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## A Nicandrian Nero? The Symbolic Significance of the Viper in Acts 28.1–6

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### Abstract

While surviving the shipwreck and the viper bite in Acts 28.1–6 have often been recognised as symbolic assertions of Paul’s innocence, the viper may hold further symbolic significance. Following his act of matricide in 59 CE, Nero was linked to Aeschylus’ portrayal of Orestes, who, in turn, was linked to a tradition that understood a viper’s birth as matricidal. Thus, through his encounter with the viper, Paul symbolically ‘appears before’ the emperor Nero—something that is anticipated yet never happens overtly in the narrative of Acts itself.

**Keywords:** Acts; Paul; viper; Nicander; Nero; Dioscuri

### 1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that one of the themes driving the narrative of Acts is the Lukan author’s apology for Paul.<sup>1</sup> A key episode in support of this narrative theme, and certainly of Paul’s innocence with respect to the accusations levelled against him, is the shipwreck survival in 28.1–6.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is often noted that shipwrecks were

<sup>1</sup> C. Kavin Rowe asserts, ‘No longer can Acts be seen as a simple *apologia* that articulates Christianity’s harmlessness vis-à-vis Rome. Yet neither is it a direct call for liberation’ (*World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 4). Although Acts was clearly never intended (simply) as a ‘simple’ apology, certainly not aimed at outsiders, Rowe’s claim does not account for the place of Acts on the trajectory towards the later second-century Apologists. See, for example, L. C. A. Alexander, *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (LNTS 289; London: T&T Clark, 2005) 201–2; D. W. Billings, ‘In the Image of the Empire: The Acts of the Apostles and Imperial Representations’ (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2015) 299–302; A. R. Hilton, *Illiterate Apostles: Uneducated Early Christians and the Literates Who Loved Them* (LNTS 541; London: T&T Clark, 2019) 96, 156, 165. Nor does Rowe’s argument account for the apologetic tone of individual texts within Acts, such as Acts 28.1–6.

<sup>2</sup> D. Ladouceur, ‘Hellenistic Preconceptions of Shipwreck and Pollution as a Context for Acts 27–28’, *HTR* 73 (1980) 435–49; C. K. Barrett, *Acts, Volume II* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 1091; A. Neagoe, *The Trial of the Gospel: An Apologetic Reading of Luke’s Trial Narratives* (SNTSMS 116; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 207; J. J. Clabeaux, ‘The Story of the Maltese Viper and Luke’s Apology for Paul’, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 604–10, at 606–7; T. M. Troftgruben, ‘Slow Sailing in Acts: Suspense in the Final Sea Journey (Acts 27:1–28:15)’, *JBL* 136 (2017) 949–68, at 958. While acknowledging that the theme of the innocence of Paul ahead of his anticipated trial by the emperor is a ‘well-documented topos’, Warren Carter notes that others have seen the primary focus here to be portraying Paul as a Hellenistic hero, or God’s efforts to protect Paul in his efforts at evangelising the nations, or simply to ‘assert God’s superiority to the Graeco-Roman gods’, or (as Carter himself suggests) a metaphorical example of how to navigate the precariousness of the Imperial world (‘Aquatic Display: Navigating the Roman Imperial World in Acts 27’, *NTS* 62 (2016) 79–86, at 80). To this could be added M. David Litwa’s claim that it seeks to present Paul as one who incarnates God’s power (‘Paul the “God” in Acts 28: A Comparison with

frequently presented in Graeco-Roman literature as instruments of divine punishment of wrong-doers.<sup>3</sup> While Paul initially survived this, which would have suggested his innocence, almost at once he is bitten by an ἔχιδνα causing the local inhabitants to comment πάντως φονεύς ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος ὃν διασωθέντα ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης ἡ δίκη ζῆν οὐκ εἶασεν (v. 4). As Lynn Allan Kauppi points out, there was a strong connection between snakes and divine justice in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen, for example, in Aeschylus, Euripides, Vergil, Statyllius Flaccus and Aelian.<sup>5</sup> In particular, snakes were associated with the Erinyes (the ‘Furies’ or goddesses of vengeance) who were also ‘helpers’ of Dike (Δίκη), the personified goddess of justice, who is probably the intended reference in this verse since the locals specifically associate Paul’s snake bite with divine punishment for murder.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Paul survives this poisonous bite, in addition to the shipwreck, would have clearly affirmed his innocence.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Vipers, Matricide, and Nero

