

An Alphabet of Queries (19)

Does the Phoenix that features in *Harry Potter and Order of the Phoenix* by J.K.Rowling (London, 2003 - the fifth book in the series, see No 24) conform to classical descriptions of this fabulous bird, or has the author used her imagination to embroider on the traditional pattern? Fawkes, the tame phoenix belonging to Professor Dumbledore, Headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, certainly shows some of the features of the Egyptian model, with its brilliant colours and fine feathers, and it throws itself into a fire in an act of sacrifice, but it is not entirely reduced to ashes, just from its former splendid swan-sized figure to a sorry lump like a scalded chicken. Perhaps it will be re-born in a later volume.



Other familiar monsters that appear in the book are centaurs and a hippogriff, whilst newcomers include Thestrals, batwinged black skeletal horses that can only be seen by those who have seen death, but are quite helpful, pestilential Doxys, Bowtruckles and the Crup, a creature indistinguishable from a Jack Russell terrier except for its forked tail, and mention is made in passing of the Blibbering Humdinger, the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, Nifflers, Porlocks, Kneazles and Knarles. The author combines classical erudition with a vivid creative imagination.

Dragonlore

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St Margaret's Day 2003



St Margaret from a 14th century carving

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

Our first resignation - Cecilia Chance has decided that she has neither space nor time to continue, her other reading and writing being more pressing, and her files full. She was not an inactive member. She gave early issues of **Dragonlore** to Michael Siddons, Wales Herald Extraordinary, and was dismayed at his dismissive attitude. She sent in pictures of giant stone dragons' heads in the National Trust gardens at Wallington in Northumberland, which proved too difficult to reproduce. And she took me on an unforgettable visit to Portmeirion (*see No 34*). In those far-off Minehead school days, she was one of those who thought that the idea of dracology was a lot of nonsense, but she was ever tolerant, helpful and honest, and we remain good friends.

New members - John and Gill Corrie, Eric Saumure, Andrew Tully.

Another Dragon Victim

St Michael and St George are familiar as dragon-slaying saints, but less well known is St Margaret of Antioch. She was the daughter of a pagan priest in the reign of Diocletian (3rd/4th century), but she embraced the Christian faith and refused to denounce it when challenged by a jealous pagan prefect whose advances she had rejected. She was imprisoned, tortured and finally beheaded, and her martyrdom is commemorated on 20th July. One of her tortures was to be menaced by a dragon in her prison cell. It attempted to devour her, and by some accounts almost succeeded, but the cross she was carrying pierced the monster's throat, forcing it to disgorge her. Perhaps this was a metaphor for the temptation of renouncing her faith to save her life, overcome by the symbol of Christianity. There is a picture of her from a 15th century seal in *The Norfolk Standard*, Newsletter of the Norfolk Heraldry Society (May 2003) showing her subduing a modest little dragon (*see right*), though an earlier carving shows a much more dramatic scene (*on the cover*). Dragons, of course, are magic and can grow bigger or smaller as the need occurs, as well as being able to recover from ritual slaughter. The struggle continues.



this might be a new candidate for a Fabulous Beast, but then it seems that Trwyth could talk and sail across the sea, so perhaps he was just another chieftain, one who had a giant boar as his totem.

Blake and Lloyd make a good case, in a scholarly but unpretentious way, for having uncovered the true historical origin of the tales of Arthur, but they seem to resent the fact that a genuine if obscure Welsh hero has been turned into an English super-hero, one of the Nine Worthies, no less, but in truth no more than a literary concoction.

One can imagine a Danish scholar diligently researching in old Jutland records for races of a minor princeling called Amleth, and no doubt what he discovered could contribute to an understanding of the development of mediaeval society in Denmark, but would it compare in importance to the purely literary figure of Hamlet that Shakespeare introduced to the world?

In **ALBION: The Origins of the English Imagination** by Peter Ackroyd (London, 2002) there is a whole chapter about King Arthur, and while Ackroyd does acknowledge Arthur's likely origin as a Welsh war-lord, it is the literary creation with its cultural and spiritual dimensions that he sees as having a long-lasting effect on our consciousness. The book is an amazing compilation of insights into our intellectual history from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. One of its arguments is that "a nature spirit persists through time and circumstance, all the more powerful for being generally unacknowledged." It is a spirit that is drawn from the very land itself, and in that land there dwelt dragons. In passing, there is one telling reference to such dragons that is worth quoting:-

"When in the eleventh century the people of Christchurch rebuffed an attempt by monks to raise money, a great fiery dragon is supposed to have visited its wrath upon the town. Dragons and beasts continued to appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as a direct inheritance of the previous civilisation when the Anglo-Saxon world was, according to J.R.R.Tolkien, 'a world of dragons'. The Old English 'draca' gave its name to Drakelaw or 'Dragon's Hill' in both Derbyshire and Worcestershire, and on the Sutton Hoo shield perched a winged dragon. To see dragons in the thirteenth century, therefore, is to see with Anglo-Saxon eyes."

