

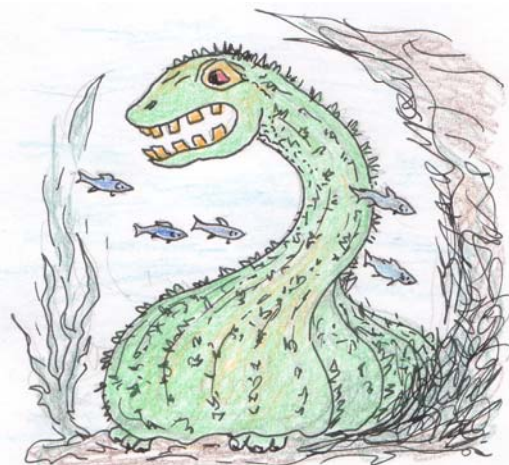
East and West

A Green Dragon from China worked in cross-stitch by Helen Murray. An ingenious link between this and the Red Dragon of Wales occurs in the delightful short story *Chinese Puzzle* by John Wyndham, of Triffid and Kraken fame, in the book **Jizzle** (London 1954, paperback edition 1962), one of many items sent in by Kay Holmes. The story is beautifully written and Welsh speech patterns are caught most exactly, making it a joy to read.



An Alphabet of Queries (14)

What kind of creature is Kerkoma, and what is its provenance? (*See A to Z in No 6*). In the early 1930s I lived in Malta where my father had been posted. He was a keen swimmer and had made himself a kind of experimental snorkel to assist him in his underwater explorations, long before these devices were readily available, so he was familiar with the many undercut cliffs and submerged caves round Malta's rocky coast which were probably the source



Kerkoma in his underwater cave

of the legend telling of a large sea-monster gnawing away at the roots of the island to the end that one day it would topple into the sea. One morning at breakfast my father gave a description of this monster, drew a picture of it, and said its name was Kerkoma. At the time I was not sure whether he was recounting his previous day's adventure (I was only six), but now I think it must have been a dream. Still, I cannot doubt his veracity, and it is likely that many of our monsters had their origins in the dreamworld.

Dragonlore

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Fighting red and white dragons watched by Vortigern and the young Merlin.

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

Here are the names of all our current members, in three classes. First (apart from those in my immediate family, Guy, Mark and Jacqueline, Mark and Keren) are Drusilla Armitage, John Brooke-Little, Jack Campbell-Kease (*aka* Arthur Mellanby), Gordon & Val Casely, Mark Dennis, John Dent, Dave & Sue Elderton, Ben Elliott, John Ferguson, Richard Fox, Stephen Friar, Eva Frommer, Darren George, Fergus Gillespie, Bob Grainger, Kevin Greaves, Leslie Hodgson, Kay Holmes, David Hopkinson, Cecil Humphery-Smith, Anthony Jones, Eve Kaye, Baz Manning, Helen Murray, Robert Noel, Bruce Patterson, Mary Rose Rogers, Roger Seabury, Stephen Slater, Roland Symons, Pete Taylor, John Wilkes, Brian Wright and Margaret Young.

Second are John Allen, Hugh Antrobus, Kevin Arkinstall, Diana Beauchamp, Cecilia Chance, Ann Gooding, Gilly Greenhill, Una Lewers, Les Pierson, CEJ Smith, Derek Taylor, John & Rita Titterton, Rose Welling and Hamish Wilson.

The third group includes Mary Barnsley, Jane Brindley, Dan Dyass, Sheila Edwards, David Freeman, Peter Giles, Keith Lovell, Mia McMeikan, Marian Miles, Dave Perks, Adrian de Redman, Dennis Skelland, PF Thorning, Terry Westphal and Martin Wood.

Progressing from the third group to the second depends only on one's initiative, but moving into the first lot requires there to be an appropriate space, which has to be an editorial decision.

