

A Case Study in Byzantine Dragon-Slaying: Digenes and the Serpent

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Digenes Akritas, called Akrites in our earliest sources, is the hero of several texts from the medieval and early modern periods and of several Modern Greek folk songs. Six Greek and one Slavic version of the epic survive. The earliest manuscript, named after the monastery at Grottaferrata, has been dated to approximately 1300. It has been argued that the long narratives are attempts to form a single cohesive story out of loosely connected songs about a hero who may have lived in the ninth century, during the reign of Basil I.¹ The songs and epics of Digenes have been mined for historical information more often than they have been studied as works of verbal art.

Scholarship on the epic tends to favor a date of origin in the twelfth century based on societal structures portrayed in the text, but a date closer to that of the Grottaferrata manuscript's production circa 1300 is possible.² The epic is thoroughly nostalgic, celebrating the frontier spirit that protected the Empire before it lost its vast Asian territories, and an author attempting to celebrate a lost age might inadvertently reproduce the way of life of a more recent, more familiar past. Elizabeth Jeffreys argues that parallel verses found in Grottaferrata and in twelfth-century texts demonstrate that "a version of the *Digenis* poem resembling G" was in existence in the twelfth century (Jeffreys 1998:xlvi). The similarities may, however, result from a common store of traditional oral formulae.

The texts of *Digenes Akrites* that we have tell us little or nothing of value about the time of Basil I, but they do attest to the nostalgia with which later Byzantines thought of the time before the loss of the Empire's eastern territories. Digenes is a warrior of superhuman power who lives in the Empire's far eastern regions. The name Akrites means "frontiersman." Though he exists at the borders between Christendom and Islamic lands, there is not the slightest suggestion of religiously motivated war. Digenes' own father is an Arab emir, and the hero's epithet literally means "born of two races." His Christian name, Basil, evokes both Basil I and Basil II, the great

¹ See Dyck 1983, 1987, 1993, and espec. Jeffreys 1998:xxx-xli for a discussion of the historicist readings of *Digenes Akrites* and historical references in the texts. I am indebted to Elizabeth Jeffreys for first encouraging me to pursue my interpretation of *Digenes Akrites* and to John Duffy and Eustratios Papaioannou for organizing the 2007 colloquium at Dumbarton Oaks in which I had the opportunity to present some of this material. Completion of this article was made possible by a grant from the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation.

² See Jeffreys 1998:xv-xviii, Magdalino 1989, Laiou 1993, and Galatariotou 1996.

military leader who ruled from 976-1025, in what later generations would recall as the last glorious period in their civilization's history before the defeat at Manzikert in 1071 and the ensuing loss of the Anatolian hinterland to the Turks. The hero's name thus has a cultural significance similar to that of the Spanish warrior commonly known as El Cid, who shares the name Rodrigo with the last Visigothic king. In *Digenes Akrites*, the emir voluntarily converts to Christianity out of love for Digenes' future mother, but there is never any hint of forced conversion. The characters never fight over religion, and many of the hero's enemies are Christian bandits. The very circumstances of the emir's conversion seem to tell us that the Christian poet, for all the violence of his subject matter, would have his religion spread through love or not spread at all. A climate of religious coexistence is one of several traits shared by the Spanish and Byzantine frontier epics. Parallels with Iranian traditions, which I hope to demonstrate in this article, indicate that *Digenes Akrites* came out of a milieu of cultural exchange as lively as the one inhabited by its characters.

We will never know whether the Akritic songs predated the epic versions of *Digenes Akrites* or vice versa. It is probably more productive simply to view both, as well as the modern Akritic songs, as part of a dynamic and vibrant tradition in which oral performances and written texts long coexisted. The battle with death is one noteworthy scene that has many parallels in Greek folklore. Folk songs tell of the hero's battle on a marble threshing floor with death, named Charos after the ferryman Charon.³ Another common folkloric motif that appears in Grottaferrata, treated with great nuance by the poet, is the dragon-slaying episode at the beginning of book six.

This essay discusses the decapitation of the dragon as a symbolic genital mutilation performed out of guilt for the rape committed at the end of book five. Calvert Watkins' 1995 study of the dragon-slaying motif in Indo-European literature is used as an approach to the topic in Byzantine Literature. I argue that the hero's apparent triumph can be read more accurately as a self-defeat. Parallels with Western literature, particularly *Beowulf*, as well as the dragon-slaying motif in Persian literature, will be addressed. No variant of Watkins' formula, "The hero slew the serpent," is ever used with reference either to Digenes or to Beowulf. Though Watkins has discussed the formula in *Beowulf*, it is noteworthy that his only example is a reference to Sigemund that occurs in an embedded narrative. I believe it is significant that the Grottaferrata poet, like the *Beowulf* poet, refrains from applying the Indo-European dragon-slaying formula to his hero.

Book five of the Grottaferrata version of *Digenes Akrites* ends with sexual guilt, and book six begins with the decapitation of a serpent. Symbolic implications seem readily apparent, but it is curious that nobody has written of the dragon as a phallic symbol. M. Alison Frantz noted that decapitation is not a common manner of slaying a dragon in Byzantine literature and art.⁴ The two most famous dragon-slaying saints, Theodore and George, are depicted piercing the

³ Guy Saunier (1993) argues that the designation of the songs as "Akritic" is misleading since only "seven or eight" themes truly pertain to the epic hero Digenes Akrites. He is right to point out that nationalistic critics have exaggerated certain similarities in order to emphasize national unity and historical continuity. Nonetheless, the number of parallels, which even Saunier concedes, is indicative of an enduring and widespread oral tradition.

⁴ Frantz 1941:9-13. Figures 1 and 2, showing a dragon punctured by arrows, are both reproduced from this source.

serpents with spears, and I believe that the strangeness of Digenes' way of killing the serpent is best explained through a psychoanalytic reading.

