Snakes have always had an aura of mystery and danger about them, and in ancient times people were fascinated by them. It is therefore not surprising that snakes feature in Greco-Roman religion and that they appear commonly on ancient coins.

In Judaism and Christianity there was a tendency to see snakes as evil. This was because in the book of Genesis a snake represents Satan and tempts Eve to disobey God. But the ancient Greeks and Romans had a positive view of snakes. They knew that if someone was bitten by a snake they could die, but this meant that snakes had power over life and death. Moreover they observed that a snake could shed its skin and in a way be reborn. So they had power over renewal and resurrection. All this meant that snakes were not like ordinary creatures: they belonged to the supernatural realm. Accordingly they appear with gods and goddesses, especially those concerned with healing.

The god of healing was Asclepius, known to the Romans as Aesculapius. His birthplace was said to be Trikka in Thessaly in northern Greece. He is shown feeding a snake on a coin minted at Trikka in the 1st half of the 4th century BC. (Figure 1) In Greek mythology he was the son of Apollo, and his daughter was Hygieia, from whose name the English word, ‘hygiene’, is derived. She was the goddess of health. On a silver coin of Trikka from about 420 BC a woman is shown feeding a snake. (Figure 2) To the Romans Hygieia was known as Salus, a word which had the meaning of general welfare as well as health. From her name the English words ‘salute’ and ‘salutation’ derive. The latter means wishing someone well. Salus appears commonly on Roman coins. (Figure 3)

The chief centre for the worship of Asclepius was at Epidaurus in the eastern part of the Peloponnesus. People who needed healing travelled to Epidaurus from all over the Greek and Roman world. In his temple Asclepius was shown with his hand on the head of a snake, indicating that it was his agent. (Figure 4) On a coin of Epidaurus he is also shown with his hand on a snake. (Figure 5) The ruins of the temple can still be seen. Near the temple there was a building in which the sick slept with snakes. (Figure 6) Presumably the snakes were tame and non-poisonous, but the psychological effect of sleeping with them must have been enormous. No wonder many people were cured!

Another important centre for the worship of Asclepius was at Pergamum (Greek: Pergamon) in western Anatolia. Today tourists visit the extensive ruins but in ancient times sick people went there in large numbers in the hope of being healed. One of them was the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius.

Snakes on Ancient Coins
by Peter E. Lewis

An albino reticulated python (Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 1 – Reverse of a bronze coin of Trikka showing Asclepius feeding a bird to a snake. In the worship of Asclepius chickens were sacrificed to the god. (Nomos Auction 4, Lot 1358)

Figure 2 – Reverse of a silver coin of Trikka showing a woman feeding a snake. (Nomos Auction 9, Lot 112)

Figure 3 – Reverse of a sestertius of Antoninus Pius minted at Rome in 144 AD. It shows Salus feeding a snake. SALVS AVG means “The emperor’s health.” He was unwell at the time. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 74, Lot 308)
emperor, Caracalla, who visited the temple in 214 AD. Asclepius is typically shown on coins leaning on a staff around which a snake is coiled. (Figure 7) A marble statue of Asclepius in a similar pose was found at Pergamum and is now in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Figure 8) The visit of Caracalla is recorded on coins, and on one Asclepius has taken the snake from his staff and is holding it up. (Figure 9) This suggests that the god did actually move and might have held a real snake. On another coin he has come out of the temple and is standing close to Caracalla. (Figure 10) Perhaps a priest pretended to be the god and provided a special manifestation for the emperor.

Also at Pergamum there was a cult of Dionysus, the god of wine, and snakes were involved in this. Secret orgiastic rites were held, and little is known about them, but the large silver coin known as a cistophorus seems to refer to them. The word means ‘basket-bearer’ and on the obverse the lid of a basket (the cista mystica) has been lifted and a snake is sliding out. It must refer to Dionysus because the surrounding wreath of ivy leaves was one of his symbols. On the reverse there is a bow case between two snakes, and on the right the staff surmounted by a pine cone is known as the thyrsus and it too was a symbol of Dionysus. (Figure 11) Other cities in the
region issued similar cistophori, but the symbol on the right varied.

There was a temple of Aesculapius at Rome, and how the god came to Rome is an interesting story. It begins with a prophetess called Sibyl who wrote nine books which she wanted to sell to the king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus (534-510 BC). Because he would not pay the price she demanded she proceeded to burn the books. When there were only three left he paid for them what she wanted for the nine. The precious books were kept in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill, to be consulted only if there was an emergency. In 293 BC a plague began to ravage the city, and the Roman Senate consulted the Sibylline books. The interpretation was that a temple to the god of healing should be built in Rome, and a delegation was sent to Epidaurus to bring Aesculapius to Rome. When the idol was being rowed up the Tiber a snake slipped off the ship and swam to an island in the river. The people saw this as a sign that the god wanted his temple to be built there, and a temple complex modelled on that at Epidaurus was erected on the island in 289 BC. There is no trace of it today, but the whole event is illustrated on a medallion of Antoninus Pius. (Figure 12) What is amazing about this story is that Aesculapius, or rather his agent, was exactly what the city needed. The plague was probably caused by rats, and the snakes which no doubt multiplied as at Epidaurus would have killed the rats. The payment to Sibyl was worth it.

