Snakes, dragons, and hydras: the Indo-European terminology for serpent*[1]

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ᴱᴺᴳ Abstract: The article deals with an analysis of some Indo-European words for 'serpent' from a linguistic and philological point of view. We offer an overview of the most debated Indo-European roots from which nouns for 'serpent' developed, and we hypothesize that the terms derived from roots such *V(n)g^{wh}i-, *serp-, *dr̥ḱ-, etc. are not to be regarded as synonymous units. Rather, they seem to designate different kinds of serpents. Indeed, the great number of words for this animal seems to be due to a taboo mechanism that enriched the terminology referring to the snake. Thanks to this kind of analysis, it appears possible to find numerous parallels between the Indo-European cultural traditions taken here into account.
Keywords: Indo-European Linguistics; Etymology; Linguistic Taboo; Indo-European Culture.

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Resumen: El artículo analiza algunas palabras indoeuropeas que significan 'serpiente' desde un punto de vista lingüístico y filológico. Se ofrece una visión general sobre las raíces indoeuropeas más debatidas a partir de las cuales se desarrollaron los sustantivos para 'serpiente', con el fin de mostrar que parece probable que los términos derivados de raíces como *V(n)g^{wh}i-, *serp-, *dr̥ḱ-, etc., no deben considerarse unidades sinónimas, sino que podrían designar diferentes tipos de serpientes. En efecto, el gran número de palabras que designan este animal parece deberse a un mecanismo de tabú que pudo haber enriquecido la terminología que designa la serpiente. Gracias a este tipo de análisis, parece posible hallar numerosos paralelismos entre las tradiciones culturales indoeuropeas aquí consideradas.
Palabras clave: lingüística indoeuropea; etimología; tabú lingüístico; cultura indoeuropea.

Summary: 1. Introduction. The serpent in the Indo-European cultures. 2. Common nouns for serpent. 2.1. Most common roots. 2.1.1. *V(n)gʷʰi-*, 2.1.2. *serp-*. 2.1.3. *dr̥k̂-*. 2.2. Other roots, 2.2.1. *wr̥mi-*. 2.2.2. *(s)neg-*. 2.2.3. *udro-*. 2.2.4 *sneh1-*. 3. Conclusive remarks.

1. Introduction. The serpent in the Indo-European cultures

Snakes – and their legendary counterparts, dragons – are a *Leitmotiv* in Indo-European poetry[5]. As Watkins (1987: 271) points out, they ought to be a «quasi-universal», characterized by linguistic formulas that were repeated from tradition to tradition and that made it peculiar. As a matter of fact, the snake motif has a particular importance both on the rhetorical-artistic and on the symbolic-religious level. Indeed, from a cultural point of view snakes have always played an ambivalent role among the Indo-European populations. On the one hand it was the *genius loci*, i.e. the protector of home and the incarnation of the dead ones, whilst on the other it was a diabolical being, a terrestrial and marine animal, which coiled around itself and could kill its victims with a glance or a poisonous bite. It was inevitable for snakes to arise great fascination in people's imagination since the dawn of time. Consequently, a large number of words to designate the animal began to circulate.

On this basis, this paper conducts a linguistic and philological analysis on some Indo-European words for 'serpent', in consideration of the fact that such an investigation might allow us to grasp the links between the culture and the ideology of the different Indo-European populations; in fact, it will be seen that numerous parallels can be found between the different traditions, since the words for the 'snake' were part of the popular vocabulary of the Indo-Europeans.

The first part of this article deals with the most common Indo-European roots, from which nouns for 'serpent' derived; for this reason, an important section will be dedicated to the distinction between the roots *V(n)gʷʰi-*, *serp-* and *dr̥k̂-* that, as observed by Sancassano (1996: 49-50), had been considered so far as synonymous units that designated 'snakes' in general, without any further nuances. Indeed, the root *V(n)gʷʰi-* probably produced the term properly designating the animal, whilst nouns developed in various ways from the roots *serp-* and *dr̥k̂-* might be innovations in this lexical field as a result of taboo mechanisms and would indicate different kinds of serpents. For this reason, the taboo mechanism must have enriched the terminology designating the snake, in such a way that different words could refer to those types of snakes, that were previously indistinctly indicated by the root *V(n)gʷʰi-*. The second part of the paper deals with other minor roots indicating different kinds of serpentine beings common to many Indo-European languages and draws overall conclusions.

The goal of this study is to detect how the different roots, which appear to carry several meanings, were elaborated in the Indo-European languages so as to observe if they are somehow interrelated.