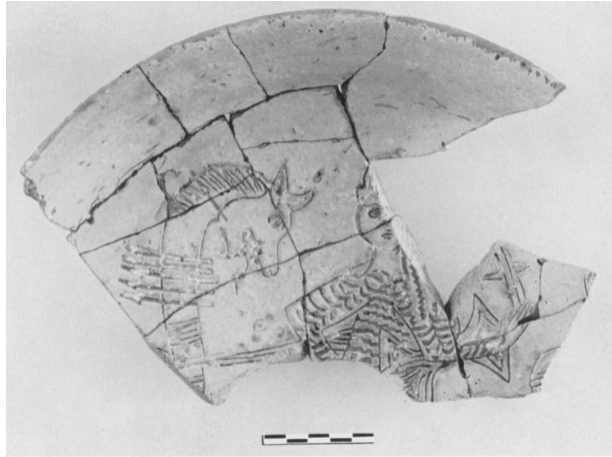


Fig. 1. "Digenes and the dragon" from the Athenian agora excavations (late twelfth or early thirteenth century).



Fig. 2. Digenes and the dragon, reconstructed by J. Travlos based on fragments from Corinth and Athens.

Henry Maguire has discussed an image on ceramic (fig. 3) of a naked dragon slayer whose prominent genitalia invite a comparison between the hero and the serpent similar to that which we find in the Grottaferrata version of *Digenes Akrites*.⁵ The Grottaferrata poet's placement of the dragon as would-be rapist immediately after the scene in which Digenes commits rape is one quality among many that mark the Grottaferrata text as a work of literature in its own right deserving to be read as such. The insistence of some Byzantinists on bringing all texts and variants into every discussion of *Digenes Akrites* is no more productive than would be an insistence on bringing Saxo Grammaticus into every discussion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A criticism I received for an earlier presentation of the thesis advanced here is that the Grottaferrata text's "monastic" audience would not have understood phallic imagery. There is no clear evidence regarding the text's intended audience, and if it were indeed a monastic community, it would be odd to assume that monks could not have grasped straightforward symbols of sexual temptation and remorse. Phallic images in medieval texts such as the Exeter Book and the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* have long been as obvious to Western medievalists as they were to the monks who produced them.⁶

⁵ Maguire 1999; also 2010:327, 333 n. 36. The illustration is taken from Papanikola-Bakirtze 1999, image no. 50 (reproduced with permission of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism-Archaeological Receipts Fund). Jan Ziolkowski has directed my attention to an image on an Etruscan vase (fig. 4) of a dragon-slaying hero sometimes thought to be Herakles. The image can be found in Schmidt 1907:9. Phallic qualities of the hero's scabbard thrusting into the serpent's mouth are unmistakable. See Ziolkowski 2007:73-75 for a discussion of ancient Greek dragon-slaying legends.

⁶ See Kinsella 1969:103 for the story of Fergus "losing his sword." While "key" is the witty answer to riddle 42 of the Exeter Book, it is surely not the first answer that would have occurred to a reader of any era. I owe many thanks to Dan M. Wiley for reading my work and sharing his knowledge of Old Irish literature.



Fig. 3. Naked dragon slayer (twelfth century), excavated at Thebes.

The most comprehensive analysis of Grottaferrata books five and six to date is that of Andrew R. Dyck, whose primary concern is to argue for an ur-epic upon which all retellings of the Digenes Akrites story were supposedly based and which was in turn, according to Dyck, based upon popular songs.⁷ Dyck reprimands “the G-redactor” for narrative crimes such as the killing of the Amazon Maximou (despite the hero’s stated policy of sparing the lives of women) and a supposedly awkward, even nonsensical, handling of the dragon episode in an attempt to “cobble together” a plot from existing songs. I hope to show that the dragon is a scapegoat who shares important qualities with the hero. Maximou is also a scapegoat. She and Digenes are both sexually unrestrained,

and her status as a female warrior makes her a hybrid perhaps more monstrous than the Arab/Greek hero.

When Digenes kills Maximou, he shows himself as a textbook example of what Aristotle calls the “consistently inconsistent” hero (*Poetics* 1454a). After having adulterous relations with the warrior woman, the problematic hero hunts her down and kills her in a fit of remorse. Digenes is always marked by extreme emotional volatility. Awareness that he is a danger even to those he protects motivates his decision to spend his life with a minimum of social contact. I likewise disagree with Dyck’s assessment of the dragon episode, which he accounts for as follows (1987:356):

It [the paradise-like setting] evokes specifically the Garden of Eden. Hence Digenes should be absent when the *δοῦλον* appears; his wife, like Eve, must be put to the test alone. However, the G-redactor could think of no other means of getting Digenes out of the way than by having him sleep, as in the lion incident. Once again a good idea is spoiled by the G-redactor’s poverty of invention.

Rather than chastise the author, it is more productive to make sense of the narrative within its own internal logic. The dream vision, ambiguously connected to the waking world and often occurring within an Edenic setting, is common in many medieval literatures. Especially relevant here is Angus Fletcher’s discussion of the garden as “cut off from the world of waking reality” (1964:348). In such a setting, it is misguided to expect the distinctions between the reality of dreams and that of wakefulness to function as they do in more mundane environments.

⁷ Dyck 1983, 1987, and 1993. While the earlier essays tended to take a dim view of the “redactor’s” literary skills, in the 1993 article Dyck gives a nuanced reading of the hero’s interaction with the Emperor.

The poet could have chosen many devices to remove Digenes from the initial action, and the choice of having him fall asleep most likely indicates a connection between the internal world of the hero's dreams and the external world in which he relates to his wife with a guilty conscience. Dyck argues that book five is a haphazard insertion into the epic, but I believe that the juxtaposition of the rape in book five with the attempted rape in book six indicates a methodically structured narrative. In contrast to Dyck's argument that the Grottaferrata text is a slapdash assembly of pre-existent narratives, Catia Galatariotou (1987) has argued that the text is built upon a complex series of narrative oppositions. Juxtaposition of the themes of sexual guilt and remorse at the ending of book five and the beginning of book six seems to corroborate this argument. While Galatariotou has brought a great deal of insight to our understanding of the text, I believe she interprets the portrayal of Digenes' character too positively. For instance, she discusses the slaying of Maximou as essentially a celebration of the reestablishment of male martial supremacy over the threateningly androgynous Amazon temptress. I am less inclined to take the projection of Digenes' guilt onto Maximou at face value. The episode, at the end of book six, shows not only that Digenes is still an adulterer, as he was shown to be at the end of book five, but that he is now a murderer as well.