Figure 7 – Reverse of a bronze coin of Commodus as Caesar (166-177 AD) minted at Pergamum. It shows Aesculapius in his temple. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 147, Lot 1830)

Figure 8 – Marble statue of Aesculapius found at Pergamum. It is of Greek or Roman origin. It is in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. (Wiki-media Commons: photo by Magnus Manske)

Figure 9 – Reverse of a bronze medallion of Caracalla (198-217 AD) minted at Pergamum. Caracalla holds a patera while an attendant is about to kill a tethered ox with an axe or a mallet. In the temple Aesculapius holds up a snake. (The New York sale, Auction XXIII, Lot 59)

Figure 10 – Reverse of a gold aureus of Caracalla minted at Rome. Caracalla holds a patera over a lighted altar. Aesculapius has come to the front of the temple and is face to face with the emperor. The small person on the left is Telesphorus, a young deity who was an associate of Aesculapius. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 52, Lot 521)
In keeping with their positive view of snakes the ancient Greeks believed in a good spirit of the cornfields called Agathadaemon (good spirit). He was shown in Greek art as a youth or a snake with a human head. The name reflects the fact that snakes protected the crops by killing rats and mice. Agathadaemon appears on a coin of Nero minted at Alexandria in Egypt. (Figure 13) Egypt was an important source of the grain needed to feed the population of Rome.

For the Greeks Delphi was particularly important because it was the centre or navel of the world. To find this centre Zeus, the chief of the gods, released two eagles from the ends of the earth and they met at Delphi. To mark this sacred spot a conical stone known as the omphalos (navel) was set up and it appears on coins often with a snake coiled around it. (Figure 14) The snake was called Python and he was created by Gaia, the goddess of the earth, to protect Mount Parnassus on the slopes of which Delphi was situated. When Apollo arrived at Delphi he killed Python with an arrow, and he is often shown on coins sitting on the omphalos.

The most amazing snake of all was Glycon, who appears on a number of ancient coins. Apart from the coins little would be known about him if it were not for the satirical writing of Lucian who travelled widely in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century AD. Lucian liked to expose charlatans, and the most successful trickster at the time was Alexander of Abonuteichus. He lived from about 105 to 175 AD and he also travelled widely. In Abonuteichus, which today is Inebolu on the north coast of Turkey, the people were aware of a prophecy that Asklepius

Figure 13 – Reverse of a billon tetradrachm of Nero minted at Alexandria in Egypt. It shows the snake Agathadaemon with a bunch of grain ears and poppies. He is wearing an Egyptian crown known as the pshept crown. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 4, Lot 2067)

Figure 14 – Reverse of a bronze coin of Hadrian (117-138 AD) minted at Delphi. It shows the snake, Python, coiled around the omphalos. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 55, Lot 399)

Figure 15 – Reverse of a bronze coin of Antoninus Pius minted at Abonuteichus in Paphlagonia. It shows the snake, Glycon. He seems to be smoking a cigar, but it is his forked tongue. (Naville Numismatics, Auction 22, Lot 195)
would come to live in their town, and they began to build a temple to him. Seeing an opportunity, Alexander produced a large snake and claimed that it was the incarnation of Asclepius. Its name was Glycon and Alexander acted as its high-priest and interpreter. It was installed in the temple and was widely consulted as an oracle. To impress the gullible Alexander sat in a darkened room with Glycon on his lap. Glycon was probably a hand-puppet or perhaps a real snake (a large python) with an artificial head attached. No doubt Alexander used magic tricks to great effect, and one suspects that magic tricks were performed in the temples of other gods in ancient times. Several important people were duped by Alexander including Rutilianus who had been proconsul of Asia. Even the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, listened to one of Glycon’s oracles. To defeat the barbarians north of the Danube he would have to throw two lions into the river. Marcus Aurelius actually did this and the lions were promptly clubbed to death when they reached the other side. Not deterred, the Roman army crossed the river, and they too were promptly annihilated. But the oracle retained its reputation and the coins show that it survived at least to the middle of the 3rd century. The people of Abonuteichus were proud of their famous oracle and they issued coins with Glycon on the reverse. (Figure 15). Other cities in the region did likewise, and on their coins he has a human or human-like head. (Figures 16 and 17) In 1962 during excavations at Tomis, which today is Constanta in Romania, a group of marble objects was found (Figure 18) and amongst them was a statue of Glycon. (Figure 19) It is on display in the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanta, and its image has appeared on the stamps (Figure 20) and banknotes (Figure 21) of Romania. Thanks to Lucian we can laugh at Glycon now and not be overcome with awe at seeing an incarnation of Asclepius.