2. Common roots for 'serpent'

2.1. Most common roots

2.1.1. *V(n)gʷʰi-*

It results that *V(n)gʷʰi-* is the most widespread root for «snake»[6]; indeed, it was elaborated in different ways in the Indo-European languages, and it is related to the most elementary

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[5]   *Cf*. Delamarre (1984: 144-145) and Calin (2017: 143-145).
[6]   Other ways of presenting this Indo-European root could be *h₁(n)gʷʰi-* or *h₂(n)gʷʰi-*, but we prefer indicating *V(n)gʷʰi-* because of the unsolved problems regarding the adoption of one or another reconstruction. Note that, as we will see (*cf. infra*), *EDG* (2010: 1135) supposes a connection between Skt. *áhi-*, Av. *aži*, from IE *h₃égʷʰi-*, in which the absence of Brugmann's Law is problematic; the author underlines an IE *e*-vocalism of the root which would explain the absence of *-ā-* in the Indo-Aryan forms. On the other hand, *EDLIL*

associations that the animal evokes. This root was unevenly reconstructed, among other options, as *$ang^{wh}i$-/*$eg^{wh}i$-/*$og^{wh}i$-/*$e\hat{g}^hi$- (*IEW*: 43-45), *$h_3ég^{wh}i$-/*$og^{wh}i$-/*$ang^{wh}i$- (Sihler 1994: 163), *$h_2(e)ng^{wh}$-i- (*EDLIL*: 42); in Mallory & Adams (1997: 529-530) two parallel roots *$h_1óg^{wh}is$ (gen.sg. *$h_1ég^{wh}is$) and *$h_{2/4}éng^{wh}is$ (gen.sg. *$h_{2/4}ng^{wh}éis$) were reconstructed, which differ the one from the other for different elements, such as the presence or absence of the nasal, the different laryngeal consonant and the different vowel alternation characterizing stem inflection. With relation to this, also Oettinger (2010b) suggests the existence of two different roots as *$h_1óĝ^h$-i-s, gen.sg. *$h_1éĝ^h$-i-s 'snake' and *$áng^{wh}$-i-s, gen.sg. *$ng^{wh}éis$ 'water snake'. As we shall show, it seems difficult to believe that two roots were to be reconstructed instead of just one, since terms with such a similar meaning could hardly derive from two different roots, to the point that it is more likely that we have to deal with the same root, which in some Indo-European languages has undergone a nasalization, and in some others it has not. Thus, we agree with the root shape proposed by Sihler (1994: 163), but in this work it will be presented from now on as *$V(n)g^{wh}i$- for practical reasons. As a matter of fact, Skt. *áhi*-, Av. *aži*, Gr. ὄφις, Lat. *anguis*, OHG *unc*, Arm. *awj*, OPr. *angis,* Lith. *angìs*, Latv. *uōdze*, Ru. *už,* and Toch. B *auk* are definitely traced back to this root[7]. In addition to these forms, as observed by Katz (1998), Oettinger (2010a), and Fagiolo (2022), the Hittite noun *illuyanka* with the possible meaning of 'snake'[8], 'eel-snake'[9] or 'fish-snake'[10] might be seen as a compound of *illu(y)*-[11] 'fish (?)' + -*anka*- 'snake' and this last element precisely seems to go back as well to the Indo-European root *$V(n)g^{wh}i$-; this element appears with an alternation of the stem vowel -*anka*-/-*anku*- because, as Weitenberg (1984: 275) observes, some Hittite *u*-stem nouns are inflected as if they were *a*-stems, and, in general, nouns that belong to the *i*- and *u*- stem-classes in Hittite can be declined as if they were *a*-stems, since the vocalic stems in *a*- form the most regular Hittite stem-class (Hoffner & Melchert 2008: 79).

Before examining this root from a semantic point of view, it seems important to remark that in the Indo-European cultures serpents were conceived of as both terrestrial snakes, which crept into the grass and caused fear to men and would arouse that sense of respect and reverence that will be characteristic of snake-like beings for a long time, and as water animals – that is aquatic snakes – that lived in salt and fresh waters and were imagined as creatures that could hold back waters and cause drought[12].

In most cases, the words derived from the root *$V(n)g^{wh}i$- were used to indicate both kinds of serpents, at the light of the possible existence of two different roots, following Oettinger (2010b); for example, Gr. ὄφις can refer both to serpents and to some kinds of fish. In other cases, some forms like Skt. *áhi*-[13], Lat. *anguis* and, probably, Hit. *illuyanka* might refer both to terrestrial and water, as in part suggested by Oettinger (*ivi*). In the first two cases, these nouns seem to have narrowed their (likely) original meaning of 'snake' to the specific one

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(2008: 42) suggests an Indo-European root *$h_2(e)ng^{wh}$-i- 'snake'; according to him, several Indo-European languages would reflect a similar proto-form *$h_2(e/o)g^{wh}$-i- without an internal nasal -*n*- which could have been analogically introduced on the basis of verbs for 'twist, wind'. However, it does not seem possible that Gr. ὄφις goes back to *Hng^{wh}-i- where the vocalism is the reflex of anaptyxis *-$ņ$- instead of an *o*-grade of the root, which would not have been affected by the laryngeal.