Most of the scholarship on *Digenes Akrites* has focused on historical rather than literary questions. Studies of the poem's language have been concerned mostly with its complicated and ambiguous linguistic register. John Mavrogordato, Henri Grégoire, and Elizabeth Jeffreys have provided especially valuable examinations of the Grottaferrata poet's effort to write in a language suited to a protagonist who, we are told, surpasses the greatest heroes of antiquity. The general scholarly consensus is that the author was not wholly successful in the attempt to produce elevated diction, though opinions vary from the basically favorable assessments of Jeffreys to Marc D. Lauxtermann's scathing criticism of the poet's language (1999:22-24). While many critics during the twentieth century shed light on important questions regarding the type of Greek the poet used, few close readings of specific textual passages have been undertaken. This article will examine how the word choice and symbolism related to the dragon in the Grottaferrata text establish a link between the conquering hero and the vanquished monster.

To examine the language of dragon-slaying in a broad context, we may gain many valuable insights from Calvert Watkins' comparative philological work. Byzantine literature is one Indo-European tradition not discussed in Watkins' major study of the dragon-slaying motif, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (1995), yet study of Indo-European serpent lore may still deepen the Byzantinist's appreciation of the dragon episode in *Digenes Akrites*. Apart from the relative obscurity of Byzantine literature, another likely reason for Watkins' omission of *Digenes* is the absence of what he has identified as the standard and remarkably static Indo-European formula, "The hero slew the serpent" (1995:301).⁸ Watkins builds a formidable case for the tenacity of Indo-European languages in holding onto conservative linguistic constructions when it comes to the killing of dragons, as in the English preservation of the archaic verb "to slay," now reserved almost exclusively for the killing of

⁸ Watkins emphasizes the phonetic repetition in formulae such as Vedic *áhann áhim* ("he slew the serpent"). The Greek cognate would be *πέφνε ὄφιν*. Similar repetition would occur in the Proto-Indo-European formula reconstructed by Watkins using the roots **g^hen-* (kill) and **og^hhi-* (serpent).

fantastic monsters. Four chapters of *How to Kill a Dragon* (36-39) are devoted to Greek dragon-slaying tales, and Watkins demonstrates that the verb *phenô*, or a derivative, is the norm when what is being slain is some sort of serpentine monster (*ibid.*:358). Later in Byzantine literature, the hero of *Callimachos and Chrysorrhoe* earns the formulaic epithet *ho phoneutês tou drakontos* (Cupane 1995:206), but by the time of the text's composition *drakôn* no longer referred to a serpentine dragon but to a humanoid ogre, such as those found in the Greek wonder tales.⁹

The dragon in *Digenes Akrites* that first appears as a handsome youth and then transforms into a three-headed serpent is akin to many creatures in Indo-European literature. The human/serpent shapeshifter is at least as old as the *naga* of Indian legend (Vogel 1926). Grégoire has referenced the dragon's Indo-Iranian pedigree (1942:168).¹⁰ While contextualizing the serpent in Indo-Iranian mythology is valuable, particularly in a text with such predominantly Eastern settings, humans and serpents switch forms in Ancient Greek literature as well. A famous example is Cadmus, and Pausanias narrates that the hero Cychreus appeared in serpent form.¹¹ Unlike these classical texts in which a human appears as a serpent, our Byzantine poet depicts instead a serpent appearing as a human. The *naga*, neither truly a human nor a snake but a supernatural being, is a comparable creature. The Byzantine poet makes the creature demonic and hideous to suit the poem's Christian worldview. Another Greek parallel may be the serpent on the shield of Agamemnon, which, like the dragon killed by Digenes, has three heads.¹²

Among non-Greek sources, the three-headed serpent most likely to be a direct influence on the Byzantine epic is the Iranian dragon Azhi Dahaka. In Ferdowsi's *Shahname* (c. 1000), the handsome ruler Zakhak (a later form of Azhi Dahaka) sprouts two serpentine heads after being kissed by Eblis (the devil) (Davis 2006:9). The transformation clearly has its parallels with the epic of *Digenes Akrites*. In both the Persian and the Byzantine epics, a character appears first as a handsome youth and then as a monstrous three-headed figure.¹³ That Ferdowsi constantly refers to Zakhak as an "Arabian" is not in itself conclusive, but the reader of *Digenes Akrites* cannot help but recall Digenes' own Arab ancestry. In all versions of the Iranian story, from the Avestan sources through Ferdowsi's retelling, Azhi Dahaka/Zakhak is defeated but not killed. He is bound and imprisoned, to await Judgment Day in the Avesta and to suffer a hell-like punishment in Ferdowsi.¹⁴ The Grottaferrata text's castration imagery, evoked through Digenes' use of the sword rather than the mace, becomes clearer still when we consider that the mace is Digenes' weapon of choice in the Akritic songs as well as the weapon used by Fereydun to defeat Zakhak.

⁹ For more on the dragon/ogre in Greek folklore, see Alexiades 1982.

¹⁰ See also Mavrogordato 1956:xlvi.

¹¹ Pausanias I.35-36.

¹² *Iliad* 11.39-40.

¹³ I thank Martin Schwartz for sharing his opinion that the dragon's three-headedness makes an Iranian origin likely. The case for Iranian antecedents was made by Grégoire, while Mavrogordato (1956:xlvi) argued that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was sufficient precedent.

¹⁴ For discussion of Azhi Dahaka, beginning with the serpent's Indo-European origins and extending through later folkloric material, see the entries by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, D.J. Khaleghi-Motlagh, Mahmoud Omidshafar, and James R. Russell under the heading AŽDAHĀ in Yarshater 1989:191-205.

