Virtual Special Issue 2020: Dragons

From Fafnir to Smaug, to the pearl-chasing Chinese *long* and the dragons that stalk the world of Internet games, these mythical creatures, whether traditional or literary, carry great symbolic value. The mound-dwelling, fire-breathing dragon in *Beowulf* belongs to a group of mythical beasts known throughout the world. J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth novels have influenced the perception of dragons as winged, fire-breathing, reptilian quadrupeds, but, as so often with mythical animals, they come in many forms. Some are wingless, legless, or multi-headed, while the popular heraldic beast, the wyvern, has two legs, wings, and a serpentine tail. The names reveal something of their heritage. 'Dragon' comes from the Greek *drakon* (a large serpent). 'Wyvern' is derived from the Latin for viper (*vipera*), and the Germanic word, *wyrm,* is cognate with Latin *vermis* (worm).

A range of articles from *Folklore* listed in this Virtual Special Issue examines dragon lore in various contexts, but focuses mainly on traditions about dragons in Britain and Europe, as well as the ways in which this dynamic tradition has influenced folktales, community performance, and the fantasy genre.

Dragons are plentiful in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic sources, where the terms *worm, orme* and *dreki* refer to creatures that range from serpentine to lizardlike and frequently come into conflict with a national, local, or even semi-divine hero. Germanic dragons are associated with burial mounds and treasure troves, and traditions about hidden treasure and death feature in many accounts (Davidson 1950). Jacqueline Simpson's seminal survey of British dragons identified a number of themes in dragon tales which relate to the nature of the creature and its habitat; to heroes, both aristocratic and ordinary, who oppose them; and to various theories about the origin and function of these fascinating beasts (Simpson 1978).

Warrior saints provide obvious candidates for dragon-slayers, given the link so often made in a Christian context between serpents and sin. St George's story fuses the theme of a Christian saint who defends good against evil with a secular hero who defeats a dragon. St George was venerated as a saint of healing in the Middle East, and as he became more popular in Britain, localized traditions associated him with healing wells and protection from pestilence. On the medieval tympanum in the church dedicated to St George at Brinsop, Herefordshire, the saint is shown spearing a dragon-like monster. According to local tradition, this dragon lived in a well near the church, and the saint fought it in a local field. The dragon's mound near the Uffington White Horse, Oxfordshire, is another site where traditions about a battle between St George and a dragon have been localized. Simpson's study notes other English dragon tales that have become attached to local landmarks. Many dragons are venomous destroyers of livestock rather than fire-breathing treasure-hoarders. A story first recorded in the eighteenth century opens with the motif of a poisonous cattle-killer. A reward is offered and a brave young peasant wins land and glory by destroying the serpent. The tale is further linked to an Anglo-Saxon carving of a stylized beast in St Mary's Priory Church, Deerhurst, near Gloucester, which traditionally is said to represent the defeated dragon. In the Sussex legend of the Knucker of Lyminster, the dragon dies of indigestion after it eats a poisoned pie and a local tombstone is said to be the burial place of its killer. (Simpson 1973, 216-17).

The dragon-slayer motif, essentially a human versus beast encounter, is found in myth, heroic epic, hagiographical legends, and local folktales. The action embodies a fundamental theme; namely, that by overcoming these fearful and destructive creatures, the heroic warrior proves himself worthy and assumes some of the power of the defeated enemy. The dragons defeated by dragon-slayers can signify the forces of evil overcome by virtue, or represent a

local monster which embodies disease. At the beginning of the last century, folklorist Mary Lovett Cameron collected an example from Tuscany. The temporal setting is vague, and the hero was an unspecified member of the powerful Sforza family. The dragon inhabited a cave, terrified the population, and decimated livestock, but it was no match for the brave and cunning Duke Sforza who lured it out by attaching a red flag to his lance. He killed it and gave its jawbone to the friars of La Trinità (Cameron 1910).

