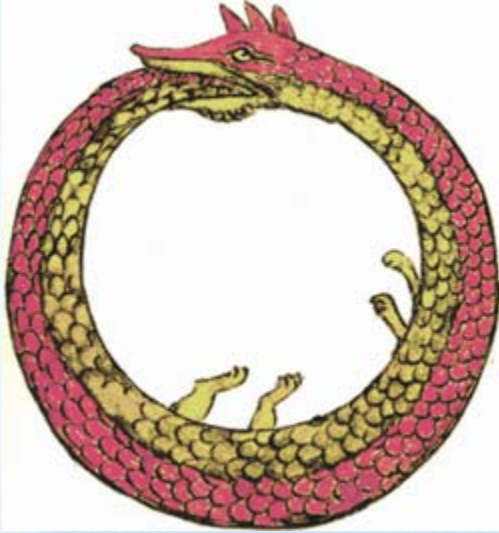


# Ouroboros



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(2)

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(1) **Drawing** by Theodoros Pelecanos, in alchemical tract titled *Synosius* (1478).

(2) **Engraving** by Lucas Jennis, in alchemical tract titled *De Lapide Philisophico*.

The **Ouroboros** (Greek Ουροβόρος, from ουροβόρος όφις "tail-devouring snake", also spelled *Ouroboros*, *Oroborus*, *Uroboros* or *Uroborus*, in English pronounced /ʊˈrɒbɔrɔs/ or /jʊərouˈbɔrəs/), is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon swallowing its own tail and forming a circle.

The Ouroboros often represents self-reflexivity or cyclicity, especially in the sense of something constantly re-creating itself, the eternal return, and other things perceived as cycles that begin anew as soon as they end (See Phoenix (mythology)). It can also represent the idea of primordial unity related to something existing in or persisting from the beginning with such force or qualities it cannot be extinguished. The Ouroboros has been important in religious and mythological symbolism, but has also been frequently used in alchemical illustrations, where it symbolizes the circular nature of the alchemist's opus. It is also often associated with Gnosticism, and Hermeticism.

Carl Jung interpreted the Ouroboros as having an archetypal significance to the human psyche. The Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann writes of it as a representation of the pre-ego "dawn state", depicting the undifferentiated infancy experience of both mankind and the individual child.<sup>[1]</sup>

## *Historical representations*

### **Antiquity**

Plato described a self-eating, circular being as the first living thing in the universe—an immortal, perfectly constructed animal.

“The living being had no need of eyes when there was nothing remaining outside him to be seen; nor of ears when there was nothing to be heard; and there was no surrounding atmosphere to be breathed; nor would there have been any use of organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which went from him or

came into him: for there was nothing beside him. Of design he was created thus, his own waste providing his own food, and all that he did or suffered taking place in and by himself. For the Creator conceived that a being which was self-sufficient would be far more excellent than one which lacked anything; and, as he had no need to take anything or defend himself against any one, the Creator did not think it necessary to bestow upon him hands: nor had he any need of feet, nor of the whole apparatus of walking; but the movement suited to his spherical form was assigned to him, being of all the seven that which is most appropriate to mind and intelligence; and he was made to move in the same manner and on the same spot, within his own limits revolving in a circle. All the other six motions were taken away from him, and he was made not to partake of their deviations. And as this circular movement required no feet, the universe was created without legs and without feet.<sup>[2]</sup> “

"Coiled dragon" forms have been attributed to the Hong Shan culture (4700 BC to 2900 BC). One in particular, in the shape of a complete circle, was found on the chest of the deceased.<sup>[3]</sup>

The notion of a serpent or dragon eating its own tail can be traced back to Ancient Egypt, circa 1600 BC. From ancient Egypt it passed to Phoenicia and then to the Greek philosophers, who gave it the name Ouroboros ("tail-devourer"). In Gnosticism, this serpent symbolized eternity and the soul of the world.

Christianity adopted the Ouroboros as symbols of the limited confines of the material world (that there is an "outside" being implied by the demarcation of an inside), and the self-consuming transitory nature of a mere "worldly existence" of this world, following in the footsteps of the preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:9-14. G. K. Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, uses it as a symbol of the circular and self-defeating nature of pantheistic mysticism and of most modern philosophy.

