

THE  
DRAGON  
FEAR AND POWER

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REAKTION BOOKS

*Dedicated to the memory of my brother, David.  
A dragon-slayer, if ever there was one.*

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# Contents

	Introduction: The Origin of Dragons	7
<i>one</i>	Dragons in Greek and Roman Mythology	13
<i>two</i>	Dragons in the Bible and Saints' Lives	43
<i>three</i>	The Germanic Dragon, Part 1: Old Norse Mythology and Old English Literature	77
<i>four</i>	The Germanic Dragon, Part 2: Sagas of Ancient Times	97
<i>five</i>	Dragons in Bestiaries and Celtic Mythology	119
<i>six</i>	Asian and East Asian Dragons	135
<i>seven</i>	Dragons in the Anti-establishment Folktale	171
<i>eight</i>	European Dragons as Fictions and Facts: From Medieval Romance to the Nursery Dragon	191
<i>nine</i>	The Old Dragon Revives: J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis	225
<i>ten</i>	'A Wilderness of Dragons'	239
<i>eleven</i>	George R. R. Martin's Dragons and the Question of Power	259
	Conclusion: The Dragon and Fear	275
	REFERENCES	281
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	311
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	321
	PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	322
	INDEX	323



A green dragon in the Northern Lights. Photo by Arnar Bergur Guðjónsson.

# Introduction: The Origin of Dragons

We are ignorant of the meaning of the dragon in the same way we are ignorant of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that fits man's imagination, and this accounts for the dragon's appearance in different places and periods.

JORGE LUIS BORGES<sup>1</sup>

**I**F ASKED WHAT a dragon is, most would reply along these lines: it has four legs and wings, is armoured with scales, hoards gold, breathes fire or spurts venom (or both), can talk, is wise but cruel, and has a fondness for eating female virgins, typically ones that are scantily clad. While it is not difficult to see that such identikit notions of dragons are chiefly derived from a combination of those depicted in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth fantasies and the celebrated myth of St George and the Dragon, these two depictions are by no means definitive. Indeed, dragons as depicted across world myth and legend are so varied in their behaviours and appearances, let alone their cultural significances, that any attempt to provide any all-purpose description of them is simply not possible. The chief aim of this book, then, as a cultural history, is to examine those key ideas about dragons that have since gone on to influence our continuing fascination with them, wittingly or not. Although, as Jorge Luis Borges remarks, we are as ignorant of their meaning as we are of the meaning of the universe, it may nevertheless be possible to try and understand what it is about dragons that seems to have necessitated our imagining them.

Dragons in their various guises are a global phenomenon, a fact that is in itself a puzzle. How did this come about? For a start, it cannot be a

consequence, at least not in all instances, of cultural contact, the obvious reason being that global awareness of other cultures is a relatively modern occurrence. Thus, for example, that dragons in both Native American and Chinese mythologies were thought of as divinities, monstrous or otherwise, cannot be explained by any cultural contact. Of course, the idea of the dragon could be regarded as having originated in fears of actual living creatures. The crocodiles of India and Egypt and the Komodo dragons of Indonesia serve as good examples of this. This, however, still does not explain fully why dragon myths are present in regions where no such creatures exist. A more persuasive possibility is the one-time global existence of dinosaurs.

Although the existence of our immediate *Homo sapiens* ancestors and the existence of dinosaurs is separated by over 60 million years, it is nonetheless true that those primitive mammals from which humans evolved were the contemporaries of dinosaurs. Given this, the cosmologist Carl Sagan has argued that memories of dinosaurs, and prehistoric predators generally, are hardwired into our brains and that dragons are a realization of our genetically determined memories.<sup>2</sup> While Sagan's theories are, he freely admits, speculations, one cannot wholly discount them. Put simply, Sagan is examining what otherwise might be termed 'the will to survive', and this, we can safely say, is a given.

Yet even if Sagan's ideas can never fully be proved, one thing that is irrefutable is the global legacy of dinosaurs: their skeletons. For our early ancestors, the discovery of the bones of such formidably large creatures would have needed explaining. Mentally reconstructing them as the most fearsome beings imaginable was only to be expected. That the global dragon came about in this way is perfectly possible. This being the case, then the differences between dragons in one region and those in another can be seen to be a result of the development of different cultural norms and values. That which became a cultural standard in Japan was never likely to have become one in Scandinavia.