It is likely that another Iranian influence on Digenes Akrites is the hero Rostam, who like Digenes is a dragon slayer noted for childhood feats of beast combat. The “Iranian Herakles,” Rostam undergoes seven trials, the first three of which are killing a lion, finding a spring of water, and beheading a dragon. These three acts all parallel episodes at the beginning of book six of the Grottaferrata text, in which the hero kills a dragon and a lion near a spring that he had found (Davis 2006:152-55). The finding of the spring, in particular, suggests that the Byzantine poet was influenced by Persian material in addition to the more obvious influence of the labors of Herakles, the first two of which are slaying the Nemean lion and the Lernean Hydra. The Persian influence may come not necessarily from Ferdowsi but from the body of folklore upon which Ferdowsi drew and to which he contributed. Greeks were familiar with tales of Persian heroes since at least the time of Herodotus, and the Eastern settings of *Digenes Akrites* make Persian influence especially likely.¹⁵

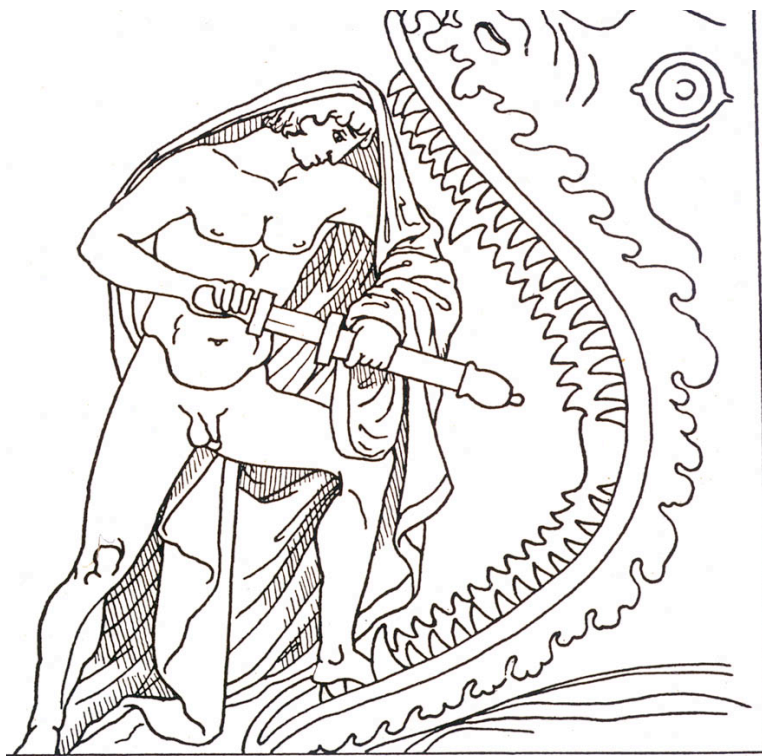


Fig. 4. Hero (Herakles?) slaying a serpent, from an Etruscan vase at Perugia.

Although the defeated monster is not slain, the Iranian hero Thraetona/Fereydun is unambiguously triumphant. I find Digenes' triumph less clear-cut. A Western text we may compare is *Beowulf*, in which it is quite evident that the hero does not really triumph over the dragon. The two destroy each other. Watkins discusses *Beowulf* at length, but it is significant that the only occurrence of the formula *wyrm æcwealde* does not refer to Beowulf. Rather, it occurs in an embedded narrative much earlier in the text, telling the story of Sigemund.¹⁶ Though it would seem upon a superficial reading that Digenes triumphs over the dragon, I believe that Digenes' slaying of the dragon is symbolic of the hero's self-destructive

tendencies. To frame the analysis in classic Freudian terminology, one would say that Digenes' death instinct turns both inward towards the id (the dragon), and outward towards the object

¹⁵ For a discussion of Ferdowsi's sources as well as the *Shahname*'s *nachleben*, see Clinton 1987:xv-xix.

¹⁶ For discussion of the formula in Anglo-Saxon literature, see Watkins 1995:414-28. Note, however, that the formula identified by Watkins is used only of Sigemund and never of Beowulf himself.

(Maximou), in a regression from the genital to the anal-sadistic stage.¹⁷ If we read the dragon-slaying episodes in both the Old English and the Byzantine epic, we observe that neither Beowulf nor Digenes is ever quite said to have slain the dragon.¹⁸ *âcwellan* and *phoneuô*, which Watkins identifies as the proper verbs for the slaying of serpents in their respective languages, are absent when the poets describe the dragon-slaying scenes in the English as well as the Byzantine epic. Watkins' basic formula, "the hero slew the serpent," is never used in either episode. Indeed, all words meaning "to kill," formulaic or otherwise, are avoided with reference to the dragons faced by the protagonists in both epics. In *Beowulf*, this omission places greater emphasis on Beowulf's death in contrast to his triumph. In *Digenes Akrites*, though the passage is narrated in the first person by a boastful young hero, he does not sing his own praises using the ancient formula, but says (Jeffreys 1998:156-57):¹⁹

εἰς ὕψος ὄλω τῷ θυμῷ τὸ σπαθὶν ἀνατείνας
εἰς κεφαλὰς κατήγαγον θηρὸς τοῦ δεινοτάτου
καὶ ἀπάσας αἶρω ὁμοῦ

I . . . stretched my sword up . . . high with all my might
and brought it down on the ferocious beast's heads,
and cut them all off at once . . . [Grottaferrata 6.74-76]

Digenes' boasts occur at a point in the poem where the hero had just been expressing remorse after the rape of a young woman, abandoned by her lover in the desert, whom Digenes had rescued from raiders before succumbing to his own adulterous and violent lust. The mood shifts strikingly from his penitence over the rape, which occurs at the end of book five, to his exultation as he recounts his combat with the dragon that threatens his wife at the beginning of book six. As much as the passages differ in mood, they are thematically similar. In both, a

¹⁷ Freud 1990:39, 55. The fourth essay chapter, devoted to "The Two Classes of Instincts" (*Eros* and *Thanatos*), is particularly applicable to Digenes and Maximou. I use "self-destructive" here in a more general sense than it has in Freud's writings. Since Digenes is obsessive rather than melancholic, and is never suicidal, Freud would probably not have called him "self-destructive;" but I find no better term in contemporary English for a character who vexes himself as Digenes does. Galatariotou (1989) has written on how the interplay of *Eros* and *Thanatos* is represented elsewhere in Byzantine literature. Galatariotou's excellent study does not engage with psychoanalysis, but her frequent references to "unconscious" motivation indicate the inevitability of applying psychoanalytic concepts and terms to the material she discusses.