The picture on the cover, a detail taken from the St Albans Chronicle, a 15th century English MS, was sent in by Helen Murray, and shows the boy Merlin explaining to Vortigern the significance of the fighting between the red and the white dragon. The Red Dragon was seen as the emblem of the Welsh and the White Dragon as standing for the Saxons. Note that they are not very large and are easily contained by a modest fence round a shallow pit, as at that time it was still considered that their wings were too small to propel them in flight. Similar pairs of fighting beasts in Ireland are said to represent the struggle between the Celtic and Roman Churches, so it is likely that such symbolism has an ancient origin that may be interpreted in whatever context seems relevant. That the fighting between Welsh and Saxon may now be considered outmoded was indicated by the design on the breast-clasp worn by the new Archbishop of Canterbury at his recent enthronement. He had been the Archbishop of Wales, and his clasp was made of Welsh gold, showing a red dragon and a white dragon holding hands in reconciliation, with a Celtic cross between them. Such a delightful piece of ceremonial embellishment shows that the symbolism of the dragon is still very much alive. If anyone has a picture of this clasp, please send it in.

lively dragons, and innumerable mediaeval craftsmen have recorded their versions of dragons in gargoyles and wood sculpture in churches. Norwich has a pet dragon, SNAP, who dates at least from the Middle Ages and who capers about processions through the streets on festive occasions but has to sit outside when the city dignitaries enter the Cathedral. To the mediaeval mind the world was so full of incomprehensible things that dragons were no more incredible than other strange beasts such as giraffes and crocodiles which a few



Snap the Dragon in the Castle Museum, Norwich

people claimed to have seen. In any case, their ecclesiastical mentors were more interested in symbolism than in actuality.

Leaving aside the question of whether there really were monstrous worm-like creatures, of the Loch Ness Monster type, surviving from past eons in deep lakes and rivers, the association of dragons with evil is therefore quite understandable.

Dragons feature less prominently in the ranks of Celtic gods, but there were plenty of them about. From references to them in Celtic legends we might conjecture that they were gods of an even earlier religion, with which the Celtic priesthood found itself in conflict.

Clearly, then, in our search for old gods we should pay full regard to dragons, water-beasts, giant worms, cockatrices and other monsters. Dragons and monsters of the Underworld feature in most ancient religions. From which religion they ultimately derive is altogether a more difficult problem, but the legends and traditions could repay careful study.

(Thanks to Leslie Hodgson for drawing my attention to Whitlock's book)

A first-class compendium, copiously illustrated, is **Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain** (Reader's Digest, London 1973) by a team of 44 authors (including both Palmer and Whitlock) with a section on Fabulous Beasts. Among the pictures are a Unicorn, Griffin and Manticora from the 13th century Westminster Bestiary, a Boa, Hydra, Lamia and Triton from Topsell's 17th century *Histories*, the Phoenix, Siren and Caladrius from another bestiary and a splendid carved boss from Westminster Abbey showing a Lion-Centaur battling with an Amphisbaenid Dragon. Many others, including heraldic monsters, are described in the concise and informative text.

Fabulous Beasts from British Folklore

Much folklore is seen as carefully preserved ancient stories, traditions and superstitions, but **Britain's Living Folklore** by Roy Palmer (Newton Abbott 1991) shows how much is still active in people's minds and beliefs even today. Apparently, there are many who still believe in mermaids, as illustrated in this charming drawing from Chapter 1, *The Watery World*. Palmer covers a wide field from fairies to ghosts, but it would seem that though some water-monsters are accepted as real to this day, nobody now thinks that dragons still exist.



In Search of Lost Gods: A Guide to British Folklore by Ralph Whitlock (Phaidon, Oxford 1979) looks for the origins of these stories and legends in an earlier set of beliefs in a spiritual world. Whitlock starts the relevant section thus:-

Dragons, water-beasts, giant worms, cockatrices and other monsters are frequent characters in folklore. Though descriptions of them vary, they have certain common features. All are a menace to their neighbours and most are eventually killed by a hero, though some are driven away by exorcism.