But it is also possible that we really do not need dinosaurs to account for our dragon myths. Following a similar line of reasoning as Sagan in respect of the evolutionary principles underlying human survival, but thereafter looking at our survival instincts from an anthropologist's point of view, is David E. Jones. The proposition here is what Jones refers to as 'the raptor/snake/cat primate-predator complex'.<sup>3</sup> Set together, the winged raptor, the venomous snake and the sharp-clawed cat amount to all that humans most fear in the animal world, the composite expression of which is the dragon. While Jones's ideas are, in the main, fascinating and persuasive, his tendency

to view all dragons as derived from this complex is perhaps stretching a point. Two obvious objections would be that not all dragons breathe fire, a feature, thinks Jones, that is derived from the cat's hot breath; nor do all dragons have the raptor's ability to fly. But as for the snake, that this creature is formative in many ideas about dragons is certain, for the evolution of the dragon in the human mind often began with the snake: Python was the first guardian at Delphi, believed to be the centre of the earth; the Asian *nāga* originates in the king cobra; the Eden serpent goes on to become the Great Red Dragon of Hell; and so on.

All told, the dragon's origins cannot be satisfactorily explained in every detail, although there can be little doubt that the fear of predators is fundamental. What can be explained, however, is why there are often striking similarities between dragons-versus-heroes dramas in cultures that are geographically remote from each other. In order to understand how this came to be requires a consideration of events that go back a mere few thousand years. Arguably the most compelling examples of this are the curious resemblances between such dramas in the broader mythological structures in which they are enacted in Celtic, Graeco-Roman, early Germanic, Persian and Indian/Vedic mythologies.

Since the late eighteenth century, linguists have pondered the significance of the etymological relationship between certain words across what later became known as the Indo-European group of languages; in effect, those languages in which the mythological structures noted above are articulated. This Indo-European group, it has been surmised, must therefore have had a common origin in a Proto-Indo-European people, who during the Bronze Age migrated east and south from Europe. Exceptionally advanced technologically, most significantly their ability to forge metal weaponry and to gain mastery over horses, which were used to pull their chariots into battle, meant that by the late Bronze Age, these peoples had conquered regions from the Mediterranean through Persia to the Indian subcontinent. As a consequence, both their language and their beliefs became embedded throughout this Indo-European group.<sup>4</sup>

Exactly who these people were cannot be said with absolute certainty, but one twentieth-century archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994), put forward the Kurgan hypothesis, a theory that eclipsed the one-time Aryan hypothesis as previously propounded by German scholars and subsequently taken up by the Nazis as a justification for military invasions. Evidence for Gimbutas's theory rests on the excavation of burial mounds, kurgans, across the Indo-European regions, which were clearly the work of

the same peoples and the oldest of which were to be found in the Black Sea areas of the Caucasus and the west Urals. It is, then, here that the Proto-Indo-Europeans are believed to have originated.

Analysts of the mythological systems of the Indo-European group have identified certain fundamental similarities in their structures. Central to this is what is known as the trifunctional hypothesis, a theory that was first put forward by the French philologist Georges Dumézil (1898–1986). According to Dumézil's analysis, Indo-European myths reflect indigenous social hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> The highest of the three social functions Dumézil identifies is that performed by rulers or sovereigns, those who command both the priesthood and the law and who are often seen to have magical powers. This function is reflected in the highest gods of the myths; for example, the Indian god Vishnu (or his predecessor Varuna), the Norse god Odin (early Germanic Woden) and the Greek god Zeus (Roman Jupiter/Jove). The middle function is occupied by the warrior figure, who is variously personified in the myths as, for example, the Indian Indra, the Norse Thor and the Greek Heracles (Roman Hercules). Occupying the lowest function are the fertility gods, who are often represented by twins accompanied by a goddess; thus, the Indian horsemen the Ashvins and the female deity Saravati, the Greek Castor and Pollux (the Roman Gemini) and their sister Helen, and the Norse Frey, his twin sister Freyja and their father Njord, the early Germanic equivalent of whom is the goddess Nerthus.