Yet, that may not be the only symbolic significance of the viper here. While most scholars caution that it is not possible to know precisely what sort of snake is intended, nonetheless, the author does want us to understand that the snake in question is highly poisonous—an impression that is confirmed by the locals’ reaction.<sup>8</sup> As James H. Charlesworth has pointed out, however, there is a very expansive vocabulary for describing snakes in ancient Greek.<sup>9</sup> The Lukan author uses just three of these terms, ὄφις, ἔρπετόν (which were both generic terms), and ἔχιδνα (which he uses only here and in Luke

Philocetes’, *JBL* 136 (2017) 707–26); or Troy Troftgruben’s claim that Acts 27–8 is seeking to create narrative suspense (‘Slow Sailing’, 958–9). In fact, it could be argued that the Lukan author weaves a number of such narrative threads through these chapters and none are actually incompatible. It all depends on which one of these threads someone wishes to pull on (so to speak). As Drew Billings asserts, ‘Texts are not necessarily univocal’ (‘In the Image’, 17).

<sup>3</sup> G. B. Miles and G. Trompf, ‘Luke and Antiphon: The Theology of Acts 27–28 in the Light of Pagan Beliefs about Divine Retribution, Pollution, and Shipwreck’, *HTR* 69 (1976) 259–67; Ladouceur, ‘Hellenistic Preconceptions’, 443; D. R. MacDonald, ‘The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul’, *NTS* 45 (1999) 88–107, at 107 n. 87; L. A. Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar Gods: Greco-Romans Read Religion in Acts* (LNTS 277; London: T&T Clark, 2006) 111–12; K. Backhaus, ‘Paulus und die Dioskuren (Apg 28.11): Über zwei denkwürdige Schutzpatrone des Evangeliums’, *NTS* 61 (2015) 165–82, at 168; Carter, ‘Aquatic Display’, 86–7; cf. R. I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 672.

<sup>4</sup> Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar*, 107–8, 110–11; cf. Pervo, *Acts*, 674; D. Marguerat, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022) 844–5.

<sup>5</sup> Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar*, 106–9.

<sup>6</sup> Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar*, 110–11. On reading δίκη as Δίκη, see L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1992) 462; Barrett, *Acts*, 1223; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 783; B. R. Gaventa, *Acts* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 356–7; Litwa, ‘Paul the “God”’, 710 n. 11. Rick Strelan identifies the viper, first, with the goddess Echidna, then with Dike, then with Echidna again (*Strange Acts: Studies in the Cultural World of the Acts of the Apostles* (BZNW 126; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004) 289–91). This is confusing, unhelpful and improbable.

<sup>7</sup> Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar*, 114–16; cf. Clabeaux, ‘The Story’, 610; C. R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: WJK, 2016) 501; Marguerat, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 844–5; contra J. W. Jipp, *Divine Manifestations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1–10* (NovTSup 153; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 11, 46. As both Lynn Allan Kauppi (*Foreign but Familiar*, 112–16) and David Ladouceur (‘Hellenistic Preconceptions’, 443–7) note, the mention of the Dioscuri as the protective deity of the ship in which Paul departs from Malta (v. 11) would further enhance the assertion of Paul’s innocence. This will be discussed further below.

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 1222; Fitzmyer, *The Acts*, 783; Gaventa, *Acts*, 358; Litwa, ‘Paul the “God”’, 710.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Charlesworth, ‘Phenomenology, Symbolology, and Lexicography: The Amazingly Rich Vocabulary for “Serpent” in Ancient Greek’, *RB* 111 (2004) 499–515. In comparison, there are ‘primarily’ only three words used for snakes in Latin, *serpens*, *anguis*, and *vipera* (Charlesworth, ‘Phenomenology’, 499).