¹⁸ It could be argued that Beowulf's insistence on fighting the dragon one-on-one with no help from his men (lines 2529-37) stems from a self-destructive hubris, but after considering the generous feedback of John D. Niles, I am inclined to see Beowulf's behavior as motivated by an altruistic wish to spare his people from harm, as the king believes, incorrectly, that the dragon was sent as punishment because the king himself had broken a divine law (lines 2327-31). Beowulf's childlessness may typologically suggest Christian chastity.

¹⁹ In the Escorial version, omission of Digenes' rape of the young woman prior to his encounter with the dragon diminishes the episode's psychological impact, and thus I do not wish to dwell on the Escorial version. I am grateful to Tomislav Longinovic for reading my manuscript and sharing his knowledge of psychoanalytic criticism. Longinovic is surely correct in his observation that the reference to "stretching my sword on high" is also very phallic. This is only one possible avenue for future psychoanalytic studies of *Digenes Akrites*. Others might include the similarities between Digenes and his father (which have been noted though never studied psychoanalytically), and the juxtaposition of the vaginal imagery of the water source with the phallic imagery of the dragon.

handsome young man is driven by lust to sexually assault a young woman. An orthodox Freudian reading would interpret the hero as the ego and the dragon as the id, which the ego attacks after being tormented by the super-ego at the end of book five.²⁰ The dragon is punished for attempting the very crime that Digenes has just committed. Decapitation of the serpent is a symbolic genital mutilation, and the dragon functions as a phallic symbol and a scapegoat onto which Digenes casts his own sense of guilt.²¹ Words of death and killing are studiously avoided throughout the dragon episode in *Digenes Akrites*, in contrast to the death of the lion immediately thereafter, in which the narrative states bluntly, ἔθανε παραχρῆμα, “it died on the spot” (Jeffreys 1998:159, 6.97). The unique importance of the dragon’s decapitation is here underscored as the hero kills the lion with a club, apparently having misplaced his sword shortly after using it to deprive the serpent of its heads.

The lion is purely part of the natural order, while the dragon is a force of supernatural evil. The lion in Christian tradition can be a Satanic image, as in 1 Pet 5:8, but it can also be simply an animal, used to illustrate a saint’s taming of nature as in the legend of St. Jerome, or, in examples familiar to the Byzantines, the Acts of Paul and Thecla and the biblical story of Daniel. If the lion were a supernatural being, a saint would have exorcised the demon. If it were a natural creature, a saint would have soothed the beast. Digenes is no saint, and the lion-slaying episode belongs to the genre of heroic beast combat rather than to any hagiographic tradition.

Demons in Byzantine literature are never slain, but rather cast out. The Persian dragons that I believe are an important source of the dragon in *Digenes Akrites* are associated with Angra Mainyu, the Zoroastrian evil spirit, just as infernal dragons are a common feature of Christian demonology.²² In addition to the likelihood of direct Persian influence, there is also considerable indirect influence. Zoroastrian serpent demons are the cousins of Greek monsters such as the hydra, and they are also ancestors of the infernal dragon in Revelation and other Christian sources from which the Grottaferrata poet clearly drew.²³ While describing the supernatural dragon, unlike the lion, which belongs to the natural order, the narrative contains words of cutting, not killing. My point is not to deny that Digenes physically kills the dragon, but I do wish to suggest some implications of the poet’s word choice: first, that the verb *apotemnô* (8.87), literally “to cut off,” as opposed to *pephnô* or *kteinô*, reinforces the phallic symbolism. *Apotemnô* is the verb Digenes uses when, preparing to die, he recounts his life’s deeds to his wife. In the same scene, *thanatoô* (8.94), literally “to make dead,” is said of the hero’s lion-slaying. While *apotemnô* literally refers to what Digenes did to the dragon’s heads, it can also refer to the

²⁰ Freud 1990:55: “The ego defends itself vainly, alike against the instigations of the murderous id and against the reproaches of the punishing conscience. It succeeds in holding in check at least the most brutal actions of both sides; the first outcome is interminable self-torment, and eventually there follows a systematic torturing of the object, in so far as it is within reach.”

²¹ For more on theoretical readings of monsters as embodiments of disowned or shameful human qualities, see especially Gilmore 2003:16: “Indeed, since Freud’s time, we have come to know the monster of the imagination as . . . a projection of some repressed part of the self.”

²² See Watkins 1995:300 for the author’s own view and a summary of scholarly opinions.

²³ The influence of Zoroastrianism on other monotheistic faiths is widely documented; see, for instance, Boyce 2001.

cutting off of his own young life and his bloodline. The poet's avoidance of stating directly that the dragon was killed also heightens the sense of the dragon's demonic qualities. Though Digenes succeeds in rescuing his wife, his triumph over his inner demons is ambiguous at best. As a symbol of the unbridled, even demonic sexual energy that the hero wishes to excise from his own character, the dragon fittingly has three heads. Eros is sometimes portrayed with three faces in Byzantine art and literature (Jeffreys 1998:323),²⁴ and multiplication of genital images may, as Freud has observed, represent an attempt to ward off castration.²⁵ The three-headed serpentine demon is familiar from Persian mythology, and in a Christian context the image may evoke a Dantesque perverse trinity.