[7]   We do not include here Gr. ἔχις 'viper' – that is sometimes included among the derivatives of *$V(n)g^{wh}i$- – because, as observed in *DELG* and *EDG* (*s.v.* ἔχις), ἔχις must contain a palatal, so much so that it seems difficult to relate it to *$V(n)g^{wh}i$-. Likewise, we do not consider Gr. ἔγχελυς 'eel', since the etymology is still uncertain (*cf. GEW*: *s.v.* ἔγχελυς).

[8]   Oettinger (2010a: 190), *EDLIL* (*s.v. illuyanka*-), *HED* (*A, E, I*: *s.v. illuyanka*-).

[9]   Katz (1998).

[10] Fagiolo (2022).

[11] Only Fournet (2014) presents a different etymological proposal, reconnecting *illu(y)*- to the Hurrian word for 'destruction'.

[12] *Cf*. Skjærvø, Khaleghi-Motlagh & Russell (1987), Gamkrelidze & Ivanov (1995: 444-447).

[13] In any case, it is meaningful that we find this noun also in the proper name Áhi Budhnyà (lit. 'serpent of the deep') which belongs to the Vedic mythological water snake from the Lower World, *cf*. Watkins (1995: 460-463).

of 'water snake', because of the concurrence of words derived – due to tabooistic reasons – from the root *serp-* as Skt. *sarpá-* and Lat. *serpens* that would indicate mostly terrestrial snakes (*cf*. *infra*). As a matter of fact, the Sanskrit noun *áhi-* was used mostly as epithet of Vṛtrá, the primeval serpent that, as personification of drought, evil, and chaos, prevented the water from flowing before being defeated by Indra (Benveniste & Renou 1934; Lazzeroni 1975, 1991, 1998)[14]. Moreover, the Latin noun *anguis* would mostly designate sacred water snakes, counterposed to the terrestrial *serpens* and the mythological *draco*; in relation to this, there is a remarkable passage in *Aeneid* 2.203-227:

> ecce autem gemini a Tenedo tranquilla per alta
>
> (horresco referens) immensis orbibus **angues**
>
> incumbunt pelago pariterque ad litora tendunt;   205
>
> pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque
>
> sanguineae superant undas, pars cetera pontum
>
> pone legit sinuatque immensa uolumine terga.
>
> fit sonitus spumante salo; iamque arua tenebant
>
> ardentisque oculos suffecti sanguine et igni   210
>
> sibila lambebant linguis uibrantibus ora.
>
> diffugimus uisu exsangues. illi agmine certo
>
> Laocoonta petunt; et primum parua duorum
>
> corpora natorum **serpens** amplexus uterque
>
> implicat et miseros morsu depascitur artus;   215
>
> post ipsum auxilio subeuntem ac tela ferentem
>
> corripiunt spirisque ligant ingentibus; et iam
>
> bis medium amplexi, bis collo squamea circum
>
> terga dati superant capite et ceruicibus altis.
>
> ille simul manibus tendit diuellere nodos   220
>
> perfusus sanie uittas atroque ueneno,
>
> clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:
>
> qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram
>
> taurus et incertam excussit ceruice securim.
>
> at gemini lapsu delubra ad summa **dracones**   225
>
> effugiunt saeuaeque petunt Tritonidis arcem,
>
> sub pedibusque deae clipeique sub orbe teguntur[15].

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[14]   For a portrait of Vṛtra see *RV* 1.32.

[15]   «Lo! O'er the tranquil deep from Tenedos/appeared a pair (I shudder as I tell)/of vastly coiling serpents, side by side,/stretching along the waves, and to the shore/taking swift course; their necks were lifted high,/their gory dragon-crests o'ertopped the waves;/all else, half seen, trailed low along the sea;/ while with loud cleavage of the foaming brine/their monstrous backs wound forward fold on fold./Soon they made land; the furious bright eyes/glowed with ensanguined fire; their quivering tongues/lapped

Here the noun *angues* refers to snakes coming from the sea, whilst *serpentes* is used with reference to snakes that creep on the earth and, finally, *dracones* designates the snakes in the temple of Minerva; as a comment to this passage, the Latin grammarian Servius wrote:

> angues aquarum sunt, serpentes terrarum, dracones templorum, ut in hoc indicat loco 'tranquilla per alta angues'; paulo post in terra 'serpens amplexus'; item 'delubra ad summa dracones'. Sed haec significatio plerumque confunditur[16].

Last but not least, this sense of 'water snake' seems to pertain to Hitt. *illuyanka* as well, as testified both by the reconstructed meaning of 'fish-snake' and by the watery and underground setting of the myth.