3.7).<sup>10</sup> Despite his somewhat restricted range, we should not assume that the author was being imprecise in his terminology at this point. Indeed, Charlesworth warns, ‘translators of ancient Greek documents...have too often misrepresented the sophistication of the ancient Greek simply by equating the 41 Greek nouns with generic terms’.<sup>11</sup> Given the context of his only other usage of ἔχιδνα, it would seem that the author uses this term to represent a creature that is more poisonous, dangerous, and heinous than average. While he may not have been familiar with the intricacies of Charlesworth’s taxonomy of snakes, he clearly wants us to identify this snake as an ἔχιδνα, a viper. As C. K. Barrett asserts, ‘Luke plainly regards this as a miracle, and therefore understands the word ἔχιδνα in its proper sense; he also represents the native inhabitants of the island as sharing his view’.<sup>12</sup> Vipers, however, are ambush predators. They strike rapidly and do not bite and cling, as our author describes this one doing (v. 3b).<sup>13</sup> While it is possible that he was simply confused or did not understand the differences in snake behaviour, it is just as likely that he deliberately sought to identify it as a viper because that had some particular symbolic significance.<sup>14</sup>

The second century BCE poet, Nicander, wrote a protracted poem, *Theriaca*, in which he describes the known poisonous creatures and how to treat their wounds.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the ἔχιδνα, he claims that the female viper bites off the head of her mate during copulation, and that her progeny subsequently eat through her belly in order to be born. In so doing, he asserts, they avenge their father’s murder (*Ther.* 128–36).<sup>16</sup> Although it is believed that Nicander was relying on Herodotus, who relates a similar tale (3.109), Nicander attributes this behaviour uniquely to the viper (that is, the ἔχιδνα), suggesting that it is the only viviparous snake.<sup>17</sup> Later writers, drawing on Nicander’s version, specifically connect

<sup>10</sup> The reference to a πύθων in Acts 16.16 is not actually referring to a snake. See Barrett, *Acts*, 784; Holladay, *Acts*, 322. I assume the common authorship of Luke and Acts. Although Patricia Walters (*The Assumed Authorial Unity of Luke and Acts: A Reassessment of the Evidence* (SNTSMS 145; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)) has argued against this, her arguments remain unpersuasive. See, for example, P. Foster, ‘Review of *The Assumed Authorial Unity of Luke and Acts: A Reassessment of the Evidence*, by Patricia Walters’, *ExpTim* 121 (2010) 264–5; M. C. Parsons and H. M. Gorman, ‘The Assumed Authorial Unity of Luke and Acts: A Review Essay’, *Neot* 46 (2010) 139–52.

<sup>11</sup> Charlesworth, ‘Phenomenology’, 512. In this regard, however, it is interesting that the Lukan author’s usage appears to approximate the usual Latin taxonomy.

<sup>12</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 1222; cf. H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 223.

<sup>13</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts*, 223; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990<sup>3</sup>) 531; Johnson, *The Acts*, 462; Holladay, *Acts*, 501.

<sup>14</sup> As Carl Holladay argues, ‘The episode should be interpreted as literary drama rather than realistic history’ (*Acts*, 501). For the same reason, it does not matter that there are no poisonous snakes on Malta. See Conzelmann, *Acts*, 223; Barrett, *Acts*, 1217; Holladay, *Acts*, 501.

<sup>15</sup> Nicander’s work was quite widely known. It was highly regarded by Cicero (*De or.* 16), and Quintilian claims that Ovid emulated him (*Inst.* 10.1.56). He is also said to have influenced Vergil. See F. Overduin, *Nicander of Colophon’s Theriaca: A Literary Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 127–8. On the other hand, Nicander’s work is fiercely disparaged by Plutarch (*Mor.* 16c), although he also deigns to refer to it (*Mor.* 567f). Henry J. Cadbury gives the impression that the Lukan author might have been familiar with Nicander’s *Theriaca* (‘Lexical Notes on Luke-Acts: II. Recent Arguments for Medical Language’, *JBL* 45 (1926) 190–209, at 199). Given that the one overt citation from a classical author in Acts (17.28) is from a didactic poem (Aratus, *Phaenomena*), it is not unreasonable to think that he might be familiar with another such poem in Nicander’s *Theriaca*.

