

**The Greatest of All Serpents:
Origins and Evolutions of the Dragon in Medieval Lore
and Manuscripts**

Robert Sarwark
May 10, 2016
LIS590MM - Carns

Introduction

Mythical beasts and sorcery have recently become rather stylish. This is very possibly a result of the meteoric rise in popularity, since 2011, of the HBO high-fantasy series *Game of Thrones*, based on the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels by George R.R. Martin (first published in 1996). Specifically, the presence of dangerous, unpredictable dragons in this franchise and their importance to the overall story arc are of note, bringing ages-old mythology to the fore in provocative and interesting ways for a modern audience.

In contrast, docile, child-friendly versions of dragons, as seen in such works as the song and subsequent animated film based on the 1963 folk ballad “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” seem to hint at a trend of de-clawing the once very fearful presence of dragons in bygone eras. Disney’s ancillary character Figment - a friendly, cat-sized purple dragon that appears at Disney World’s Epcot Center - is downright adorable. And the 2010 animated children’s film *How to Train Your Dragon* and its sequel are favorites of both contemporary children and their parents. Even the original Godzilla, a Japanese dragon-like monster first introduced in 1954, has a certain cuteness to him. These, along with other such whimsical representations of what otherwise, historically, would be considered the Devil incarnate, represent a general trend in the West starting in the mid-twentieth century. In *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (originally published in 1967), the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges elaborates on the status of dragons as “puerile”: “Time has considerably tarnished the prestige of Dragons...[It is] perhaps the best known though also the least fortunate of fantastic animals.” This domesticated view appears to have been a bit of an anomaly, however. The psychic presence that dragons have occupied in previous human eras throughout the world, Borges continues, was quite substantial: In addition to their generally

fierce, demonic reputation in many locales, “[p]eople really believed in Dragons. This is attested to even as late as the mid-sixteenth century, in Konrad von Gesner’s *Historia Animalium*, a scientific treatise” (Borges 2005: 71).

Though perceptions may continuously change, what remains a constant is the dragon figure’s lingering presence in human cultures - in both its malignant and beneficent manifestations - throughout the world. As G. Elliot Smith noted, “An adequate account of the development of the dragon-legend would represent the history of the expression of mankind’s aspirations and fears during the past fifty centuries and more. For the dragon was evolved with civilization itself” (Smith 1919: 76). This sentiment accurately echoes that of the scribes and artists of the medieval era and is as good a starting point as any in attempting to better understand the reasons why dragons were so prominent in their works.

This essay takes as its quarry not only the appearance of dragons in the texts, illuminations, and illustrations of medieval manuscripts such as hagiographies and bestiaries but furthermore attempts to explain some of the real-world inspirations and conceptual evolutions of these mythological yet archetypal creatures.

Symbolism and Morphology

Smith wrote that “if in the West the dragon is usually a ‘power of evil,’ in the far East he is equally emphatically a symbol of beneficence. He is identified with emperors and kings; he is the son of heaven, the bestower of all bounties, not merely to mankind directly, but also to the earth as well” (*Ibid.*: 82). Garry and El-Shamy attest to this distinction as well (2005: 73). It bears mentioning that Eastern and Western dragons also, not surprisingly, often appear quite

differently in art. While this can be, in part, accounted for by the vastly different materials and styles implemented between two such distant regions, differences in respective cultural norms and belief systems are essential to a holistic analysis as well. At the same time, the widespread variability of the various manifestations of dragons in illustrations from throughout the West - ranging wildly on a spectrum from limbless, wingless serpents on one end to four-legged and winged quadrupeds with almost mammalian features on the other - makes it difficult to ever tag one specific physiognomy to the name. Generally, however, the Eastern dragon tends to be taloned and serpentine - an enormous, magical legged snake, often with a head vaguely reminiscent of a shih tzu dog - wingless, though, as noted by anthropologist David E. Jones, “flight capable” (2000: 8).