2.1.2. *serp-

The second most common root to indicate serpents in Indo-European languages was **serp-*; as already suggested, the words derived from this root seem to be an innovation in the Indo-European lexicon, in particular in Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, with respect to the nouns derived from **V(n)gʷʰi-*. As a matter of fact, the root **serp-* gave rise to the verbs Skt. *sárpati*, Gr. ἕρπω, and Lat. *serpo*, which all mean 'to crawl'[17]. Because of a linguistic taboo, on the basis of this meaning these languages appear to have created nouns as Skt. *sarpá-*, Lat. *serpens* – which refer to snakes, because of their crawling movement – and also Gr. ἑρπετόν, that designates any animal that goes on all fours or that crawls[18], including likely serpents[19]; indeed, animals that crawled across the grass such as snakes used to inspire fear among the people. In addition to these forms, Alb. *gjarpër* 'snake' goes back to the root **serp-* as well, which gave origin at first to PAlb. **serpeno-*[20]; it seems impossible to suppose that the Albanian term constitutes a loanword from Latin, since, if it were a Latinism, the Indo-European sibilant would have not developed as [ɟ]. Actually, the words for 'serpent' Skt. *sarpá-*, Lat. *serpens*, and Alb. *gjarpër* originated from IE **serp-* seem to constitute epithets that designated this animal – as alternative denomination with respect to the nouns going back to **V(n)gʷʰi-* – so as to evoke it without actually pronouncing its name because of the fear that it used to arise. In fact, in Indo-European cultures snakes were conceived of as dangerous and sacred animals and, as Lazzeroni (1987: 25) points out, a taboo can lead to the substitution of a word that is avoided out of reverence, fear or modesty[21]. It should be stressed that other Indo-European words with different meanings were employed to designate serpents indirectly out of fear, such as Lith. *žaltys* 'green' > 'snake' and OCS *gadŭ* 'creep, eerie, disgusting creature' > 'reptile,

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hungrily the hissing, gruesome jaws./All terror-pale we fled. Unswerving then/the monsters to Laocoon made way./ First round the tender limbs of his two sons/each dragon coiled, and on the shrinking flesh /fixed fast and fed. Then seized they on the sire,/who flew to aid, a javelin in his hand,/embracing close in bondage serpentine/twice round the waist; and twice in scaly grasp/around his neck, and o'er him grimly peered/with lifted head and crest; he, all the while,/his holy fillet fouled with venomous blood, tore at his fetters with a desperate hand,/and lifted up such agonizing voice,/as when a bull, death-wounded, seeks to flee/the sacrificial altar, and thrusts back /from his doomed head the ill-aimed, glancing blade./Then swiftly writhed the dragon-pair away/unto the templed height, and in the shrine/of cruel Pallas sure asylum found/beneath the goddess' feet and orbed shield» (Verg.*Aen.*2.203-227, trans. T.C. Williams).

[16]   Serv. Aen. 2.204.
[17]   In fact, **serp-* is not a nominal, but a verbal root (*cf. LIV*: 536).
[18]   *Cf.* LSJ (*s.v.* ἑρπετόν).
[19]   It is true, however, that in Mycenaean Greek ἑρπετόν (dat.pl. *e-pe-to-i* [/herpetoihi/]) appears to designate likely serpents, *cf.* likely serpents, *cf.* Tozza (2016: 31-37), Piquero (2019: 223ff.) and *DMic.Supl* (*s.v. e-pe-to-i*) for discussion and other interpretations.
[20]   See *AED* (*s.v. gjarpër*) and Çabej (1976-2006: *s.v. gjarpër*).
[21]   As Di Giovine (2008: 196) remarks, something like this happens for the Indo-European nouns for 'bear' as well. Indeed, the root **ĥ̥ḱo-* would have given rise in almost all Indo-European to words indicating bear, with the exception of the Germanic family – in which the animal is designated as OHG *bero*, OS *bera*, ON *bjǫrn* 'dark, brown' –, Lith. *lokỹs* «licker» and Sl. *medvědĭ* 'one that eats honey'.

serpent'[22]. Moreover, something like this happened in Semitic languages as well. Indeed, Mayer-Modena (1982) underlines that in these languages the periphrases for snake recall its particular wisdom (e.g. Hebr. *nāḥāš* 'snake' ← *nḥš-* 'to divine, predict') or its ability of binding and wrapping (e.g. Eth. *kayĕsī* 'snake' ← *kys-* 'to bind').

Therefore, the root **serp-* seems to be the basis of these nouns, that constitute an innovation due to a taboo, indicating the *serpent* in some Indo-European languages. On the one hand, in Albanian the term *gjarpër* is the only one that designates serpents and it does not seem characterized by differences of meaning due to various kinds of serpent. On the other, as already suggested, Skt. *sarpá-* and Lat. *serpens* were used in contraposition to Skt. *áhi-* and Lat. *anguis* to indicate terrestrial serpents, that is crawling serpents. Furthermore, it has already been pointed out the meaning of 'terrestrial snake' of Lat. *serpens*. Similarly, Skt. *sarpá-* occurs often, in the *Atharvaveda*, in rituals against serpents understood as venomous terrestrial (or chthonic) beings[23]. In addition to this, the semantics of 'terrestrial snake' might be confirmed also by the fact that, in sight of their etymology, Skt. *sarpá-* and Lat. *serpens* refer to serpents that creep, which by definition can be only terrestrial snakes that creep on the earth and among the grass, differently from water snakes that swim in the waters. Finally, in both languages the difference between the couplets *áhi-* ~ *sarpá-* and *anguis* ~ *serpens* might also be marked from a chronological point of view. In fact, *áhi-* is the usual word for '(water) snake' from the *Ṛgveda* onwards, whilst *sarpá-* is used starting from the *Atharvaveda*[24] and, similarly, *anguis* is attested from Naevius, whilst *serpens* appears from Cato onwards.