<sup>16</sup> K. D. Wilson, ‘Avenging Vipers: Tragedy and Succession in Nicander’s *Theriaca*’, *CJ* 113 (2018) 257–80, at 259; cf. Overduin, *Nicander*, 234–8; E. Capettini, ‘Nero the Viper: Zoological Lore and Political Critique in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*’, *AJP* 141 (2020) 635–64, at 648.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, ‘Avenging Vipers’, 260–1. Hence the English name, ‘viper’. While there is no modern scientific truth to this tale, Capettini suggests that it may have arisen from ‘empirical observations of the fact that female vipers do not frequently survive reproduction’ (‘Nero the Viper’, 646).

this viper mating/birthing tale to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, in which Orestes kills his mother, Clytemnestra, in order to avenge his father, Agamemnon.<sup>18</sup>

In 59 CE, the emperor Nero killed his mother, Agrippina.<sup>19</sup> That murder is mentioned by Josephus (*BJ* 2.250), Martial (*Ep.* 4.63), and Pseudo-Seneca (*Oct.* 309). It is described in considerable detail, however, by Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.3–9), Suetonius (*Nero* 34), and Dio Cassius (61.12–14), all of whom claim that Nero initially had her boat sabotaged so that she would die in a shipwreck, but when she survived that and sent word to him of her good fortune, he sent an assassin to her home who stabbed her through the womb.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, according to Dio Cassius, she exposed her belly and urged her assailant to strike her there ὅτι Νέρωνά ἔτεκεν (61.13.5). Juvenal was the first Roman writer to connect Nero's act of matricide with the Orestes story—although he suggests that Nero lacked the more noble motive of Orestes (*Sat.* 8.215–16)—but both Suetonius (*Nero* 39.2) and Dio Cassius (61.16.2) overtly make that connection as well.<sup>21</sup>

Tacitus reports that there were several portents of divine displeasure following Nero's act, including a woman who gave birth to a snake.<sup>22</sup> It appears to have been Plutarch (*Mor.* 567E–568A), however, who was the first to associate Nero directly with a viper overtly or in a formal sense, suggesting that the gods' original punishment for his crimes was for him to be reincarnated as a Νικανδρική ἔχιδνα (567F).<sup>23</sup> To add to Nero's indignity, Plutarch imagines his punishment to include reincarnation as a *female* viper, perhaps an ironic allusion to his having to experience therein his own matricide enacted by his progeny.<sup>24</sup> As Emilio Capettini argues, 'it seems clear that only a few decades after his death Nero could be associated in the collective *imaginaire* not just generally with snakes...but with a very specific subset...that, according to the ancient zoological lore, was capable of matricidal cannibalism'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The clearest connection is made by Aelian (*Nat. an.* 1.24). Aeschylus, himself, 'does not associate Clytemnestra exclusively with the viper' but also associates her with other snakes as well (Wilson, 'Avenging Vipers', 263–6).

<sup>19</sup> A. A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Mother of Nero* (London: Batsford, 1996) 214; J. Malitz, *Nero* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 29–31; L. J. Keppie, "'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner": The Murder of Nero's Mother Agrippina in its Topographical Setting', *GR* 58 (2011) 33–47, at 33; T. Luke, 'From Crisis to Consensus: Salutary Ideology and the Murder of Agrippina', *Illinois Classical Studies* 38 (2013) 207–28, at 207.

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, *Agrippina*, 218–21; Keppie, 'Guess Who's Coming', 34–5; Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 642; Luke, 'Crisis to Consensus', 207. Trevor Luke is sceptical of Tacitus' account and doubts the veracity of the attempted shipwreck story ('Crisis to Consensus', 208–9). However, it is told by Suetonius and Dio Cassius as well as Tacitus and, thus, would appear to derive from a popular tradition. Anthony Barrett suspects that it contains a kernel of truth (*Agrippina*, 221), while others, like Jürgen Malitz (*Nero*, 32–4) and Lawrence Keppie ('Guess Who's Coming', 33), seem convinced by Tacitus' reliability.

<sup>21</sup> Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 642–3. In fact, that association was apparently strengthened by Nero playing the role of Orestes on stage after Agrippina's death. See S. A. Curry, 'Nero *Quadrupes*: Animalizing the Emperor in Suetonius's *Nero*', *Arethusa* 47 (2014) 197–230, at 198; Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 644.

<sup>22</sup> Barrett, *Agrippina*, 226. Although Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.12) uses the generic term, *anguis*, the fact that it is a live birth is highly suggestive.