Pendragon

This book, by Steve Blake and Scott Lloyd, was briefly noted in No 30. A splendid golden wyvern is prominently displayed on the cover, but in spite of that there is very little about dragons in the book, which is mainly concerned to prove the true identity of Arthur as a chief warrior (*pendragon* in Welsh) serving a sixth-century tribal leader, or “king”



in North Wales, based on the interpretation of clues in the earliest Welsh poetry, mainly the names of people and places. Arthur was no king himself, but leader of a warrior band that spent most of its time fighting other British tribal war-bands. He probably never even saw a Saxon, let alone fight them for the freedom of his land. Blake and Lloyd are pretty certain that they have identified the site of Arthur’s last battle at Camlan, in northern Wales, and even the location of his tomb nearby. Arthur served Maelgwn Gwynedd (Maglocunus) who ruled over a large area of North Wales, and apparently had a Dragon as a totem. Other kings in the area had a lion, a lioness, a leopard and a bear as totems, so perhaps the dragon on the cover, though drawn in a later style, represents Maelgwn’s totem, which Arthur, as Pendragon, might have borne into battle - a nice play on words. There is no mention of this possibility in the book, nor of the likelihood of these Welsh warriors carrying a lance-head wind-dragon modelled on that of the departed Roman cohorts.

There is, in passing, a description of Arthur’s pursuit of the giant boar Trwyth who had extraordinary powers, and the thought occurred that

The Loch Ness Monster

A stunning new book, *The Landscape of Scotland* with breathtaking photography by Sampson Lloyd and informative snippets of text by Paul Ramsay (London, 2003) contains this brief chapter under the above heading, here reproduced in full:-

Loch Ness is not the only loch or river believed to be haunted by a monster. Loch Morar, Scotland’s deepest inland loch, is said to be home to Morag, a monster that appears whenever a MacDonald of Clanranald is about to die. But in terms of capturing the public’s imagination, no other monster can hold a candle to Nessie, who has sparked numerous scientific expeditions and provided a highly lucrative boost to the local tourist industry ever since the first “photograph” (now known to be a hoax) appeared in 1934.

Tales of a monster in the depths of Loch Ness are nothing new, however; as long ago as the sixth century AD, no less a figure than Saint Columba encountered a monster at a crossing of the River Ness. It seems that Columba and his party had met a funeral party on the banks of the river, gathered there to bury someone whom the monster had killed. Despite the danger, Columba ordered one of his companions to swim back and collect a small boat that they had left on the other side. Unable to resist the provocation, the monster, which had been lurking nearby on the river bed, rose to attack the swimmer. Columba made the sign of the Cross, invoked the name of God, and ordered the beast away. All around were amazed by the power of the Christian God.

But is it really likely that such a beast inhabits the deep waters of Loch Ness now? It used to be suggested that Nessie might be something like a plesiosaur, a survival from an earlier geological period. There are two reasons why this is improbable: first, the last Ice Age covered the whole land and scoured out any fresh water bodies. Nothing could survive under these circumstances. Second, Loch Ness is very poor in nutrients: it simply cannot produce the amount of food that a large animal such as Nessie would need to survive.

(This really says all that is necessary, but see our A to Z in No 6.)

Loch Ness was a rather sentimental “family adventure” film of 1998, directed by John Henderson and starring Ted Danson, Joely Richardson and Ian Holm. It contains this interesting and perhaps crucial snatch of dialogue:

The scientist says, “...but I cannot believe it if I cannot see it.” To this the wee gairl replies, “Nae, nae, ye canna **see** it if ye dinna **beleeve** it.”

This exchange neatly summarizes the polarity between the scientific outlook in which the idea of reality is built upon the evidence of the senses (although paradoxically scientists are taught to distrust sense impressions), and the romantic, mystical, spiritual or religious view, call it what you will, in which belief in a reality comes first and then imagination can build up a world on whatever evidence is appropriate. Clearly much historical dracology falls into the second category. Would it be possible to reconcile the two by treating imagination as an additional sense? Just as the senses can be misled by illusions, so, of course, may imagination be corrupted by idle fantasy. There are philosophical questions here in need of clarification.