Therefore, the series of nouns Skt. *sarpá-*, Lat. *serpens*, and Alb. *gjarpër* from the Indo-European root **serp-* constitutes an innovation in the Indo-European lexicon for the serpent animal due to tabooistic reasons. In the case of Sanskrit and Latin, these two words had to coexist with the archaic nouns *áhi-* and *anguis*, but they designated more precisely terrestrial snakes and eventually prevailed over other terms, since human beings were more afraid of snakes they might encounter while walking than of snakes that were staying in the waters.

2.1.3. **dr̥k̂-*

The last main root that gave rise to words for serpent in Indo-European languages is **dr̥k̂-*, to which Gr. δράκων, Lat. *draco*, OIr. (*muir*)-*dris,* OHG *tracho*, OE *draca*, alb. *dragua* go back. The more recent terms G *Drache* and Swed. *drake* have also stemmed from this root. The aforementioned root **dr̥k̂-* is the one for 'to see, to stare', from which Gr. δέρκομαι 'to see'[25] derives; as a matter of fact, in Greek the word δράκων with the meaning of 'snake' developed in the first place, and it was only later that it appeared as loanword in Latin as *draco*. Moreover, the Latin form *draco*, in turn, spread out and got as loanword in OHG *tracho*, OE *dracha* and Alb. *dragua*.

For these reasons, Gr. δράκων appears as the most significative term in this series. In this case too, it seems to be the result of a linguistic taboo used to avoid naming serpents explicitly, since this noun would have the literal meaning of 'one who stares'. With respect to this, δράκων is more attested than ὄφις[26], but, despite what it might seem, they actually convey different meanings. The reason why the terms were regarded as synonyms is that they occurred in close passages with reference to the same snake, such as in *Iliad* 12.200-209:

> ὄρνις γάρ σφιν ἐπῆλθε περησέμεναι μεμαῶσιν   200
>
> αἰετὸς ὑψιπέτης ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ λαὸν ἐέργων

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[22] *EDSIL* (s.v. гадъ).
[23] *Cf. AV* 10.4, 11.3.
[24] In any case, some parts of the *Atharvaveda* may be also ancients as well, so that the chronological evidence must be considered cautiously for this poem.
[25] *IEW* (s.v. **derk̂-*), *LSJ* (s.v. δέρκομαι) *LIV* (s.v. **derk̂-*).
[26] For example, there are 8 occurrences of δράκων and only one of ὄφις in the *Iliad*.

φοινήεντα **δράκοντα** φέρων ὀνύχεσσι πέλωρον

ζωὸν ἔτ’ ἀσπαίροντα, καὶ οὔ πω λήθετο χάρμης,

κόψε γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχοντα κατὰ στῆθος παρὰ δειρὴν

ἰδνωθεὶς ὀπίσω· ὃ δ’ ἀπὸ ἕθεν ἧκε χαμᾶζε   205

ἀλγήσας ὀδύνῃσι, μέσῳ δ’ ἐνὶ κάββαλ’ ὁμίλῳ,

αὐτὸς δὲ κλάγξας πέτετο πνοιῇς ἀνέμοιο.

Τρῶες δ’ ἐρρίγησαν ὅπως ἴδον αἰόλον **ὄφιν**

κείμενον ἐν μέσσοισι Διὸς τέρας αἰγιόχοιο[27].

However, Aristotle in *Historia Animalium* (602ᵇ25) and in other passages of this work refers to δράκων as a type of ὄφις, as resulting for example from the expression ὑπὸ δράκοντος τοῦ ὄφεως «of δράκων-type serpent», which indicates that a δράκων could be a sub-category of the animals represented by the name ὄφις, which is a generic serpent. Moreover, the similar expression δράκοντος ὄφεως can be found in Euripides’ *Bacchae* 1025-1026[28]. Additionally, there is an eloquent scholion of the passage of Euripides’ *Orestes* 479 – in which Orestes is characterized as a matricide δράκων[29] – that goes as follow:

εἶδος ἀντὶ γένους ἔλαβεν· γένος μὲν γὰρ ὁ ὄφις, εἶδος δὲ ὁ δράκων καὶ ἔχις καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν ὄφεων· νῦν δὲ δράκων ἀντὶ τοῦ ἔχις. οὗτοι γὰρ οὐκ ἐξ ᾠῶν γεννῶνται, ἀλλὰ ζῳοτοκοῦνται καὶ τικτόμενοι διαρρηγνύουσι τὰς τῶν μητέρων γαστέρας, ὥς φησι Νίκανδρος· ‘γαστέρ’ ἀναβρώσαντες ἀμήτορες ἐξεγένοντο’ [*Ther*. 134]. διὸ ἔχιν αὐτὸν ὡς μητροκτόνον φησίν[30].