<sup>23</sup> Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 654–5; cf. R. M. Frazer, 'Nero the Singing Animal', *Arethusa* 4 (1971) 215–18, at 216. Emilio Capettini argues that this connection is also made in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* ('Nero the Viper', 657–8). Nero was not the first emperor to be likened to a snake. Suetonius also claims that Tiberius described Gaius (the future emperor Caligula) as a *natrix* or water snake (*Cal.* 11). Plutarch also cites a legend that Alexander the Great's mother, Olympia, had actually been impregnated by a god in the form of a δράκων or serpent (*Alex.* 2.4, 3.2). Livy also repeats this legend, but uses the generic term, *anguis*. A similar legend is also associated with Pomponia, the mother of Scipio Africanus. See S. Barnard, 'Cornelia and the Women of Her Family', *Latomus* 49 (1990) 383–92, at 383. Only Nero, however, seems to be associated specifically with a viper (*vipera*).

<sup>24</sup> Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 654–6. It may also be an allusion to Nero's history of 'non-normative sexual behavior' including 'playing a passive and female role'. See Curry, 'Nero *Quadrupes*', 200, 219.

<sup>25</sup> Capettini, 'Nero the Viper', 657.

Given the likely dating of Acts, it is probable that the Lukan author would have been familiar with the Nero–Orestes–viper intertextuality, as well as the story of Nero’s attempt to murder his mother via a shipwreck.<sup>26</sup> There appear to be clear echoes of it in our story. And, according to the chronological timeline that the narrative of Acts presupposes, Nero was the emperor at the time of Paul’s shipwreck, and our particular episode seems to be dated to 59 or just after.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, that situates it around the very time that Nero was committing his act of matricide. Could ‘Nero the viper’, then, constitute another symbolic layer that the author intends in the tale of Paul’s viper bite in Acts 28.1–6? There are, perhaps, two other clues in the story from Acts that would lend additional support.

### 3. Further Clues?

First, there is the manner of the viper’s introduction into the story, namely, its sudden emergence from the bundle of sticks (φρυσγάτων τι πληθος) that Paul had gathered. F. F. Bruce compares this to an anecdote from T. E. Lawrence, describing a snake that slowly emerged with the heat of the fire that he presumed ‘we must have gathered...torpid, with the twigs’.<sup>28</sup> But Lawrence is known to have had a penchant for exaggeration and fabrication.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the scenario that the Lukan author constructs is scarcely believable. At least one study has found that vipers in southern Italy often remain active right through winter and do not necessarily go into brumation (hibernation).<sup>30</sup> It is unlikely that such a snake would be torpid enough to be inadvertently bundled up in the gathering of sticks. This is even less likely given the way that the author describes Paul’s action. Barrett suggests that it is difficult to know what the author means by συστρέψαντος (v. 3a), noting that this verb is used of ‘animals *gathering* themselves to spring’ or of soldiers ‘*rallying, forming* a compact body’ (italics original), before he decides upon a translation of ‘gathered and twisted together’.<sup>31</sup> Apart from a sense of ‘to bend’ or ‘contort’ (which is not particularly relevant here), it usually has the connotation of gathering into an organised, unified, or ‘tight’ group.<sup>32</sup> Paul could not have picked up and organised sticks and accidentally entrapped a viper in the process. On the other hand, an orderly or uniformly arranged bunch of sticks is suggestive of the Roman *fascēs*, namely, the quint-essential symbol of Roman legal authority. In this case, however, rather than containing an axe as a symbol of the power of capital punishment, it contains a viper—or, symbolically, the emperor Nero himself. Granted that the language here is far from precise or technically correct, the image and the connotations are evocative nonetheless.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The most recent and thorough assessments of the dating of Acts are by Richard Pervo, who dates it to about 115 (*Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006) 343–6), Billings, who dates it in the early second century during the time of Trajan (‘In the Image’, 21–4), and Knut Backhaus, who dates it 100–130 (‘Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte. Ein ordnungsversuch im chronologischen Chaos’, *ZNW* 108 (2017) 212–58).

<sup>27</sup> Barrett dates the voyage to Rome to 59 (*Acts*, lvii), Bruce suggests 59–60 (*The Acts*, 93), and Beverley Gaventa simply places it after 59 (*Acts*, 51).

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, *The Acts*, 531.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, H. E. Raugh JR, ‘Review of Fred D. Crawford, *Richard Aldington and Lawrence of Arabia: A Cautionary Tale*’, *Middle East Journal* 54 (2000) 670–1.

<sup>30</sup> M. A. L. Zuffi, F. Giudici and P. Ioalè, ‘Frequency and Effort of Reproduction in Female *Vipera aspis* from a Southern Population’, *Acta Oecologica* 20 (1999) 633–8, at 634.