He goes on to tell the stories of many localized monsters, from the Knucker of Sussex, the Wherwell Cockatrice, the Highclere Grampus, the Crowcombe Worm and other Somerset dragons, the Buckland Shag, the Afanc of Glaslyn, the Lambton Worm and many others up to the Kelpies of the Hebrides. Most of these lived in "bottomless" ponds or deep wells and thus emerged from the Underworld which in the ancient pagan religions was seen as the home of the spirits to which people would return after death. Perhaps these dragons and water-monsters were originally powerful nature beings who only turned nasty when people abandoned the old religions and turned to Christianity, which for some looked to a heaven in the sky and saw the Underworld as an evil hell. A



Cockatrice looking into mirror

somewhat similar development is seen in the transformation of the daemons in the Middle East from helpful spirits to wicked devils. Whitlock concludes thus:-

Dragons were familiar characters to mediaeval folk. In many Mumming Plays and Morality Plays the Dragon is a key figure. It represents the evil against which St George, the embodiment of virtue, fights. Surviving doom paintings on church walls depict

More Welsh Dragons



These fine red dragons are supporting the shield of the Marquess of Bute at Cardiff Castle, drawn by Anthony Jones. The arms are *Or a fess checky Azure and Argent within a double tressure flory counter-flory Gules*, a variant of the basic Stewart arms. Tony has written and illustrated a series of booklets on **Heraldry in Glamorgan**, of which No 8 dealing with **Cardiff Castle**



(Pencoed 1998) contains this drawing (*left*) of a delightful sitting lion wearing a helmet with a wyvern crest, from a newel post in the Castle. In an essay on Aspects of Welsh Heraldry in *The Coat of Arms* (No 181, Spring 1998), Tony points out that although the dragon has been associated with Wales since the 8th century, there are surprisingly few dragons in Welsh personal heraldry and of these, three are of English origin, two for semi-historical persons, and only one of genuine Welsh origin, that for Dafydd ap Gruffudd. To these he has added one more, discovered in a church in Montgomeryshire but as yet unidentified. It is *Argent a dragon rampant Vert armed and barbed Gules*, which he has drawn here (*right*). Green dragons also turn up in



Hereford (the famous inn) and in Somerset, and are considered by some their natural colour, often with gold tongue, claws, tail-barb and breast-plates. For Welsh dracology, Tony recommends **A History of the Red Dragon** by Carl Lofmark, edited by G A Wells (Welsh Heritage Series No 4, Llanrwst 1995), which is both scholarly and comprehensive though rather speculative in places. Its scope is indicated by its chapter headings:- The Dragon in Prehistory and Ancient History; The Dragon of Britain; Norman Conquerors and Welsh Rebels; The Tudor Dragon and the Modern Symbol of the Welsh Nation. Pertinent today, it quotes a suggestion that the serpents which **St Patrick** banished from Ireland may have been emblems of pagan Celtic gods and protectors of pagan warriors. (Certainly there is no evidence that zoological snakes ever existed there, Ireland having been cut off from the European mainland far earlier than Great Britain was.) Another nice touch is that the saint's name in his native Welsh is *Pa draig*, meaning "What dragon?" Lofmark concludes that the Red Dragon is what it has always been, a symbol of Welsh national consciousness and its aspiration for independence.

Another excellent booklet is **Y Ddraig Goch / The Red Dragon** by Aeres Twigg (Gomer Press, Llandysul 2000); bilingual throughout with lots of pictures all in colour, it also tells the story of Vortigern and the dragons. This legend appears again in **Merlin and Wales: A Magician's Landscape** by Michael Dames (Thames & Hudson, London 2002), a scholarly and inspiring book bringing ancient myths to life. For serious study, **Merlin through the**

Ages: A Chronological Anthology and Source Book edited by R.J.Stewart and John Matthews (Blandford, London 1995) will be invaluable; it reproduces this drawing by Miranda Grey of King Vortigern and the youthful Merlin with two little dragons. And while we are on Welsh history, note should be taken of **Pendragon: The Definitive Account of the Origins of Arthur** by Steve Blake and Scott Lloyd (Rider, London 2002) which argues convincingly that the name "Pendragon" means "Chief of Warriors" and not "Dragon's Head." The question that remains is, when did the Welsh start using the image of a winged dragon monster to represent their warrior class? Lofmark does not fully answer this.



Although the majority of commercial and institutional logos show abstract geometrical forms, wavy leaves or simple arcs, the Welsh like to introduce the hint of a dragon into theirs. Here is a selection, collected by Roger Seabury from his workplace in Newport, Gwent:-



Welsh Development Agency



Welsh Tourist Board



**WELSH PURCHASING
CONSORTIUM**



Cardiff / Caerdydd



Rhondda Cynon Taff