Dragons were sometimes associated with the feasts of important saints. The pageant dragon used in the festival of St Martha and her dragon-like opponent, the Tarasque, in Provence was described by Eliza Gutch, a founding member of The Folklore Society. Her account of the origins and development of this long-established festival was the culmination of research carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century which her husband presented to the Society after her death (Gutch 1952). Pageant figures of snake-like dragons feature in Japanese agricultural festivals (Daniels 1960). In contrast with the monstrous reptilian creatures of European lore, Chinese and Japanese dragons were typically a compilation of nine creatures, nine being an auspicious number. Their role, as part of complex symbolic systems, included control of the weather, especially the rainfall essential to agriculture. The association of dragon figures with festivals in such widely separated geographical regions illustrates the ease with which this mythical beast adapts to different contexts and becomes a focus for communal activities.

Dragon traditions draw on a variety of sources and fulfil a number of functions. Early printed pamphlets relied on the testimony of reputable witnesses to provide validation for the existence of dragon-like beasts. A seventeenth-century example described a venomous serpent lurking in St Leonard's Forest near Horsham in Sussex (Latham 1878). The St Leonard's Forest story acquired a dragon-slayer and became the site for a fight between St Leonard, the dedicatee of a local chapel, and a dragon. Accounts of sightings continued for many years—not as a dragon-slayer tale, but as shorthand for an unfounded rumour (Harte 1994). The function and meaning of familiar motifs can vary dramatically, as illustrated by a variant of The Monstrous Bridegroom (The Disenchanted Husband ATU 425B), collected by the anthropologist Paul Durrenberger during fieldwork among the Lisu people, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group inhabiting certain mountainous regions of Southeast Asia (Durrenberger 1978). In this tale, the supernatural spouse is a dragon whose actions are pivotal in maintaining the balance between human and non-human worlds in Lisu culture, a relationship which is reflected in the unusually complex tasks undertaken by the wife to regain her dragon-husband.

Beowulf contains a reference to another Germanic hero, Sigemund, who kills a dragon and appropriates its hoard, and is the father of yet another dragon-slayer Sigurd (Sigurðr), whose encounter with the dragon Fafnir appears in several Norse sources (Talbot 1983). Dragons and dragon-slayers feature in variants of a well-known Persian folktale 'The Tale of Prince Mohammed' (ATU 300). The youngest of three brothers follows a dragon into a well where he kills three more dragons who have abducted women. Although his jealous brothers abandon him, he kills yet another dragon that demands a maiden tribute each year and then returns triumphant (Bagheri, 2001).

The encounter between Beowulf and the dragon is undoubtedly one of the most famous dragon fights in Western literature, not least because of its influence on Tolkien and the current popularity of the fantasy genre. Traditional dragons are unsociable beasts, but dragon companions have become a regular feature in fantasy writing since the end of the nineteenth century. The child-friendly dragons in Kenneth Grahame's 'The Reluctant Dragon' and E.S. Nesbitt's *A Book of Dragons*, Tolkien's lesser-known creation Chrysophylax from *Farmer Giles of Ham*, Anne McCaffrey's psychic dragonriders, the dragons of Ursula K. LeGuin's Earthsea novels, and Terry Pratchett's comic creations reflect how folklore can be used to

express changes in social attitudes and ideas (Unerman 2002). In this context, dragons are no longer just static symbols from the past. Their opponents can be children, not warriors, who find a unique way of dealing with them. Fantasy writing has added depth of character and individuality to these ancient creatures and created fictional landscapes in which humans and dragons can work together to defeat a common enemy.

New approaches to the interpretation of dragon lore are reflected in some of these articles. George Monger situates dragon traditions in the field of cryptozoology and notes that there are some striking similarities between characteristics of mysterious Big Cat sightings and those associated with older supernatural beasts, such as local dragon traditions (Monger 1992). Geomythology, the study of oral traditions created by pre-scientific cultures to explain geological or paleontological phenomena, is now a popular approach in folklore studies. David Reese adopts this approach in his survey of early interpretations of extinct animal bones as the remains of giants, saints, dragons and other monsters on Malta, Crete, and other Mediterranean islands (Reese 1976).

Ultimately dragons are creatures of power that can signify pagan error, pestilence and plague, or an enemy attacker. They can be frightening cosmic symbols of chaos or represent nature tamed by the process of civilization. As a symbol of sin, the dragon has obvious echoes of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, but it can also provide a rallying point for civic pride or a companion in the world of fantasy. In the past it has embodied many kinds of 'otherness', but the dragon's prevalence in popular culture and fiction suggests that it is a polyvalent symbol which can be and is being constantly revived.

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