<sup>31</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 1222.

<sup>32</sup> F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 2064.

<sup>33</sup> In Greek the *fascēs* are normally referred to as αἱ ῥάβδοι συνδεδεμένοι (e.g. Plutarch, *Mor.* 283ε), or simply αἱ ῥάβδοι (e.g. Josephus, *Bj* 2.365–6). Interestingly, ῥάβδος is never used in the NT in the plural and, thus, never with this technical sense.

The second possible clue is the mention of the Dioscuri in v. 11. David Ladouceur argues that the fact that the ship in which Paul departs from Malta is under their protection is significant, firstly, because nowhere else does the Lukan author mention the divine protector of the ship in which Paul sails; and, secondly, the Dioscuri were not just patron deities of sailors, they were also ‘guardians of truth and punishers of perjurers’.<sup>34</sup> More than that, however, the Dioscuri were also strongly associated with young, paired brothers from the Julio-Claudian dynasty, with the last such pair so identified being Nero and Britannicus.<sup>35</sup> Suetonius also notes that the ‘founder’ (*auctor*) of Nero’s family line, his great-great-grandfather L. Domitius Ahenobarbus (after whom Nero, himself, had been named) had had a personal encounter with the Dioscuri that would prove providential for his descendants (*Nero* 1.1–2). Consequently, the Dioscuri were particularly associated with Nero’s family of origin.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, as Trevor Luke points out, ‘in imperial ideology safety at sea was viewed as a benefit of empire’.<sup>37</sup> Warren Carter suggests that this *pax terra marique parata* (as Augustus describes it in *Res Gestae* 13) probably referred, in particular, to the abolition of piracy and the fostering of economic prosperity and trade across the Mediterranean.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, through the conjunction of the ideologies of *pax deorum*, *pax Romana*, and *pax Augusta*, there would also have been a sense that the emperor acted in consort with the gods, including the gods of the sea, so that the sea could be considered ‘an ally of Nero’.<sup>39</sup> In other words, having been deemed to be innocent by the emperor in the symbolic form of a viper,<sup>40</sup> Paul is effectively guaranteed safe passage

<sup>34</sup> Ladouceur, ‘Hellenistic Preconceptions’, 444–5; Marguerat, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 848. Backhaus points out that, traditionally, the Dioscuri served four primary functions: they were (1) rescuers of those in peril at sea, (2) avengers of the wicked, especially at sea, (3) messengers of good news of victory/salvation, and (4) deities that promoted Rome’s claims to power and undergirded its expansionism (‘Paulus und die Dioskuren’, 167–8). He claims that the primary function of the Dioscuri here is as heralds of salvation, but co-opted and Christianised (‘Paulus und die Dioskuren’, 179–82). This is unlikely. As Amber Gartrell points out, at least among the Romans, the Dioscuri were heralds of ‘victory in battle’ rather than salvation *per se*, and then usually in regard to battles in which they themselves had assisted (*The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome: Myth, Ritual, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 84–6, 89, 92, 95–9).

<sup>35</sup> Gartrell, *The Cult*, 189. Gartrell notes one possible allusion to Titus and Domitian as the Dioscuri, but no such connection is made again until the late fifth century, and she asserts that it was at its strongest with the Julio-Claudians (*The Cult*, 190–1).

<sup>36</sup> Although Kauppi (*Foreign but Familiar*, 113) and Backhaus (‘Paulus und die Dioskuren’, 171) note the connection between the Dioscuri and the imperial family, they fail to note this personal connection to Nero. While Gartrell suggests that Nero ‘reportedly spurned his Domitian ancestry upon his adoption by Claudius’ (*The Cult*, 95), it is doubtful that Suetonius was the only one who made this familial connection.

<sup>37</sup> Luke, ‘Crisis to Consensus’, 220.

<sup>38</sup> Carter, ‘Aquatic Display’, 80–5. In this regard, it is perhaps significant that Nero was one of the few emperors who was actually able to close the gates of the temple of Janus (indicating a cessation of war throughout the Empire) and declare himself the bringer of peace ‘on sea and land’. See H. Cornwell, ‘Die Pax Romana und die Idee von einem Imperium. Frieden in der römischen Antike’, *AW 3* (2018) 17–21, at 21.

