THE AMPHISBAENA'S ANTECEDENTS

Housman, in the less familiar of his two amphisbaena poems (*The Amphisbaena, or, The Limits of Human Knowledge*), highlights the double-headed serpent's defensive advantages:

> The prudent its approach avoid,
> And do not stop to be annoyed,
> For all who see it are perplexed
> And wonder what will happen next . . .
> Until it starts, you never know
> In which direction it will go,
> Nor can you even then maintain
> That it will not come back again.

Fabulous it may be, but Esarhaddon believed that it was among the hazards which he faced in 671 B.C. as he led his army through the desert towards Egypt: 'A distance of 4 double-hours in a journey of 2 days (there were) two-headed serpents [whose attack] (spelled) death—but I trampled (upon them) and marched on.'[1] Linguistically it is not clear whether the reptile's two heads are at either end or both at one, like the Russian imperial eagle's. But the first, amphisbaenic, option would be the more dangerous, and finds a degree of support in reality.

The conditions which severely tested the endurance of Esarhaddon's troops are highly congenial to the sand-boa (*eryx*), found in semi-arid and desert regions in north Africa, south-east Europe, and Asia as far east as India;[2] its preferred ambient temperature is 40°C. According to the *Naval Intelligence Geographical Handbook for Persia*, published in September 1945: 'Its sluggish and placid disposition makes it easy to handle, and it is often carried by snake-charmers as part of their equipment and exhibited as a two-headed snake, that is to say, with a head at each end. The tail, which is thick, blunt, and very short, makes this possible' (219). It is not venomous, though no doubt it suits the snake-charmer's act to suggest otherwise, and perhaps too to imply that his pet is a young specimen of a reptile that might attain a formidable size when adult.

Exaggerated or completely misconceived fears of the threat posed by snakes to human life remain with us, and stories of two-headed serpents might be expected to have been prominent in the reminiscences of Esarhaddon's troops, passing into camp-fire mythology to figure among the dangers with which veterans scared new recruits. Greek mercenaries, like Alcaeus' brother Antimenidas who served under Nebucadnezzer (F 350)[3] and those who assisted Psammetichus' rise to power in 664 (Hdt. 2.152), must have been exposed to 'friendly' warnings against this hazard of

[1] A. L. Oppenheim's translation in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, 1955²), 292; cf. R. Borger and O. Kaiser (edd.), *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* I (Gütersloh, 1984), 399. A double-hour is equivalent to *c.* 10 km.

[2] See further B. Grzimek (ed.), *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopaedia* 6: *Reptiles* (New York, 1975), 368–80, esp. 374–7.

[3] See further W. Burkert, ' "Königs-ellen" bei Alkaios: Griechen am Rand der östlichen Monarchien', *MH* 53 (1996), 69–72 (= *Kleine Schriften ii: Orientalia* [Göttingen, 2003], 248–51); R. Rollinger, 'Homer, Anatolien und die Levante: Die Frage der Beziehungen zu den östlichen Nachbarkulturen im Spiegel der schriftlichen Quellen', in C. Ulf (ed.), *Der neue Streit um Troia. Eine Bilanz* (Munich, 2003), 330–48.

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desert campaigning[4] long before the amphisbaena's first appearance in literature, as a terrestrial counterpart to an epic hazard to shipping when the Aeschylean Cassandra seeks a suitable *comparandum* for Clytemnestra (*Ag.* 1232–4):

> τί νιν καλοῦσα δυσφιλὲς δάκος
> τύχοιμ' ἄν; ἀμφίσβαιναν, ἢ Σκύλλάν τινα
> οἰκοῦσαν ἐν πέτρασι, ναυτίλων βλάβην.

The word is evidently expected to be familiar to the audience;[5] Aeschylus did not think it necessary to make clear that the amphisbaena is a reptile, the first of many to be associated with Clytemnestra.[6] *Δράκαινα* and *μύραινα* appear to have served as models for the formation.[7] But we might have expected a word connoting dicephaly or amphistomy, and should consider whether *ἀμφίσβαινα* represents popular etymology of a foreign term.

Some slippage is not unlikely in terms denoting unfamiliar animals.[8] Whether Nicander's *amphisbaena* (*Ther.* 372–83) is the sand-boa or another species I leave to others; but he clearly has a real snake in mind.[9]

If such are the amphisbaena's origins, its elevation in Aeschylus to comparable status with Scylla's might be judged an outstanding example of the often quoted claim (Pl. *Epin.* 987 D 9–10) that whatever the Greeks borrowed from foreigners they enhanced.[10]

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[4] Similarly with the flying snakes to be found in the borderlands east of Egypt, as Herodotus (2.75-6, 3.107–9) believed; cf. *Isaiah* 30.6. Almost certainly this mythical pest was also mentioned in Esarhaddon's account of his desert march; see further T. Braun, 'Spines of winged snakes', in V. Karageorghis and I. Taifacos (edd.), *The World of Herodotus* (Nicosia, 2004), 265–85; Robert Rollinger, 'Herodot (II 75f., III 107–109), Asarhaddon, Jesaja und die fliegenden Schlangen Arabiens' in Herbert Heftner u. Kurt Tomaschitz (edd.), *AD FONTES! Festschrift f. Gerhard Dobesch* (Vienna, 2004), 927–46.

[5] It is a pity that we do not know why Aristophanes mentioned it in his *Storks* (*Pelargoi* F 457 K-A).

[6] See further Garvie's note on Aesch. *Cho.* 249.

[7] See further P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* (Paris, 1983), 81; C. D. Buck and W. Petersen, *A Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives* (Chicago, 1949), 289; P. Kretschmer, *Glotta* 12 (1923), 280–1, n. 1.

[8] Thus Gothic *ulbandus* 'camel' derives from Greek *elephas*; I owe this curiosity to Dr Gerald Stone.

[9] See further Gow and Scholfield ad loc.; H. Lloyd-Jones, *Mythical Beasts* (London, 1980), 9–11. The blind worm lizard (*Typhlops vermicularis*) has been a popular candidate; but these reptiles (not actually snakes), being secretive and subterranean, are rarely found except when the soil is dug up; see further Grzimek (n. 2), 338–44. Lloyd-Jones favours *doliophis*.

[10] This note has profited from discussion withThomas Braun and, by email, with Robert Rollinger; I am most grateful to them both.

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