

Western Dragons

In European folklore, a dragon is a serpentine legendary creature. The Latin word *draco*, as in constellation Draco, comes directly from Greek *δράκων*, (*drákōn*, *gazer*). The word for dragon in Germanic mythology and its descendants is *worm* (Old English: *wyrm*, Old High German: *wurm*, Old Norse: *ormr*), meaning snake or serpent. In Old English *wyrm* means



"serpent", *draca* means "dragon". Finnish *lohikäärme* means directly "salmon-snake", but the word *lohi-* was originally *louhi-* meaning crags or rocks, a "mountain snake". Though a winged creature, the dragon is generally to be found in its underground lair, a cave that identifies it as an ancient creature of earth. Likely, the dragons of European and Mid Eastern mythology stem from the cult of snakes found in religions throughout the world.

In Western folklore, dragons are usually portrayed as evil, with the exceptions mainly appearing in modern fiction. In the modern

period the dragon is typically depicted as a huge fire-breathing, scaly and horned dinosaur-like creature, with leathery wings, with four legs and a long muscular tail. It is sometimes shown with feathered wings, crests, fiery manes, and various exotic colorations.

Many modern stories represent dragons as extremely intelligent creatures who can talk, associated with (and sometimes in control of) powerful magic. In stories a dragon's blood often has magical properties: for example in the opera *Siegfried* it let Siegfried understand the language of the Forest Bird. The typical dragon protects a cavern or castle filled with gold and treasure and is often associated with a great hero who tries to slay it, but dragons can be written into a story in as many ways as a human character. This includes the monster being used as a wise being whom heroes could approach for help and advice, so much so that they resembled Asian dragons rather than European dragons of myth.

Roman dragons

Roman dragons evolved from serpentine Greek ones, combined with the dragons of the Near East, in the mix that characterized the hybrid Greek/Eastern Hellenistic culture. From Babylon, the *musrussu* was a classic representation of a Near Eastern dragon. John's *Book of Revelation* — Greek literature, not Roman — describes Satan as "a great dragon, flaming red, with seven heads and ten horns". Much of John's literary inspiration is late Hebrew and Greek, but John's dragon is more likely to have come originally through the Near East.^[1] Perhaps the distinctions between dragons of western origin and Chinese dragons are arbitrary, since the later Roman dragon was certainly of Iranian origin: in the Roman Empire, where each military cohort had a particular identifying *signum*, (military standard), after the Dacian Wars and Parthian War of Trajan in the east, the Draco military standard entered the Legion with the *Cohors Sarmatarum* and *Cohors Dacorum* (Sarmatian and Dacian cohorts) — a large dragon fixed to the end of a lance, with large gaping jaws of silver and with the rest of the body formed of colored

silk. With the jaws facing into the wind, the silken body inflated and rippled, resembling a windsock. It is hard to resist giving this Romanized Parthian dragon a distant Chinese origin.

Dragons in Germanic mythology

The most famous dragons in Norse and Germanic mythology are:

- Níðhögr who gnawed at the roots of Yggdrasil, or Jörmungandr the giant sea serpent which surrounds Miðgarð the world of mortal men;
- The dragon encountered by Beowulf;
- Fafnir, who was killed by Sigurd. Fafnir had turned into a dragon because of his greed.
- Lindworms are monstrous serpents of Germanic myth and lore, often interchangeable with dragons.
- A dragon is slain by legendary hero Sigurd (or Siegfried) from German medieval epic poem *Nibelungenlied*.

Many European stories of dragons have them guarding a treasure hoard. Both Fafnir and Beowulf's dragon guarded earthen mounds full of ancient treasure. The treasure was cursed and brought ill to those who later possessed it.

English "dragon" derives (via Middle English, Old French, and Latin) from Greek *dracon*, "serpent, dragon"; the Greek word derives from Indo-European **derk-*, "to see," and may originally have meant something like "monster with the evil eye." Notwithstanding their folkloric associations, there is no etymological connection between *dragons* and the ghoulish figures known as *draugar* in Old Norse, who haunt rich burial mounds.

Dragons in the emblem books popular from late medieval times through the 17th century often represent the dragon as an emblem of greed. (*Some quotes are needed*) The prevalence of dragons in European heraldry demonstrates that there is more to the dragon than greed. Though the Latin is *draco*, *draconis*, it has been supposed by some scholars, including John Tanke of the University of Michigan, that the word *dragon* comes from the Old Norse *draugr*, which literally means a spirit who guards the burial mound of a king. How this image of a vengeful guardian spirit is related to a fire-breathing serpent is unclear. Many others assume the word *dragon* comes from the ancient Greek verb *derkesthai*, meaning "to see", referring to the dragon's legendarily keen eyesight. In any case, the image of a dragon as a serpent-like creature was already standard at least by the 8th century when *Beowulf* was written down. Although today we associate dragons almost universally with fire, in medieval legend the creatures were often associated with water, guarding springs or living near or under water.

The poem *Beowulf* describes a *draca* (= dragon) also as *wyrm* (= worm, or serpent) and its movements by the Anglo-Saxon verb *bugan* = "to bend", and says that it has a venomous bite; all of these indicate a snake-like form and movement rather than with a lizard-like or dinosaur-like body as in later belief.

