from the lightning; they from whom a great brood has sprung in many ways, those serpents do we revere with obeisance." On the other hand, biting snakes are less fondly regarded. A later passage in the same hymn praises the gods Agni and Soma: "Agni has put away the poison of the serpent, Soma has let it out. The poison has gone back to the biter. The serpent is dead!" There is also a lot of talk about crushing snakeheads and throwing them in the river (Book 10, Hymn ix).

Thus the supernatural serpents serve as a boundary between vulnerable human beings and dangerous but mundane snakes, as Laurie Cozad notes in her *Sacred Snakes: Orthodox Images of Indian Snake Worship*. They are a nexus between the ordinary world and the strange, numinous one of the gods. But it's a thin and wavering line. You can say all you want about magical serpents, but ordinary snakes have magic in them, too. As the book of Proverbs (30:19) maintains, "the way of the serpent upon the rock" counts among the things "too wonderful" for comprehension.

The snake remains the world's most emotionally evocative—and most ambivalent—of all creatures: the most feared, the most reviled, yet, paradoxically, the most honored among all animals. Perhaps because the snake is so utterly alien, so absolutely "Other" he may be conjured up as anything. We cannot even

decide if he is beautiful or hideous, god or demon, worm or dragon. He is all these things and more. That is part of his magic.

But what we see in the serpent may not be, in the last analysis, totally so alien, after all. Jeremy Narby, in his *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, speculates on the deepest connection of all: between the shape of the serpent (whose Aztec name, *coatl*, means "twin") and the twinned DNA molecule. From there it was a comparatively short leap to connecting the various spiral ladders, caduceuses, braided ropes, endless knots, twisted vines to the structure of DNA itself. The serpent is in us. He *is* us.

Narby probably goes too far in his analysis, making some rather forward pronouncements about the "mindedness" of nature. However, his work is too important to ignore and too compelling to scoff at. He is only one of many who find in the serpent a jumping-off point for new theories about the mind, the body, and the spirit. Freud had his own ideas on the subject, and so did the ancient rishis of India, the magicians of Egypt, and the shamans and healers of small and remote tribes. If the snake cannot stir one's spirit, nothing can. Cultures as diverse as pre-Columbian America, India, Egypt, China, sub-Saharan Africa, Celtic Europe, Nordic Europe, and the United States have all accorded the snake a special place in their culture. For traditional African people, the snake is an ancestor. In India, he has been a hero and a villain, sometimes both at once. In South America he is a terrifying lord.

The mythic world knows nothing of genotypes, enzymes, and DNA, but it has a lot to say about the origin not only of snakes but also of the universe, and snakes are frequently credited with the creation of all that is. Indeed, the two were curiously entangled. In the beginning, it seems, there were snakes, not only around the world but also literally *around the world*—enfolding it and wrapping it like a ribbon. This is a motif that occurs all over the planet. The Dahomey people of Africa, for instance, honored the snake god Danh, who carried the creator god in his mouth. He encircled the earth like a giant belt; this prevented the planet from bursting apart into splinters. Danh also pooped so much that he made literally mountains of excrement. This sounds bad, but the stuff was filled with gold. (Something of the same sort happened to the Indian elephant-headed god, Ganesha. He was tripped by a snake and his stomach split open, spilling its contents. Ganesha immediately picked up the snake and used him for a belt, taping himself back together.)

Snakes, whether real or mythic, always seem something more than just another animal. Indeed, they even seem to be more than snakes. It is a dizzying, indeed, serpentine path one treads when one gets involved in snake lore. We are never satisfied with snakes' own natural magic, which is enormous, but are intent upon making them out to be bigger, deadlier, and even more powerful than they really are. In the natural world, for instance, snakes don't devour themselves or spin themselves into a hoop and go hurtling through the countryside spitting poison on everyone they meet. Yet over and over, this story appears, not just as some mythic motif, but as a sworn-to actual "fact." And when this circular snake uncoils, it is said to "sting" with its tail, just as it bites with its fearsome jaws. Many myths from

around the world attest to this behavior, although in actuality no snake stings. And while many natural species of snake inhabit ponds, rivers, and even the ocean, the myths of mankind have transmogrified these ordinary water snakes into huge, fearsome, slithering sea monsters, hundreds of feet long.

Many peoples, the world over, have capitalized on the snake's double nature, imagining him as a bridge or conduit, often representing the "umbilical cord" between human beings and mother earth. The Warao people of the Orinoco delta, for example, tell the story of the Mother of the Forest; her husband is a serpent that forms a bridge from the heavens to the earth. Souls cross this great serpent bridge to the afterlife. In Buddhist legend, a great company of cobras formed a bridge across the Ganges so that the Lord Buddha could cross easily. Since so many snakes volunteered for bridge duty, four separate bridges had to be formed. Which bridge would the "Lord of all Worlds" choose to cross? The compassionate Buddha obligingly became four Buddhas and crossed all four bridges simultaneously so that none of the snakes would feel slighted.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) also uses the concept of the snake as a bridge in his wonderful short story, "The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily" (1795). Almost alone among European writers he describes the snake as symbolizing the spread of humanity and of our spiritual development. It should be admitted that Goethe's snake was an unusual serpent from the get-go, as she dined upon spicy herbs and drank dew. However, her tale really gets going when she swallows some gold pieces and becomes both luminous and transparent. In the story, the snake sacrifices herself, allowing the Prince to marry his beautiful lily. It is a lovely, if rather complicated, tale involving (beside snake bridges) will-o'-the-wisps, a ferryman (who wants artichokes, onions, and cabbages rather than gold for transport payment), magical piles of gold, giants, hawks, deadly flowers, and kings made out of metal.

Snakes are more frequently presented as demons than as cheerful helpers, however. Indeed, in this guise they are a worldwide phenomenon. For example, demons with snakeheads were said to live in the Guangxi province of China. They had a habit of calling out to people, but one was well advised not to respond if so summoned by them. Nothing good would come of it. The same province boasted snakes so large they could gulp down elephants, although an alternate translation of the same ideogram could refer to government officials, probably wishful thinking on the part of the mythmakers.

In Chinese myth, the first legendary ruler was a divine being with the body of a serpent. This was Fu Hsi, who created the first *I Ching*, the famous collection of Chinese oracles.

The snake (*she*) also occupies the fifth palace of the Chinese zodiac. Just like the Genesis snake, the Chinese serpent was clever but treacherous, and so are people born under his sign. Indeed, in China a traitorous person is said to have a "snake heart." In more recent folklore, snakes are regarded as one of the "five noxious beings," although once snakes were worshipped as gods, too—or else gods were portrayed as snakes. The most famous of these was the snake god of