In T.H. White’s *A Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, the following is included under the dragon’s entry:

The Devil, who is the most enormous of all reptiles, is like [the] dragon. He is often borne into the air from his den, and the air round him blazes, for the Devil in raising himself from the lower regions translates himself into an angel of light and misleads the foolish with false hopes of glory and worldly bliss (White 1984: 167).

Here we see as well the common medieval motif of the dragon as hoarder and guardian of treasure (i.e., “glory and worldly bliss”) but more importantly as akin to the Devil himself, if not one and the same. Furthermore, the creature depicted in the drawing accompanying this text - a dragon coiled around and biting into an elephant - is also quite perfectly aligned with the compelling Jones’ hypothesis on the origins of the dragon’s basic form and qualities, detailed in a later section of this essay.

Classical versus Christian Dragons

The discussion of the transition from classical to Christian representations of both dragons and dragon-slaying heroes is not without its share of debate. As Ogden contends, “The Christian tradition of saintly dragon slayers grows directly out of the classical one, whilst incorporating, of course, an infusion of serpent symbolism from the Old and New Testaments” (2013: 3), e.g., the Serpent of the Garden of Eden. Garry and El-Shamy agree that the dragon-slaying motif [of Christian hagiography] “harkens back to the Greek myth of Perseus and Andromeda” (2005: 76).

This view is further qualified by Kuehn:

It has...been suggested that the dragon-slaying iconography grew out of the tradition of associating the saints with ancient Greek mythologies...However, this theory is based on the assumption that the story of a Christian saint rescuing a princess or maiden from a dragon was ancient, whereas it dates back no earlier than the eleventh century... (2011: 103).

Ogden attempts to further clarify the issue: “The most famous Christian dragon slayer of them all, St. George, did not acquire his dragon until the twelfth century AD (so far as our evidence tells), but his dragon story is of a variety broadly established for other saints as early as the third century AD” (Ogden 2013: 3). Therefore, there appears to have been somewhat of an overlay of the classical, pre-Christian dragon/dragon-slayer motif (e.g., Haracles, Perseus) onto Christian hagiography only *ex post facto*, in some cases (such as St. George’s) almost a millennium after the historical lifetimes of the principal actors.

As seen in this Christian hagiographic lore - perpetuated in the medieval period but regarding the establishment of the Church itself - dragons (as well as serpents and sea-monsters) are constant foes of many other early Christian-era saints besides St. George. Included are tales relating to Saints Margaret (Marina), Thomas, Phillip, Silvester, Callupan, and Victoria (*Idem*),

among many others. As pertains to their inclusion in medieval manuscripts, these stories served the purpose of promoting godliness and virtue juxtaposed with the compelling and unambiguously malign figure of the dragon as the manifestation of evil. Since these saints' lives and deeds were, by the height of the medieval era in which they were chronicled, already well-shrouded in the mists of antiquity¹, it is not surprising that a mythological creature would feature so prominently in order to fully enshrine the mystique and wonder surrounding the earliest heroes of the Christian faith. In simplest terms, the physical threat posed by such a menacing creature as a dragon is a metaphor for the spiritual threat posed by the Devil in his lures towards the commission of all varieties of sin, especially those sins associated with paganism. The mighty, "good-hating dragon" (*Ibid.*: 245), it seems, is merely the most transparent and deep-seated manifestation of such an evil presence.

The Dragon Complex

To the modern observer, the parallels between the mythological dragon and, among other large prehistoric vertebrates, carnivorous dinosaurs in particular, appear to be a foregone conclusion: both are enormous, reptilian, and bloodthirsty. The common assumption, then, is that ancient observers merely looked at the fossilized skeletons of the great beasts of, as we now know, over 65 million years ago and imagined them as living, breathing creatures amongst them - or at the very least lurking at the fringes of human society. Another conceit is that perhaps we, as a human species, retain on a virtually if not truly genetic level a reminiscence of long-extinct gargantuan and marauding predators from our evolutionary collective past. In *An Instinct for Dragons*,

¹ Generally, dragons no longer appear in the hagiographies of saints who lived after the sixth century AD (Ogden 2013: 239).