Dragons in Celtic mythology

In Britain, the dragon is now more commonly associated with Wales due to the national flag having a red dragon (*Y Ddraig Goch*) as its emblem and their national rugby union and rugby league teams are known as the dragons. This may originate in Arthurian Legend where

Myrddin, employed by Gwrtheyrn, had a vision of the red dragon (representing the Britons) and the white dragon (representing the invading Saxons) fighting beneath Dinas Emrys. The red dragon was linked with the Britons who are today represented by the Welsh and it is believed that the white dragon refers to the Saxons who invaded Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries. This particular legend also features in the Mabinogion in the story of *Llud and Llefelys*.

It has also been speculated that the red dragon of Wales may have originated in the Sarmatian-influenced Draco standards carried by Late Roman cavalry, who would have been the primary defence against the Saxons. In Welsh language the word "Pennaeth" means also a chieftain, apparently due to the Roman *draco* standards.

Dragons in Slavic mythology

Dragons of Slavic mythology hold mixed temperaments towards humans. For example, dragons in Bulgarian mythology are either male or female, each gender having a different view of mankind. The female dragon and male dragon, often seen as brother and sister, represent different forces of agriculture. The female dragon represents harsh weather and is the destroyer of crops, the hater of mankind, and is locked in a never ending battle with her brother. The male dragon protects the humans' crops from destruction and is generally loving to humanity. Fire and water play major roles in Bulgarian dragon lore; the female has water characteristics, whilst the male is usually a fiery creature. In Bulgarian legend, dragons are three headed, winged beings with snake's bodies.

In Bulgarian, Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian lore, a dragon, or "змеј" (Bulgarian), *zmey* (Russian), *smok* (Belarusian) *zmiy* (Ukrainian), is generally an evil, four-legged beast with few if any redeeming qualities. *Zmeys* are intelligent, but not very highly so; they often place tribute on villages or small towns, demanding maidens for food, or gold. Their number of heads ranges from one to seven or sometimes even more, with three- and seven-headed dragons being most common. The heads also regrow if cut off, unless the neck is "treated" with fire (similar to the hydra in Greek mythology). Dragon blood is so poisonous that Earth itself will refuse to absorb it. It's interesting fact that in the Bulgarian mythology these dragons are sometimes good, apposing to the evil Ламуа /ламья/, a beast that shares a common likeness with the *zmey*.

The most famous Polish dragon is the Wawel Dragon or *Smok Wawelski*, the Dragon of Wawel Hill. It supposedly terrorized ancient Kraków and lived in caves on the Vistula river bank below the Wawel castle. According to lore based on the *Book of Daniel*, it was killed by a boy who offered it a sheepskin filled with sulphur and tar. After devouring it, the dragon became so thirsty that it finally exploded after drinking too much water. A metal sculpture of the Wawel Dragon is a well-known tourist sight in Kraków. It is very stylised but, to the amusement of children, noisily breathes fire every few minutes. The Wawel dragon also features on many items of Kraków tourist merchandise.

Dragons in Aragonese mythology

There is a legend that a dragon dwelled in the the Peña Uruel mountain near Jaca. It says that it could mesmerize people with his glance, so the young man who decided to kill the beast equipped himself with a shiny shield, so that the dragon's glance would be reflected. So, when the young man arrived the cave where the dragon lived, he could kill it easily because the dragon mesmerized itself. This legend is very similar to the Greek myth of Medusa.

Dragons in Basque mythology

Herensuge is the name given to the dragon in Basque mythology, meaning apparently the "last serpent". The best known legend has St. Michael descending from Heaven to kill it but only once God accepted to accompany him in person. Sugaar, the Basque male god, is often associated with the serpent or dragon but able to take other forms as well. His name can be read as "male serpent". A. Xaho, a romantic myth creator of the 19th century, fused these myths in his own creation of *Leherensuge*, the first and last serpent, that in his newly coined legend would arise again some time in the future bringing the rebirth of the Basque nation.

Dragons in Catalan mythology

Dragons are well-known in Catalan myths and legends, in no small part because St. George (Catalan *Sant Jordi*) is the patron saint of Catalonia. Like most dragons, the Catalan dragon (Catalan *drac*) is basically an enormous serpent with two legs, or, rarely, four, and sometimes a pair of wings. As in many other parts of the world, the dragon's face may be like that of some other animal, such as a lion or bull. As is common elsewhere, Catalan dragons are fire-breathers, and the dragon-fire is all-consuming. Catalan dragons also can emit a fetid odor, which can rot away anything it touches.

The Catalans also distinguish a *víbria* or *vibra* (cognate with English *viper* and *wyvern*), a female dragon with two prominent breasts, two claws and an eagle's beak.

Dragons in Italian mythology

The legend of Saint George and the dragon is well-known in Italy, but other Saints are depicted fighting a dragon. For instance, the first bishop of the city of Forlì, named Saint Mercurialis, was said to have killed a dragon and saved Forlì, so he often is depicted killing a dragon. Likewise, the first patron saint of Venice, Saint Theodore of Tyro, was a dragon-slayer, and a statue representing his slaying of the dragon still tops one of the two columns in St. Mark's square. St. Michael, the patron saint of paratroopers, is also frequently depicted slaying a dragon. Many dragons of the European Middle Ages were thought to be demonic or of evil status.