Taking these points into consideration, it seems possible to assert that Gr. δράκων is a noun indicating a subcategory of ὄφις. Indeed, differently from this last one, δράκων appears to have specialized its meaning, referring to huge-sized mythological snakes[31], so that it might be translated as ‘dragon-snake’ or only ‘dragon’, even if the concept of dragon was not the same as the one that spread over the Middle Ages. This concept was inherited by Lat. *draco* as well, as it entered into the Latin lexicon as a loanword[32]. As a matter of fact, Griffiths (1996: 4-7) observes that the Greek and Roman dragon has no limbs or wings and no affinity with fire at all and looks more like a giant snake, whose main role is the one of guardian or tutelary spirit, such as the Lernaean Hydra or Python[33]. The meaning of Lat. *draco* was already

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[27] «For a bird had come upon them, as they were eager to cross over, an eagle of lofty flight, skirting the host on the left, and in its talons it bore a blood-red, monstrous snake, still alive as if struggling, nor was it yet forgetful of combat, it writhed backward, and smote him that held it on the breast beside the neck, till the eagle, stung with pain, cast it from him to the ground, and let it fall in the midst of the throng, and himself with a loud cry sped away down the blasts of the wind. And the Trojans shuddered when they saw the writhing snake lying in the midst of them, a portent of Zeus that beareth the aegis» (*Il*.12.200-209, transl. A.T. Murray).

[28] ὦ δῶμ’ ὃ πρίν ποτ’ ηὐτύχεις ἀν’ Ἑλλάδα/ Σιδωνίου γέροντος, ὃς τὸ γηγενὲς/ δράκοντος ἔσπειρ’ ὄφεος ἐν γαίᾳ θέρος «O house, which once prospered in the sight of Greece, house of/ the old man of Sidon, who sowed the earthborn harvest of the/ dragon in the soil» (E.*Ba*.1024-1026, transl. D. Kovacs).

[29] ὁ μητροφόντης ὅδε πρὸ δωμάτων δράκων/ στίλβει νοσώδεις ἀστραπάς, στύγημ’ ἐμόν, «Here is a mother-killing snake before the palace, with sickness in his darting glance: how I loathe him!» (E.*Or*.479-480, transl. D. Kovacs).

[30] «He replaces the species with the genus. For the ὄφις is a genus, and the δράκων and ἔχις and the rest of the snakes are species. Here, he has δράκων instead of ἔχις. They are not born from eggs, but they are born live, and when they are born they break through their mothers’ stomachs, as Nicander says, “by eating through the stomach of their mother, they are born motherless”. Therefore, he says he is a viper, since he is a mother-killer» (Σ E. *Or*. 479, transl. Wilson 2018: 264).

[31] For this *cf*. Ogden (2013: 2ff.).

[32] *Cf*. *ThLL s.v. draco* («fere i.q. serpens, anguis (apud recentiores plerumque magni serpentes hoc nomine significantur) [...] monstrum fabulosum mirae magnitudinis, serpentis simile»).

[33] For a detailed analysis of this myth see Fontenrose (1959).

suggested in *Aeneid* 2.203-227, in which snakes that find themselves in the temple of Minerva are defined as *dracones*.

It is only during the late Roman Empire that the figure described by the Latin word *draco* acquires the typical attributes of Medieval dragons, such as the ability of flying and spitting fire. For this reason, other words as OIr. (*muir*)-*dris,* OHG *tracho*, OE *draca* and the Latinism Alb. *dragua* appear to designate the dragon as the creature known today. In particular, the Old Irish compound *muirdris* had the literal meaning of 'sea-dragon'[34] and designated the creature defeated by Fergus mac Léti in the homonymous tale. Last but not least, the Albanian *dragua* 'dragon' is also quite interesting from a folkloric point of view, since it is the term by which mythological human-like heroes – equipped with wings – are known; specifically remarkable is the fight between these *dragonj* and the demon-like creatures *kuçedra* (< Lat. *chersydrus*, *cf. infra*), as told in the 16th song of the Albanian epic poem *Lahuta e malcís* (*The Highland Lute*) by Gjergj Fishta.

In conclusion, the Indo-European root **dr̥k̂*- 'to see' seems to be at the basis of the series for «mythological huge-sized serpent, dragon»; Gr. δράκων literally means 'the one who stares'[35], so that it could have designated these creatures only by recalling one of their main features.

2.2. Other roots

In this section we discuss other – less common – roots from which nouns indicating different kinds of serpents in the Indo-European languages derived. In the light of their minor role in the lexicon for 'serpent' and 'dragon', we dedicate just a few lines to their analysis.