<sup>39</sup> Luke, ‘Crisis to Consensus’, 220. Carter does not consider this inter-connected sense of *pax* (‘Aquatic Display’, 80–5). On *pax* in the Roman ideology see, for example, K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 47; G. Woolf, ‘Roman Peace’, *War and Society in the Roman World* (ed. J. Rich and G. Shipley; London: Routledge, 1993) 171–94; A. Brent, ‘Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor’, *JTS* 48 (1997) 411–38, at 415–16; N. Bondioli, ‘Roman Religion in the Time of Augustus’, *Numen* 64 (2017) 49–63, at 52; Cornwell, ‘Die Pax Romana’, 17–21.

<sup>40</sup> Although it could be argued that this is unlikely given the tradition that Paul was executed at Rome during the reign of Nero, and especially in relation to the so-called ‘Neronian Persecution’, Brent D. Shaw notes that this particular tradition is heavily reliant on Eusebius, who presents conflicting evidence, while ‘the testimony of other later witnesses on Paul’s stay in Rome are variable and even contradictory’ (‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution’, *JRS* 105 (2015) 72–100, at 78 n. 24). Indeed, Christopher P. Jones suggests that it seems to be ‘a tradition based on slender evidence’ (‘The Historicity of the Neronian Persecutions: A Response to Brent Shaw’, *NTS*

to Rome in a ship protected by gods, who are not only the guardians of the innocent but who were strongly associated with the Julio-Claudian line and with Nero's own family of origin in particular.

It might be argued that the author would not have perceived of the Dioscuri as operating as protective deities because as a 'Christian', he would have been a strict monotheist. But, as Paula Fredriksen points out, such an assertion is a misconstrual of the nature of ancient 'religion' because '*all* ancient "monotheists" ...were, by modern measure, "polytheists"' (italics original). It was, rather, a case of 'My god is bigger than your god; but your god...also exists, and has real effects, both cosmic and social'.<sup>41</sup> Carter argues that, in Acts, the sea constitutes a 'contested site in which the sovereignties of God and Rome co-operate and collide'.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, that 'contest' is also a contest for honour between God and the gods of Rome—a contest that, in this case, has been claimed by God through the gods' acknowledgement of the innocence of God's representative.<sup>43</sup> In a sense, then, through this exchange God has bettered these Roman gods, so they subserviently offer their protection.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, by means of the symbolism of the viper in this story, and its specific connection to Nero, the Lukan author appears to add a further level of complexity to his apology for Paul and his affirmation of Paul's innocence. Indeed, through his encounter with this *vipera ex machina*, Paul has essentially appeared before the emperor—an outcome to the narrative arc that began in 25.12, but one that many modern readers of Acts have found lacking from its conclusion.<sup>44</sup>

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63 (2017) 146–52, at 152). There is, in fact, far more uncertainty regarding what happened to Paul in Rome, and when and how he died, than is often assumed. See L. P. Pherigo, 'Paul's Life after the Close of Acts', *JBL* 70 (1951) 277–84; T. M. Troftgruben, 'Ending "in an Unhindered Manner" (Acts 28:31): The Ending of Acts within its Literary Environment' (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2009) 24–6; J. A. Harrill, 'Saint Paul and the Christian Communities of Nero's Rome', *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* (ed. S. Bartsch, K. Freudenberg, and C. Littlewood; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 276–89.

<sup>41</sup> P. Fredriksen, 'Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish "Monotheism"', *HTR* 115 (2022) 23–45, at 25–30; cf. R. W. L. Moberly, 'How Appropriate is "Monotheism" as a Category for Biblical Interpretation?', *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (ed. L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. North; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 216–34.

<sup>42</sup> Carter, 'Aquatic Display', 80.

<sup>43</sup> See J. H. Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 245. Marguerat suggests that the snake symbolises an evil power over which Paul has triumphed (*Die Apostelgeschichte*, 845).

<sup>44</sup> On the ambiguous ending to the book of Acts see, for example, W. F. Brodend II, 'The Means of Absent Ends', *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. B. Witherington III; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 348–62; Barrett, *Acts*, 1236, 1249; D. Marguerat, 'The Enigma of the Silent Closing of Acts (28:16–31)', *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy* (ed. D. P. Moessner; Harrisburg: TPI, 1999) 284–304; Alexander, *Acts*, 206; Pervo, *Acts*, 688; Troftgruben, 'Ending'; Harrill, 'Saint Paul', 280–1.

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