Although as one critic has remarked, 'there are as many differences between Thor and Indra as there are between Iceland and India,' and it could just as readily have been pointed out that the same is also true of the Midgard Serpent and Vritra,<sup>6</sup> such obvious similarities cannot be mere coincidence. Indeed, these dramas also have parallels in the ancient Greek myth of Zeus' battle with Typhon, in the Hittite myth of Baal versus Yam, and in numerous Celtic myths and legends in which heroes (sometimes not admirable ones) tackle dragons in lochs and glens.

It is to this Indo-European group that this book will pay closest attention, for much of our modern notion of the dragon was formulated here, both from the original myths and from subsequent folktales that were derived from them. Close attention will also be paid to that most evil of dragons which originated in serpent form in the Garden of Eden and went on to become the apocalyptic Satan-dragon, as told of in the New Testament's Book of Revelation. This dragon was most often synonymous with paganism, that is to say any beliefs that were non-Christian, and was therefore regarded

as the chief enemy of the early Church and the prime target of Christian saints, such as St George.

Yet while the dragon is a global phenomenon, it cannot be said that it has impacted significantly on popular culture in all its forms, as it is clear that dragons in some mythologies have largely tended to remain insular. Notable examples of these are the feathered serpent deity Quetzalcoatl, originally of Mayan and later of Aztec mythology; the two Native American shamans in the forms of the water serpent Kitchi-at’husis and the giant horned snail Weewilmekq, who did battle in Boyden Lake in Washington County, Maine; the flesh-eating dragon-bird Piasa of Illinois; the dreaded creatures known as the Taniwha of Maori legend; and from Aboriginal Australian myths, the monstrous Bunyip and the primordial Dreamtime god, the Rainbow Serpent.<sup>7</sup> Fascinating as these creatures most certainly are, for the purposes of this book, they must remain in their caves and their watery lairs.

As for draconic origins, one last question remains – and it is no small one. Although we can to a large extent understand how the idea of the dragon developed out of survival fears which subsequently cross-pollinated, both as a result of migrations and more stable intercultural contacts, what is more difficult to understand is the significance of the dragon in the human psyche. One way of approaching this question is offered by the theoretics of structural anthropology, most notably in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009).<sup>8</sup>

Fundamental to Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach is that the human mind can be understood as being comprised of two opposing forces: Culture and Nature. Culture is that controlled space in which humans establish themselves in relative safety, rear their offspring, cooperate with their neighbours, build and defend their homes and cultivate those food-stuffs best suited to prolonging life. Culture, then, is a product of the human determination to survive under the best possible circumstances. But Nature is all that militates against this and is, in this respect, all that cannot be controlled.

No matter how deep the foundations of Culture, when Nature is unleashed in its most violent form it can reduce everything that humans value to ash and rubble or, as is the case in Asian and East Asian mythologies, cause drought, famine and floods. The Culture/Nature opposition, simply put, is that between life and death, and it is not hard to see how the dragon in its ferocious form can be understood as an embodiment of Nature. Thus, for example, in early Germanic, Celtic and Christian mythologies, the dragon-slayer, as the embodiment of Culture, can be understood as

humanity's most strenuous effort to combat Nature's untameable vicissitudes, whereas in Asia and East Asia, the dragon must be appeased and, to try to ensure that it does not use its powers to wreak havoc, revered.

So much is straightforward. But the problem is that humans are of both Culture *and* Nature, and this is one of life's paradoxes, perhaps the greatest of all. On the one hand, human survival depends on cooperation and collective self-interest; on the other, humans are untamed and seething with antisocial impulses that need to be restrained, for when they are not, chaos ensues. More than this, the determination to survive will always be concluded by the inevitability of death. In this sense, dragon blood courses through us all. And no matter whether the dragon is combatted or worshipped, the Culture/Nature drama is played out, to greater and lesser degrees, in the human psyche throughout our existence. If all this is accepted as perfectly reasonable, then the idea of the dragon is not only the projection of our fears of Nature's power but of our deepest fears of ourselves. The dragon is both the dread of our doom and the dread of the part we all play in precipitating it.