



The multiple meanings of ancient zoological terms

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Many terms currently in use in the scientific language derive from classical Greek or Latin words. Some are employed with the same spelling, such as *hypophysis* (Greek) or *species* (Latin), some slightly or largely modified. The identity or resemblance between the classical term and the modern one may give the impression that they are the “same” term and that they have the same meaning, but this is very often misleading. Etymology is not identity. Very often, not to say almost always, the term “borrowed” from a language that was in use 2000 (or more) years ago experienced a modification in its sense, which may have transported it quite far away from the original connotation or even meaning of the word. This is well shown by the present work by Liliane Bodson. A member of the Belgian Royal Academy, she is a specialist of ancient Greek and Roman views on zoology and the relationships between humans and animals, with a particular emphasis on herpetology (amphibians and reptiles) and the works of Aristotle.

This very original book concentrates on the case of the polysemic classical Greek term σήψ (*sēps*) and its Latin transcription *seps*. This “zoonym” is a rather unusual case of zoological lexicology, both because of the extent and specificity of its applications and of its interdisciplinary dimension. Greek dictionaries which mention this term often define it as designating a venomous snake, the bite of which provokes a burning thirst and leads to putrefaction. Bodson studied a comprehensive corpus of texts from the classical period (400–200 BC) to the end of the Byzantine time (15th century AD). She found 63 occurrences of this term. As relevant zooarchaeological material is not available, she relied only on written and iconographic evidence to establish the status of this word in the texts considered. Her careful and thorough analysis allowed a reconstruction of the lexical history of the term *seps* and of related ones. The word σήψ first occurred as a medical term in the Hippocratic corpus. This noun is related to the verb σήπω (*sēpo*), which means “to make rotten” or “to rot, decay, putrefy”. The term σήψ thus literally means “putrefying sore, decaying wound”. First under its Greek form, then after latinization, it was applied to several kinds of venomous animals. Using an array of kinds of evidence (descriptions of the animals, of their behaviour, geographic distribution, toxicological and anthropological criteria), Bodson proposes rather precise specific identifications for the animals. Some of these confirm previous interpretations, others are rectified and some are new, having been unnoticed formerly.

Four groups of organisms were designated in classical times by the term σήψ or *seps*. The most common meaning of the term (35 occurrences) points to venomous snakes or “vipers” from Eurasia and North Africa. Bodson provides convincing evidence that, according to the sources, at least three identified taxa of the family VIPERIDAE, currently known as *Vipera ammodytes*, *Vipera ammodytes meridionalis* and *Echis pyramidum*, were involved, but in some cases the identification cannot go beyond the family. A second meaning of the