Another observation of Freud's that helps elucidate the dragon-slaying episode in *Digenes Akrites* is that the appearance of a double may act in the symbolism of literature and dreams as a portent of death (2003:142). The dragon is certainly a double to Digenes. Like the epic's problematic hero, the dragon is a rapist (or at least he tries to be); and similarities between the monster and the hero are heightened by the dragon's initial appearance in human form. In punishing the dragon, Digenes punishes himself. The encounter with the serpent occurs after guilt has driven him to abandon his former home (Jeffreys 1998:150-51, 5.281-89):

Καὶ μετ' ὀλίγον καὶ αὐτὸς ἦλθον εἰς τὴν καλὴν μου
 τοῦ Ἀπριλίου τρέχοντος πρὸς μεσότητα ἤδη,
 τὸ συνειδὸς κατήγορον φέρων τῆς ἀμαρτίας
 καὶ ταλανίζων ἑμαυτὸν ἐν τῇ ἀθέσμῳ πράξει
 ὀπηνίκα τὸν ἥλιον, τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν εἶδον,
 ὡς αἰσχυρόμενος αὐτὴν μεγάλως ἀδικήσας,
 μετ' ὀλίγον γὰρ ἔδοξα μετοίκησιν ποιῆσαι
 (διὰ τὸ γινῶναι καὶ αὐτὴ τὴν παράνομον μίξιν),
 ἣν δὴ καὶ πεποιήκαμεν ἀπάραντες ἐκεῖθεν.

And while I myself returned to my lovely girl,
 as April was already hastening toward its mid-point,
 having a guilty conscience of my sin
 and castigating myself for my illicit deed.
 When I saw my sun, my soul,
 since I was ashamed of having greatly wronged her,
 after a while I decided to move our home
 (because she too knew of my unlawful intercourse),
 which we did, removing ourselves from there.

²⁴ See Beaton 1996:155-158 for a discussion of the romance *Libistros and Rhodamne*, in which King Eros is described as *trimorphoprosopos*, "three-form-faced." The most reliable critical edition of the text is Agapitos 2006.

²⁵ "If one of the ordinary symbols for a penis occurs in a dream doubled or multiplied, it is to be regarded as a warding-off of castration" (Freud 1953:357).

Jeffreys has noted that the the epic's third-person narration suggests no widespread knowledge of Digenes' crimes. In this passage, Digenes is largely imagining others censuring him as he censures himself (Jeffreys 1998:151).

The opening of book six combines classical and biblical images to form a complex symbolic system. Parallels with the temptation of Eve have rightly been noted (*ibid.*:153). If we look at only biblical allusions, Digenes emerges as a Christ figure who defeats the serpent, and his wife as a second Eve who has withstood her adversary's assaults, but such an interpretation has its problems, as the passage emphasizes the temptation not of the woman but of the serpent. Insofar as he is motivated by desire to consummate his own lust rather than to corrupt others and expel them from Paradise, the dragon has more in common with Hades abducting Persephone than with Satan tempting Eve. The scene of a young girl in an idyllic natural setting with a spring and, most importantly, narcissus flowers alludes to Pausanias' passage on the abduction of Persephone (IX.31). A curious feature of Pausanias is his digression insisting that the narcissus was in fact the flower that Hades used as bait to lure Persephone. In *Digenes Akrites*, where the dragon and not the girl is being tempted, the girl's face is likened to the narcissus flower: *ναρκίσσου γὰρ τὸ πρόσωπον τὴν χροίαν ἐμίμειτο*, "Her face mimed the color of the narcissus" (Jeffreys 1998:154, 6.31; trans. mine). In this scene where Digenes, still narrating in the first person, projects all evil onto the serpent and sees only purity and good in his wife, the serpent is Hades, tempted by a beautiful woman near a spring, and he is also Persephone, tempted by a lovely narcissus. Digenes' narrative alters both the story of Eve and the serpent as well as the story of Hades and Persephone to show his wife's virtue and his own heroism.

Yet we cannot take Digenes' account of his own redemption at face value. His encounter with the warrior woman Maximou shows that Digenes is unchanged. As much as he may wish that the dragon represented only the vanquished Satan, or a Hades who failed to abduct Kore, the reader knows that the dragon also represents the uncontrolled, self-destructive sexual energy of Digenes. His decapitation of the serpent functions as a self-castration, foreshadowing his untimely and childless death. He belongs to the group of medieval heroes, including Beowulf and Cúchulainn, whose superhuman stature makes them indispensable defenders of their communities but renders them incapable of leaving heirs lest the world should be populated with a superhuman race. Such heroes are often hybrid in some way, such as the racially mixed Byzantine hero, or Cúchulainn, who has births in the animal, human, and spirit worlds. The idea of hybrid supermen whose population God must regulate has biblical origins:

οἱ δὲ γίγαντες ἦσαν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκεῖναις καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνο, ὥς ἂν εἰσεπορεύοντο οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ πρὸς τὰς θυγατέρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἐγεννώσαν ἑαυτοῖς· ἐκεῖνοι ἦσαν οἱ γίγαντες οἱ ἀπ' αἰῶνος, οἱ ἄνθρωποι οἱ ὀνομαστοὶ. [Gen 6.4, Septuagint]

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old,

warriors of renown. [Genesis 6.4, NRSV. The NRSV is here identical in meaning to the Septuagint except for “warriors” instead of “men.”]²⁶

As Digenes’ refusal to serve among regular soldiers in Constantinople and his decision to remove himself to the far borders of the Empire demonstrate, he knows he is unfit to mix with the society of normal men. Failure to procreate finalizes the necessary separation between Digenes and the rest of imperial society.

A Western epic that has been compared to *Digenes Akrites* is *El Poema de Mio Cid* (Hook 1993:73-85). The common characteristic of being situated on the frontier between Islamic lands and Christendom invites comparison, though the two heroes themselves are opposite in important ways. The defining epithet of El Cid is *mesurado*, attested in the opening verses of the surviving manuscript (Michael 1976:75), while any sense of measure is quite antithetical to the character of Digenes. El Cid’s virtue and moderation enable him to reintegrate fully into Spanish society and marry his daughters to royalty, insuring that his own bloodline will live on in the rulers of Spain. *El Poema de Mio Cid* is a triumphalist epic in celebration of an expanding community. *Digenes Akrites* is a lament for an empire that has declined after the loss of its hero. El Cid is a frontiersman who moves from the margin to the center and acts as the key figure in an expanding state. The Castilian hero is not only a protector but a unifier, bringing the different faiths and geographical regions of Spain into political unity under his king. In contrast, Digenes begins on the frontier and moves ever further from the center of the empire, aware that his violence and strength pose a potential danger even to those he protects, until he dies childless to live on in nothing but song after the loss of the lands he defended.