2.2.1. **wr̥mi-*

In addition to the roots just discussed, it is interesting that some nouns for 'serpent' developed from the IE root **wr̥mi-* «worm». In particular, this is the case of the Germanic series OE *wyrm*, ON *ormr*, OHG *wurm*, G *Waurms*, OS *wurm* and OFr. *wirm*, that might be translated as 'serpent, dragon, reptile'[36], since the Germanic family does not have words for 'serpent' derived from IE **V(n) gʷhi-* (Watkins 1995: 416). The same root **wr̥mi-* gave origin to Lat. *vermis* 'worm'.

In this case, not only is the origin of this meaning of 'serpent' from a previous 'worm' related to the fear that serpents, dragons and reptiles caused to human beings, but also to the similarities between the physical appearance and the pace of the two animals; it is no coincidence that, as Lazzeroni (1998: 90) remarks, already in the Vedic literature the terminology used in the narration of the defeat of the serpent Vr̥trá is exactly the same used in exorcisms against worms. Therefore, the juxtaposition of serpents and worms appears to be determined more by cultural factors than by linguistic ones.

2.2.2. **(s)neg-*

Other nouns for 'serpent' derive from the Indo-European root **(s)neg-* 'to crawl, to creep, to bend'[37]. Indeed, this root gave origin to the series Skt. *nāgá-* '(sacred) snake', OHG *snecko*, G *Snakr*, ON *snōkr/snākr*, D *snog*, Swed. *snok*, OE *snaca*, E *snake*; Lith. *snake* 'snake'[38]. On the one hand, the Sanskrit term *nāgá-* – whose feminine version is the *nāginī* – was used to designate seven-headed serpents, idolized as gods and inhabitants of the waters, whose kings were the

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[34] *Cf*. Watkins (1995: 447) and Mallory & Adams (2006: 326).
[35] In our opinion, this meaning might be due to a taboo mechanism, since these creatures were known for their good sight (*cf* Festus, *De verborum significatu*, 67 M, according to whom the noun δράκων "ἀπὸ τοῦ δέρκεσθαι, quod est videre. Clarissimam enim dicuntur habere oculorum aciem.") and had the duty of looking out treasures, e.g. the Lernaean Hydra and Ladon (*cf*. Ogden 2013: 26-40).
[36] In fact, Griffiths (1996: 32) observes that, for example, OE *wyrm* covered any animals that were non-mammal-like, from small worms up to giant snakes.
[37] For this last reconstruction see Schwartz (1980) and Mayer-Modena (1982: 181).
[38] *Cf*. *EDPG* (*s.v.* **snakan*-).

Nāga-rā́jas (lit. 'the kings of the *nāgas*'). On the other, the Germanic nouns mean generically 'serpent' in these languages, in which there is no evidence of derivatives from IE *V(n)gʷhi- (*cf*. *supra*). Regardless, taboo stands at the origin of this series for 'serpent', since it recalls crawly beings such as serpents, with a metaphor similar to the one just presented about the nouns going back to IE *serp- (*cf*. *supra*).

2.2.3. *udro-

Other root analysed here is *udro- 'of water, aquatic', from which, in the first instance, Gr. ὕδρος '(venomous) water snake' and ὕδρα 'hydra'[39] derive. In fact, these two nouns are derivatives of Gr. ὕδωρ, so that they only indicate water snakes, that were generally regarded as dangerous creatures[40]. Latin borrowed the term ὕδωρ as *hydrus*; this animal was regarded as a venomous water snake, that resembled vipers due to its attributes, even if aquatic[41].

In any case, similar to the animal designated by Gr. ὕδρος and Lat. *hydrus* is the creature called by Gr. χέρσυδρος and Lat. *chersydrus*, which is a sort of amphibious snake that inhabited the swamps. According to Solinus[42], these were venomous snakes that were found in Calabria. The amphibious nature of the animal seems to be also attested by the etymology itself of the name, that could be a compound of χέρσος 'land' + ὕδρος[43].

However, as Di Giovine (1988: 158-9) remarks, it is even more interesting that Albanian borrowed Lat. *chersydrus*[44] as *kulshédër*, *kuçédër* 'dragon, fabulous creature'[45]; indeed, the term widened its meaning from '(amphibious) snake' to 'dragon' when Albanian borrowed it. This semantic shift could have happened rather early, since Alb. *kulshédër* was used to gloss Lat. *draco* yet in Bardhi's dictionary[46]. Indeed, the *kulshédër* is a monstrous serpent-like being, with a thousand legs, as many claws and seven heads. It is the enemy of the *dragua*-heroes (*cf*. *supra*), and their fight is told in *Lahuta e malcís* (*The Highland Lute*) by Gjergj Fishta[47].

