

The bird was a Rukh and the white dome, of course, was its egg. Sindbad lashes himself to the bird's leg with his turban, and the next morning is whisked off into flight and set down on a mountaintop, without having excited the Rukh's attention. The narrator adds that the Rukh feeds itself on serpents of such great bulk that they would have made but one gulp of an elephant.

In Marco Polo's *Travels* (III, 36) we read:

The people of the island [of Madagascar] report that at a certain season of the year, an extraordinary kind of bird, which they call a rukh, makes its appearance from the southern region. In form it is said to resemble the eagle but it is incomparably greater in size; being so large and strong as to seize an elephant with its talons, and to lift it into the air, from whence it lets it fall to the ground, in order that when dead it may prey upon the carcase. Persons who have seen this bird assert that when the wings are spread they measure sixteen paces in extent, from point to point; and that the feathers are eight paces in length, and thick in proportion.

Marco Polo adds that some envoys from China brought the feather of a Rukh back to the Grand Kahn. A Persian illustration in Lane shows the Rukh bearing off three elephants in beak and talons; 'with the proportion of a hawk and field mice', Burton notes.



* William Edward Lane was an English Orientalist of the 19th Century.

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Dragonlore

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A Dragon art-student drawn by Kevin Arkinstall

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

With sadness we report the death of Les Pierson, who was a knowledgeable heraldist and a staunch dracologist, and we share our grief with Mary, his widow.

We welcome new members Tricia Rutherford and John York.

Kevin Arkinstall HSDAD, SHA, is a renowned heraldic artist and keen dracologist. He drew an unusual dragon for the College to use, but unfortunately the pesky critter has gone into hiding and resists all efforts at discovery. However, his drawing of an art-student dragon (*on the cover*) will show his talent. It is taken from the flier for an Heraldic Art Weekend, for which he is the course tutor, to be held from Friday 21st to Sunday 23rd November 2003 at Urchfont Manor College (telephone 01380 840495 for further details). Kevin is best known for his very fine, almost feathery, style of drawing heraldic beasts and monsters, which perfectly combine with his exquisite calligraphy. But for beginners who are tempted to go for a weekend at Urchfont, the flier says "No experience is necessary; the course aims to demonstrate how to achieve strong and lively heraldry, emphasising character, the importance of line and some of the tie-ins with calligraphic work."

There is an important book that has been around for some years that should have been mentioned here before. It is **The Book of Imaginary Beings** by Jorge Luis Borge with *Margarita Guerrero* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1974). Originally published in Mexico in 1957 as *Manual de zoologia fantastica* with 82 entries, and then in Buenos Aires in 1967 as *El libro de los seres imaginarios* with 116 pieces, a new edition, enlarged, revised and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni came out in the U.S.A. in 1969 and then in London in 1970 (Jonathan Cape) before this 1974 Penguin edition. It now contains 120 entries ranging from creatures in the mythology of antiquity worldwide down to the imaginations of modern authors such as Kafka and C.S.Lewis. Sometimes he gives a brief descriptive summary of the nature of the being, its history and the source from whom it is known, and sometimes he just quotes a whole paragraph from the original text. We shall be doing likewise from time to time.

The Feast of St Michael and All Angels falls on 29th September.

ADDITION TO THE A TO Z

SQUANDERBUG - A wicked little creature that tempted people to be profligate and wasteful, featured in a campaign to promote thrift and economy during the Second World War. The name might have been influenced by that of Scanderbeg, the Albanian hero whose name was in turn derived from Alexander the Great.



An Alphabet of Queries (21)

Is the Roc, properly known as the Rukh, based on reality? Our main source of information about this giant bird of prey is in the adventures of Sindbad the Sailor in *The Arabian Nights*, from the second of his seven voyages. While these stories are generally regarded as the height of fantasy, a recent book, **1421** by Gavin Menzies (London 2002), suggests that the character of Sindbad may have been based on the Chinese Admiral Zheng He, explorer and adventurer, who built a fleet of enormous junk-like ships and travelled far and wide, possibly even circumnavigating the world in one of his seven voyages. He certainly sailed around the Indian Ocean and visited Madagascar, which ties in with our second clue. In his *Travels*, Marco Polo reports that in the court of the Kublai Khan he was shown a vast feather, said to be from a Rukh, that had come from Madagascar where these enormous birds were to be seen. We now know of a giant flightless bird, *Aepyornis*, some eight or nine feet high, that used to live in Madagascar, and like the ostrich or emu its legs were quite out of proportion to its body compared with other birds. Is it possible that the Chinese explorers, finding huge birds' legs, possibly fossilised, could have extrapolated a body on to them in the proportions of a bird of prey, thus leading to the notion of a huge eagle-like monster? As for the giant feather, it is supposed that it might have been a fossil palm frond. On the other hand, there are those who link stories of the Rukh to ancient Persian mythology with its Senmurv, Simurgh and other Phoenix-like birds, so some doubt must remain. But surely the key lies in Madagascar.