Some New Hybrids

Two interesting hybrid monsters appear in the pages of *The Heraldic Craftsman*, The Journal of the Society of Heraldic Arts, No 44 (June, 2003). First is an unicorn-headed lion holding a banner of the arms of Bibby, drawn by Kevin Arkinstall, with blue head and rear sandwiching red chest and forelegs, claws counter-coloured as you would expect. It makes a salient comparison with John George's **Union**, the supporter for the Wilkinson Sword Company's arms which had a white Unicorn's upper parts and a red Lion's lower, joined at the waist. The second hybrid monster illustrates an obituary of Sir David Hughes Bt, SHA, and shows a Lion-Wyvern cast in silver by Sir David, a demi-lion rampant crowned, charged on the shoulder with an ermine spot and conjoined with the wings and tail of a wyvern (*top right*). It does not say whose emblem this was, but Sir David was a self-taught innovative sculptor who loved heraldic and religious symbols, and may well have devised this beast for his own enjoyment.



More unusual hybrids appear in Darren George's latest instalment of *The Mad Menagerie*, Part 4, (*Heraldry in Canada XXXVII, no 2, "Spring" - i.e. May -2003*) in which he discusses hybrids in general with some very pertinent comments and advice about various Canadian combinations such as a raven-wolf, wolf-raven, raven-bear, griffin-moose and griffin-deer. In discussing the hippogriff, and noting that it has "wings like his sire," according to Ariosto (who is thought to have invented the monster), implying that the creature's father was a winged non-sterile griffin (though perhaps it was an eagle?), he has this to say,-

*It is hoped that the term **keythong**, which makes no statement about gender, will eventually replace the clumsy and inaccurate term "male griffin."*



But his most distinctive contribution is "the **Beavern** (*left*), a truly Canadian symbol which combines the industrious nature of the Beaver with the formidability of the Wyvern...clearly recognizable and easily distinguished from other monsters." He hopes that it may "find some popularity with Canadians whose ancestors are Welsh (or come from the Russian city of Kazan)," but fears that it is "more likely to be consigned to the realm of the utterly silly monsters." (*see No 18, Montypythonidae*) On the provenance of this beast, Darren writes, "I didn't so much devise it as discover it, as I saw one of the delightful

creatures on Canada Day a few years ago. It did not breathe flames as a pure dragon does, but it did have some magical powers, as it glared fiercely at me that night, which caused me to have the worst headache of my life the next morning. The drawing was done by Eric Saumure, editor of *Heraldry in Canada...*" He also indicates that its name might better be spelt **Beayvern**.

Perhaps while interest in hybrids is running high, it would be good to reprint the letter from Major T.R.Davies to *The Coat of Arms* (No 91, Autumn 1974) on *The Ethics of Monsters*, which was triggered off by Wilkinson's "Union."

SIR,

The more discerning of your readers must have been surprised by a grant of arms to a well-known steel firm which included supporters that were half-unicorn and half-lion. This is very, very naughty and must be condemned by every heraldist in Europe. The essential thing about a heraldic monster is that people should have believed that at one time it existed and roamed the earth. The Greeks were convinced that centaurs, satyrs, Pan, Pegasus, the Sphinx, etc. had an existence. When dragons became an accepted heraldic charge after c.1300 everybody knew they existed, and the faith was so strong that as late as the 1690s members of the Royal Society, London, paid the cost of publishing a book by the Swiss scientist, Professor Scheuchzer, entitled *Proof of the existence of dragons*. We can trace the origin of the European dragon to its source. In Roman times crocodiles and hippopotami still lived in the Nile down to the Delta (none have been seen north of the second Cataract, 800 miles upriver, this century). A common theme painted on the walls of late Egyptian temples was Horus the Avenger spearing the wicked Set, shown as a mixture of crocodile and hippo. The same artists painted the identical scene on walls in Coptic churches as St. Michael slaying the dragon, so the dragon-motif spread over Europe from pagan Scandinavia to Christian Byzantium. Mediaeval man had to believe in dragons, as they are mentioned fourteen times in the Old Testament!

Similarly the rhinoceros was more widely distributed in the ancient world and early travellers caught a hasty glance of the white rhino before beating a quick retreat, bringing back to Assyria and Persia rough descriptions of the unicorn. In Scandinavia people believed in the Trolle and it appears in their heraldry; old sailors in this century have sworn they have seen mermaids and mermen. Thousands believe there is a monster in Loch Ness. The Irish are sure the leprechaun and banshee exist; if they had developed a national style of heraldry these would have figured in it. But to manufacture hybrids must always be unethical.

MAJOR T.R.DAVIES
Bebington, Cheshire

We may not agree with the Major - I have reservations about his notion on the origin of the unicorn - but his views should surely be taken seriously.