El Cid displays his characteristic moderation in the epic’s obligatory, though greatly moderated, beast-fighting episode. Though the *Poema de Mio Cid* epic has very little of the fantastical or supernatural about it, the motif of the hero displaying his power over nature by defeating a fierce animal is still present. When the hero is ruling in Valencia, after having married his daughters to the nefarious Infants of Carrión, his palace lion escapes from its cage. His cowardly, high-born aristocratic sons-in-law run and hide, while the brave frontier warrior of relatively humble origins shames the lion and marches it back to its cage (Michael 1976:ii. 2278-2310). Different as this episode in *El Poema de Mio Cid* is from Digenes’ battles with the serpent and the lion, the beast-combat episodes in both epics occur at times of domestic

²⁶ The idea that God will not permit superhuman beings to thrive in his world is perhaps most clearly expressed in medieval literature by Dante in the *Inferno*: “Natura certo; quando lasciò l’arte / di sì fatti animali, assai fê bene / per tòrre tali essecutori a Marte. / E s’ella d’elefanti e di balene / non si pente, chi guarda sottilmente, / più giusta e più discreta la ne tene; / ché dove l’argomento de la mente / s’aggiugne al mal volere e la possa, nessun riparo vi può far la gente.” (Leonardi 1991:31, 49-57; 922-23). “Nature, when she cast away the mold / for shaping beasts like these, without a doubt / did well, depriving Mars of more such agents. / And if she never did repent of whales and elephants, we must consider her, / on sober thought, all the more just and wary: / for when the faculty of intellect / is joined with brute force and with evil will, / no man can win against such an alliance.” (trans. Musa 1995:170). Cúchulainn, one of the most out-of-control and monstrous, yet at the same time most heroic, figures of medieval literature is forced to kill his own son in defense of the honor of Ulster (Kinsella 1969:39-45). For Cúchulainn’s three births, see *ibid.*:21-25. The idea that elimination of the Nephilim was one of God’s purposes in sending the Flood is first made explicit in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, such as *Jub.* 7:21-25 (Charlesworth 1985:70).

adjustment for their respective heroes. Digenes has just been wedded and El Cid has just married his two daughters when these scenes occur.

Jungian psychoanalyst Joseph L. Henderson has remarked of a patient's dragon-slaying dreams (1964:125): "He had to find a means of freeing the psychic energy attached to the mother-son relationship, in order to achieve a more adult relation to women—and, indeed, to adult society as a whole. The hero-dragon battle was the symbolic expression of this process of 'growing up'."²⁷ This citation occurs in a passage discussing, among other mythological references, Theseus' rescue of Ariadne from the Minotaur, so the point is not so much about dragons in particular, but about beast combat as a symbol of marital transition. The Infants of Carrión fail to tame their own nature as well as to rescue their brides. The girls must be rescued by their father, as they are still essentially maidens waiting to be married off to suitable young men. El Cid triumphs. Digenes seems to triumph as well, but in defeating the dragon he shows himself so much like the dragon that we are left to conclude that he has defeated himself. He has a vexed transition into married life, the stage when the parent is most fully replaced by the spouse as an object of libido and by the super-ego as a voice of admonition. He will not be a faithful husband, and both he and his wife will die prematurely. A symbolic castration need not coincide with a literal one. In the case of Digenes, it clearly does not, as his later sexual adventures show. As a symbol, however, decapitation of the serpent reveals that Digenes' sexuality, for all its exuberance, is fundamentally deficient in that it does not conform to the standards of Christian marriage.

The dragon's association with life force, albeit a destructively unbridled life force, marks it as part of an Eastern tradition. Dragons in Germanic tradition, such as the serpent in *Beowulf* and Fafnir in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, seldom leave their hoards. They act as treasure guardians unassociated with sexual energy. To pursue the comparison further in psychoanalytic terms, the hoarding of wealth, for Freud, is connected with the anal character, an earlier stage than the phallic (1989).²⁸ Northern dragons share many traits with actual snakes: hiding away, coiled up,

²⁷ Henderson's case study is applying a point made by Jung (1962:374), namely that dragon-slaying represents attainment of maturity and liberation from parental influence. Jung's interest in lion-dragon combat extended to Mithraic symbolism where the god Aion is depicted as a lion-headed man doing combat with a snake. He discusses similar imagery from ancient Egypt and medieval Europe. According to Jung, "the legend of Samson is a parallel of the Mithraic sacrifice" (*ibid.*:280). It is possible that the lion's appearance in *Digenes* immediately after the beheading of the serpent is related to the lion-serpent combat motif, particularly since Digenes has by that point been so strongly identified with the dragon. The classic Jungian interpretation of animal and monster imagery in dreams is that instinct has been disassociated from the Self, which may help us further understand the poet's need to have Digenes fall asleep before the appearance of the dragon and again before that of the lion. Jung remarks, in his analysis of beast imagery in dreams, on the need "to capture and regulate the animal instincts so as to exorcise the danger of falling into unconsciousness" (1974:224).

²⁸ Jung (1916:397), basing his observations on primarily on Wagner, sees the cave dragon such as Fafnir as the "terrible mother" guarding the treasure of the son's libido. Phallic and Oedipal implications make the story of Fafnir ripe for reexamination by psychoanalytic critics, as the formerly human character turned into a serpent because he had killed his own father, thus forfeiting his humanity. Further study of this topic is, however, outside the scope of the present article.

and woe to anyone who steps too near them.²⁹ Dragons in Greek mythology share with their Persian and Indic counterparts an association with water and hence with life-giving force (Watkins 1995:460-63). Like his Eastern Indo-European and classical relatives, the Serpent in *Digenes Akrites* appears near a source of water. An ancient Greek monster similar to Digenes' dragon is the hydra, another multi-headed water serpent, and Cychreus in Pausanias' *Description of Greece* is spotted in the sea as an omen.