Here is what Jorge Luis Borges has to say on this subject:-

The Rukh

The Rukh (or as it is sometimes given, *roc*) is a vast magnification of the eagle or vulture, and some people have thought that a condor blown astray over the Indian Ocean or China seas suggested it to the Arabs. Lane* rejects this idea and considers that we are dealing rather with a 'fabulous species of a fabulous genus' or with a synonym for the Persian *Simurgh*. The Rukh is known to the West through the *Arabian Nights*. The reader will recall that Sindbad (on his second voyage), left behind by his shipmates on an island. Found

a huge white dome rising in air and of vast compass. I walked all around it, but found no door thereto, nor could I muster strength or nimbleness by reason of its exceeding smoothness and slipperiness. So I marked the spot where I stood and went round about the dome to measure its circumference which I found fifty good paces.

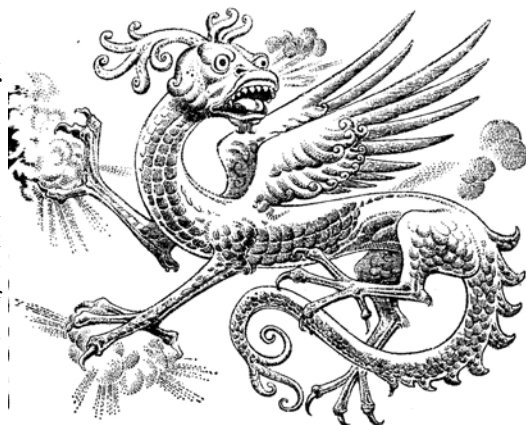
Moments later, a huge cloud hid the sun from him and

lifting my head... I saw that the cloud was none other than an enormous bird, of gigantic girth and inordinately wide of wing...

No 31), carvings, mosaics and of course stained glass, this last receiving a full-page colour reproduction of a panel by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, dated about 1862, and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, showing, "How the good Knight St George of England slew the dragon and set the Princess free." It is notable in that it shows St George wedging the dragon's mouth open with his shield while he stabs it in the throat with his sword. Another example mentioned by Litten is a window by Archibald Davies in St James's church, Birlingham, Worcestershire, and illustrated in colour in **The Bromsgrove Guild - An Illustrated History** edited by Quintin Watt (The Bromsgrove Society, 1999) which also contains examples of other dragons, unicorns, sea-horses and a faun amongst the craft work shown. And for those wondering what NADFAS is (as I did), Roland tells me that it is the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts, of which he is part of the Bath Church Recorders' Group, looking after the heraldry side of things.

FEEDBACK (3)

Una Lewers has kindly presented us with a copy of **A Book of Dragons** by Ruth Manning-Sanders, with drawings by Robin Jacques (New York, 1965), which contains fourteen fairy tales from around the world, some about kindly beasts and those that proudly serve the Supreme Ruler of Heaven, and some about those bad and savage dragons that have to be either killed or outwitted. Of the

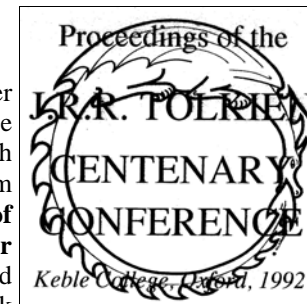


former kind is Chien Tang (*above*), though I fear the artist did not realise that Chinese dragons could fly without wings, at least until their artists had seen examples of western dragons which they then copied. Of the wicked kind is this Irish dragon (*left*) being slain by the Thirteenth Son of the King of Erin. This team of author and artist has produced a large number of similar books covering Giants, Dwarfs, Mermaids, Magic Animals and Monsters (*see No 6*) among others.