## Middle Ages

In mythology, it appears as the serpent Jörmungandr, one of the three children of Loki and Angrboda, who grew so large that it could encircle the world and grasp its tail in its teeth. In the legends of Ragnar Lodbrok, such as *Ragnarssona þáttur*, the Geatish king Herraud gives a small lindworm as a gift to his daughter Þóra Town-Hart after which it grows into a large serpent which encircles the girl's bower and bites itself in the tail. The serpent is slain by Ragnar Lodbrok who marries Þóra. Ragnar later has a son with another woman named Kráka and this son is born with the image of a white snake in one eye. This snake encircled the iris and bit itself in the tail, and the son was named Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye.

## Alchemy

In alchemy, the Ouroboros is a purifying sigil. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung saw the Ouroboros as an archetype and the basic mandala of alchemy. Jung also defined the relationship of the Ouroboros to alchemy:<sup>[4]</sup> The alchemists, who in their own way knew more about the nature of the individuation process than we moderns do, expressed this paradox through the symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail. Ouroboros has been said to have a meaning of infinity or wholeness. In the age-old image of the Ouroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process, for it was clear to the more astute alchemists that the *prima materia* of the art was man himself. The Ouroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e. of the shadow. This 'feed-back' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality, since it is said of the Ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolizes the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the *prima materia* which [...] unquestionably stems from man's unconscious.

The famous Ouroboros drawing from the early alchemical text *The Chrysopoeia of Cleopatra* dating to 2nd century Alexandria encloses the words *hen to pan*, "one is the all". Its black and white halves represent the Gnostic duality of existence.

As a symbol of the eternal unity of all things, the cycle of birth and death from which the alchemist sought release and liberation, it was familiar to the alchemist/physician Sir Thomas Browne. In his *A*

*letter to a friend*, a medical treatise full of case-histories and witty speculations upon the human condition, he wrote of it:

that the first day should make the last, that the Tail of the Snake should return into its Mouth precisely at that time, and they should wind up upon the day of their Nativity, is indeed a remarkable Coincidence,

It is also alluded to at the conclusion of Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658) as a symbol of the circular nature and Unity of the two Discourses:

All things began in order so shall they end, so shall they begin again according to the Ordainer of Order and the mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven.

## **Non-western traditions**

It is also present in some Hindu folk-myths, as a snake (Adishesha) circling the tortoise Maha kurma that supports the eight elephants which support the world on their backs. However, the snake does not bite its own tail, but instead is calling itself into being through what some literary theorists have called a performative speech act.

Snakes are sacred animals in many West African religions. The demi-god Aidophedo uses the image of a serpent biting its own tail. The Ouroboros is also seen in fon or dahomean iconography as well as in Yoruba imagery as Oshunmare.

The god Quetzalcoatl is sometimes portrayed as an Ouroboros on Aztec and Toltec ruins.

## **Modern**

The organic chemist August Kekulé claimed that a ring in the shape of Ouroboros that he saw in a dream inspired him in his discovery of the structure of benzene. As noted by Carl Jung, this might be an instance of cryptomnesia.

The flag of the short-lived Italian Regency of Carnaro featured the Ouroboros on it. The Ouroboros has been incorporated into the crests of the Hungarian and Romanian Unitarian churches.

## **FREEMASONRY**

It is written in old Sacred Scripts: "Oh! How it is pleasant that the brothers meet together"

Hoping to be the one for all and to be all in one as the principle of **OUROBOROS**:

One is all, at the same time simple and infinite, and is a Unit in the Plural.

## **SERPANT AND THE BIBLE**

The sixth day in the story of Creation, God created the human being - Adam. This creature was made in God's image, but what does that mean? That he was by nature impelled to create, to look at what he saw and change it? Even if sometimes the changes did not work out well?

God made man master over the earth and all that was on it. Then he created the woman, telling her and Adam to be fruitful and multiply.

God told Adam that he could eat from any tree in the Garden of Eden, except one. This was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil - if Adam ate from that, he would die. But all was well in paradise, and the man and the woman were happy.

Until the serpent came to tempt them. 'Eat the fruit' said the serpent. 'Why not?'

**ADAM AND EVE DISOBEY GOD** Eve was intrigued by this temptation: the fruit would make her wise, she thought. So she took one piece from the Tree of Knowledge, ate it and offered some to Adam. He ate it too.

Suddenly everything changed. They felt shame, becoming aware of their nakedness for the first time. They hid from the presence of God. But God called to them: "Where are you?" They knew they were caught. Their reaction was very human. Instantly, they began to blame each other. Adam blamed Eve for offering him the fruit. Eve blamed the serpent for tempting her. But the deed had been done, and they now faced the consequences, which were terrible - God sent them from the Garden, and an angel with a flaming sword barred the entrance so Adam