Another of Pausanias' tales is of interest to the reader of *Digenes* for its emphasis on the ambiguous relation between the hero and the monster. Pausanias tells of a sailor in Odysseus' crew stoned to death by the inhabitants of Temesa for violating a young woman and later returning as a *daimôn*, killing the inhabitants of the land indiscriminately until they decide to propitiate him annually by sacrificing their most beautiful maiden. The hero Euthymos eventually happens upon Temesa when one of the sacrifices takes place and vanquishes the *daimôn*, who flees into the depths of the sea. The name of the malicious sea spirit defeated by Euthymos is simply Hero. Pausanias' narrative reminds us that there is often very little to separate the hero from the monster.³⁰

Although *Digenes Akrites* is a pacifist text, pleading for all races to unite voluntarily through the loving bonds of Christian faith, the hero's own life and character underscore the tensions that arise between different groups of people. Love for a Christian woman leads Digenes' father, the emir, along with his entire household, to become Christian, yet the offspring of the union is one of the most internally conflicted characters in medieval literature. Digenes cannot fit into any community. Despite his parents' fervent Christianity, he is ultimately too violent and lustful to lead an exemplary Christian life or even accommodate to Christian society. The hybridity that ought to lead to union of all people under the Gospel really leads to a monstrous otherness.

None of this discussion of Digenes' monstrosity is meant to undermine his heroism. He is a great hero, but one of that class who share many monstrous qualities. A final point of Watkins' study relevant to Digenes involves how the hero takes on the role of the monster in accounts of the hero's death. Symbolic self-castration accounts for why Digenes' progeny have not populated the world with supermen, but the poet still faces the problem at the epic's end of how such an invincible warrior can die an early death. A case of tetanus contracted in the bathtub is not a worthy adversary, and must be viewed as the tool rather than the agent of Digenes' destruction. The true answer to the question: Ἄρα τίς τὸν ἀήττητον ἴσχυσεν ὑποτάξαι; "Who had the strength to conquer the unvanquished one?" (Jeffreys 1998:232, 8.267), is the trio of Death, Charon, and Hades (8.268-70), the last of which was prefigured in the dragon. Death is here the triumphant warrior and Digenes the defeated monster/hero in a formulaic inversion of the sort

²⁹ For the insight of the Nordic dragon's similarity to an actual snake, I am indebted to Thomas Dubois. I thank John D. Niles for sharing his insight that the Beowulf dragon has no demonic powers and can be seen as a part of the natural order rather than as a creature of supernatural evil.

³⁰ Pausanias VI.6. For discussion of the hero/monster ambiguity, see Watkins 1995:398-407.

Watkins discusses in Greek and other Indo-European traditions, particularly in his chapter “*Nektar* and the Adversary Death” (1995:391-97).³¹

The goals of this article have been to discuss the dragon’s Indo-European antecedents and parallels and to work towards an understanding of the episode’s erotic symbolism. Digenes is a psychologically vexed individual, and comparison with other ambiguous heroes such as Cúchulainn may help in the important work that has already been done comparing Digenes with El Cid, who shares the Byzantine hero’s proximity to Islam and peaceful relations with many Muslim neighbors, but does not share his rash disposition. Cúchulainn’s three births may also be a point of comparison in future research on the “twice-born” border lord.³²

Since no psychoanalytic reading of *Digenes Akrites* has yet been undertaken, I have deemed it appropriate to concentrate on early forms of psychoanalysis. We should establish what a Freudian or Jungian reading would be before applying the theories of later psychoanalytic schools. I have concentrated on the most plausible interpretation of what I regard as obvious phallic symbolism, but other ways of reading the phallus are possible. The phallic struggle between sword and heads could be construed as one in which Digenes battles with and symbolically replaces the phallus of his father, a character who had abducted the hero’s mother but was later domesticated by her and moved through love to adopt her Christian faith. Such a reading would seem to complement rather than contradict the interpretation I have proposed here. It could also plausibly be argued that the symbolic genital mutilation is not a self-defeat but a victory over the passions: “If your eye causes you to sin . . .” (Mark 9:47). According to this more optimistic reading, the dragon-slaying would seem to mark a successful passage through the Oedipal phase, as the hero steps into the paternal role after overcoming not only his own bestial nature but also the phallus of the father. At the ending of book six, after the hero “shamefully” (*athliôs*) murders Maximou, he then relocates to the banks of the Euphrates, thus moving ever further from the center of imperial society. In book seven, verse 105, we learn that the hero builds a church in honor of St. Theodore. This development may mean that the hero’s triumph over his own lust is depicted as he grows into an icon of the great dragon-slaying military saint. This interpretation seems too neat because the Maximou episode, in which the hero commits adultery and murder, comes between the dragon-slaying and the building of the house with its shrine to St. Theodore near the Euphrates. The hero’s premature and childless death likewise reinforces his failure to step into the role of father and husband. In line nine of book seven, we are told that the source of the Euphrates is “paradise itself,” suggesting that the hero’s sins have been washed away as he is restored to a prelapsarian state of grace, and events leading to this episode demonstrate that whatever divine pardon Digenes receives is granted

³¹ *Pephn-* does not appear in the hero’s death scenes in either the Grottaferrata or the Escorial text, although *ktein-* occurs frequently in both. For more on ancient parallels, see Watkins 1995:493-98.

³² This story, and that of Cúchulainn’s slaying of his only son Connla, do not occur in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* proper, but are from other sections of the Ulster cycle that Kinsella (1969) includes for clarity. For discussion of possible Persian antecedents to the theme of the “twice-born,” see Grégoire 1942:170. Like Cúchulainn, Rostam is also famous for killing his own son in combat.

purely through grace, in spite of his many sins. Digenes is a heroic character, but one who is flawed and self-destructive from the epic's beginning to its end.

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