Last but not least, another animal similar to the ὕδρος is the Gr. χέλυδρος and Lat. *chelydrus*, that was slightly different from the χέρσυδρος, *chersydros*, since the former is more related to aquatic settings, even if it is an amphibious animal. It is no coincidence that it seems to be a compound of χέλυς 'turtle' + ὕδρος.

2.2.4 *sneh₁-

The last root that we have taken into account is *sneh₁- 'to spin'[48] – also reconstructed as (s)nē(i)-[49] – to which an Indo-European *(s)nh₁-tr-ih₂ 'who spins round, snake' goes definitely back[50]. Indeed, many Indo-European nouns such as Lat. *natrix*, OE *nædre*, OIr. *nathir*, Go. *nadrē* (gen.pl.), OIc.*naðr*, OHG *nātara*, OS *nādra* can be tracked down to this Indo-European root, and it is clear that, also in this case, there is a tabooistic mechanism at the basis of this series of nouns, which would refer to the spinning movement of serpents. If it is true that the majority of these nouns generally mean 'snake, adder', the only one with a different meaning is Lat. *natrix*, which alludes to water snakes, having this specific meaning[51]. As remarked by scholars, the Latin term could have changed its

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[39] As pointed out in *DELG* (*s.v.* ὕδωρ), the term ὕδρα is mostly used to specify the Lernaean Hydra.
[40] *Cf*. *Il*.2.721-723.
[41] Indeed, Servius comments: «graviter spirantibus hydris aquae serpentibus. 'graviter' autem 'spirantibus' solo nocentibus flatu: Lucanus 'ante venena nocens'» (Serv. 7.753).
[42] Solinus, *De mirabilibus mundi*, 2.33.
[43] For a description of the χέρσυδρος see Kitchell (2014: 29).
[44] The stress of the noun and the evolution from /s/ to /ʃ/ would testify that it is a Latinism and not a Grecism.
[45] *Cf*. Çabej (1976-2006: *s.v. kuçédër kulshédër*), *AED* (*s.v. kuçédër*).
[46] *Cf*. *Dictionarium Latino Epiroticum* (*s.v. draco*).
[47] For more details about this mythological fight see Tirta (2004: 121) and Doja (2005: 451).
[48] *LIV* (s.v. *sneh₁-)
[49] *IEW* (s.v. (s)nē-, (s)nēi-).
[50] *EDLIL* (s.v. *natrix*). Contrarily, this root is reconstructed as *nē-tr- or *nə-tr- in *IEW* (s.v. *nē-tr-, *nə-tr-).
[51] On this cf. *EM* (s.v. *natrix*) and *EDLIL* (s.v. *natrix*).

meaning because of an association with Lat. *natāre* 'to swim' due to folk etymology[52], and a similar meaning in nouns from the same root is found only in the compounds OE *wæternædre* and OHG *wazzarnatra*, both of which entail the meaning of 'water snake'.

3. Conclusive remarks

In this paper we offered an overview on the most common and debated Indo-European roots from which nouns for 'serpent' and similar developed. Firstly, we have analyzed the three main roots for 'serpent' *$V(n)g^{wh}i$-, *serp-* and *$dr\hat{k}$-*, and then we have moved on to other less common roots to indicate this animal, such as *$wr̥mi$-*, *(s)neg-*, *udro-* and *$sneh_1$-*.

It resulted from this analysis that, on the one hand, the root *$V(n)g^{wh}i$-* seems to have produced the terms that properly designated the animal, whilst, on the other, the remaining roots would have developed into words indicating different kind of serpents –terrestrial or water snakes, mythological or real ones – due not only to taboo, but also to cultural factors. As mentioned throughout the paper, the main root *$V(n)g^{wh}i$-* is at basis of nouns indicating both water and terrestrials snakes depending on languages themselves, but the other two main roots *serp-* and *$dr\hat{k}$-* got specialized, indicating different kinds of snakes (i.e. terrestrial snakes, mythological huge-sized serpents, and dragons) with respect to the first root. In our opinion, there is indeed a tendency to recall serpents indirectly by referring to the way they move (i.e. creeping, crawling) or to their main features (sharp-sightedness, amphibious or aquatic nature). Lastly, to our mind these innovations would be idiolinguistic or sometimes areal, but it is unlikely that they can go back to a common linguistic phase. In many cases, we also found examples of borrowings of nouns to indicate serpents from other Indo-European languages (e.g. Lat. *draco* < Gr. δράκων, Alb. *gjarpër* < Lat. *serpens*, *cf*. also Alvarado 2017 for borrowings in Slavic from Greek).

In conclusion, the sense of reverence and respect that this animal arose must have fascinated human beings since ancient times, so that it required a larger number of words that referred to it than other animals. Hence, meaningfully all these nouns derived from different Indo-European roots can hardly be regarded as synonymous units. In any case, our research lives room for further investigation on the semantics of this kind of nouns, since the analysis of the remaining roots for 'serpent', only mentioned here, in the Indo-European languages could lead to additional considerations on the topic.

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[52]   *EM* (s.v. *natrix*).

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