David E. Jones muses, “The dragon puzzle persists. There seems to be no physically based theory to explain why the dragon populates the imagination of peoples in seemingly all cultures. What, after all, is this beast that all the world knows - this creature that never was?” (Jones 2000: 4).

Jones further contends that the explanation indeed lies in our evolutionary past in a way that is deceptively simple - that the dragon myth is so universal because it is a composite of the three types of animal that most threatened our collective, distant ancestors: the eagle (raptor), the leopard (cat), and the snake (serpent) (*Idem*), together referred to as “the dragon complex” (*Ibid.*: 17). This assessment tends to concur with the conclusions of classical folklorist Adrienne Mayor, who recommends “...that there are real cultural gains to be made if academic science and folk knowledge can find ways to trust each other” (Mayor 2011: 225). If we are all indeed descended from a species of primate that originated in the Rift Valley of Eastern Africa, all three proposed component animal groups - raptor, cat, serpent - would most certainly have been very real and very constant threats.

Conclusions

Throughout the world, the dragon or something generally fitting that description is a part of human cultures and mythologies. As Jones has elucidated, there is likely a very real precedent for the inherent fear we feel towards such a threatening albeit fantastical creature because it represents the threat of predation by the three very real kinds of animal. Although this complex creature has had many of its traits altered or even, if temporarily, neutered in the West - from evil incarnate, to whimsical friend, and back again to a more menacing figure - one factor remains:

we keep imagining it. As Smith wrote, “The history of the evil dragon is not merely the evolution of the devil, but it also affords the explanation of his traditional peculiarities, his bird-like features, his horns, his red colour, his wings and cloven hoofs, and his tail” (1919: 137). It is perhaps a particularly human trait to combine such devilishness into one compact, portable package such as a dragon, one that can be so transmutable throughout time and space. While the West in particular has become markedly less religious over the last century, especially as regards devout observances of Christian dogma, it appears that the factual foundations of the dragon myth - and thus why we still enjoy watching or reading about dragons - are much, much older than any organized religion.

Works cited

Borges, J.L. 2005. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. New York: Penguin.

Garry, J. and H. El-Shamy (Eds.). 2005. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Jones, D.E. 2000. *An Instinct for Dragons*. New York: Routledge.

Kuehn, S. 2011. *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Mayor, A. 2011. *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ogden, D. 2013. *Dragons, Serpents, and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds: A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, G. E. 1919. *The Evolution of the Dragon*. Manchester: The University Press.

White, T.H. (Trans., Ed.). 1984. *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*. New York: Dover.

Medieval snails and knights — who knew? It turns out that medieval illuminated manuscripts featured a lot of bizarre imagery in the margins, but this pocket of art history might be one of the most intriguing. Scholar Lilian Randall provides the best theory for the unusual motif: these medieval knights fought snails in the margins because snails represented the Lombards, who had become widely despised lenders throughout Europe. Snail was an insult and, over time, it became a type of meme detached from its original meaning. Of course, like much of art history, this theory is just a theory. But you might also think of the dragons from Chinese folklore; those big-eyed, snake-like creatures that appear in popular celebrations around the world during Chinese New Year. Less well known is the Middle Eastern and South Asian, particularly Persian, origins of the dragon. Whether it's a terrifying monster terrorizing humans in legends, or a beautiful motif used for decoration, dragons played a big role in mythology, books, and art in the region, and are probably some of the oldest examples of the mythical beast in existence. Ancient dragons. Ancient Indian sources like the Rig Veda (one of the... Dragons, sea serpents and giant worms appear on medieval maps, with the creatures representing wilderness and the unknown. Twelfth century chronicler Gerald of Wales viewed Ireland as a wild and inhospitable place but he reported in his Topography of that country, 'There are no dragons,' presumably good news to all. It wasn't only knights who battled dragons during the medieval period. According to medieval bestiaries, the unicorn was the wildest of all beasts and it was swift and fierce. The only way to capture it was for a virgin to stay close, whereupon the unicorn would lay its head in her lap, and so be able to be caught. The animal came to represent power and purity and the links to Christ and the Virgin resonated with the medievals.