Dragon Mechanisms

Nicholas Williams has kindly sent in a copy of a paper delivered at the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference held at Keble College, Oxford, in 1992, which incidentally had a delightful Ouroboros as its emblem (*see right*). The paper, entitled **The Mechanics of Dragons: An Introduction to the Study of their 'Ologies** by Angela Surtees and Steve Gardner (and illustrated by Ruth Lacon) presents "a tongue-in-cheek analysis of dragons and their place in society, suggesting that perhaps they are not necessarily the terrible and evil creatures they are sometimes portrayed to be." In keeping with the occasion, it mentions Tolkien's Smaug and Glaurung, giving a full account of the reasons for dragons' hoards and the uses they put them to, with details of their mating rituals and breeding habits, and also describes the mysterious Arkenstone, a draconite that grows in the forehead of mature dragons and has many magical properties, along with other parts of its anatomy such as dragons' teeth, eyes and scales, which were all put to good use by alchemists. It attempts to reconcile a dragon's apparent bulk with its ability to fly by quoting the anatomical structure of hollow gas-filled bones from Dickinson (while forgetting that wingless Chinese dragons could fly not because of some mechanism but because they were spiritual), and briskly deals with their fire-breathing properties, while noting that this ability was not present in earlier versions of the species. It describes dragons' great knowledge, inquisitiveness, bashfulness and addiction to ley-lines among other things and is a wholly enjoyable and stimulating essay.



One of the sources quoted by these authors has been kindly given us by Gill Corrie. It is the book **The Flight of Dragons** by Peter Dickinson, illustrated by Wayne Anderson (London, 1979), a thrilling combination of science with romance which sets out to prove that giant, winged, fire-breathing dragons did actually exist. Dickinson, who was born in 1927 and was for many years an assistant editor of *Punch* (which was when I met him) before becoming a successful author of slightly weird detective stories and children's adventure fantasies, has produced a coherent theory which is at least as probable as the theory that dragons are completely legendary. Or so he says. He understands physics and chemistry as well as the theory of organic evolution, and makes good use of them in his arguments. He provides a convincing explanation for dragons hoarding gold in their lairs, and why it was supposed that they could understand human speech and reply in similar vein (a mistaken assumption resulting from their hypnotic powers), but he fails to come to terms with the fact that early descriptions of dragons describe them as relatively small, non-flying and unable to breathe fire. Perhaps there are many branches in the dragon tree of evolution, and he has picked on just the one. But whatever criticisms a dracologist might make of this book, it carries a beautifully crafted theory, thoughtfully presented and imaginatively illustrated, for which we can be most grateful.

There have been some other contributions too. Hugh Antrobus (who is a doctor and knows about these things) is convinced that dragons do not breathe fire, but belch

it, and Fergus Gillespie has uncovered some early heraldic depictions of dragons “breathing fire at both ends,” thus confirming that this is a digestive problem and not a respiratory one. Various authors have speculated on the kind of anatomical arrangement that might be able to accumulate inflammable gases in an extra stomach, and also on the sort of mechanism that could ignite a sudden release of gas, perhaps a spark produced by the gnashing of metallic teeth or by a special high-frequency muscular organ in the back of the throat, but all these speculations lack clear evidence to support them. In many cases the supposed flames depicted by artists may have been attempts to depict smelly breath, vomit or just a forked tongue, though the fiery fart may be harder to understand. Here the bonacon comes to mind, and we may hope to look to Stephen Slater for further enlightenment.

VEXILLOLOGY

From **Flagmaster 107**, (Winter 2002), the Journal of The Flag Institute, we note that an 18th century Flagbook shows a flag for Luneburg with a golden winged horse on red, and one for Naples with a green dragon on white, as well as the better-known golden winged lion on red for Venice. This last, the emblem of St Mark, may still be seen on the insignia of the Italian Naval Ensign, but the other two seem to have been lost in the mists of history.



A Dragon from Ancient India

The *Rig Veda* is probably the most ancient literary composition known to us, and in it is the story of **Vrtra**, a mighty dragon that coiled itself round the mountains, cutting off the headwaters of the seven great rivers of Western India until their lands became parched and dry. Then came Indra with his sword and slew the dragon, releasing the waters in a huge burst that flooded the land, after which it returned to prosperity.

In his exciting new book **UNDERWORLD - Flooded Kingdoms of the Ice Age** (London, 2003), Graham Hancock suggests that this story may not be just a myth, but a poetic description of an actual event. The dragon is the last great glaciation of the Himalayas and Indra’s sword the global warming that melted the glaciers and precipitated the floods. There may have been people who witnessed these events and told about them, not in dry abstract terms but in a dramatic form that could be easily remembered and passed down word for word through many generations until they were at last written down in the manner that has survived to the present day..

Hancock has come across many myths that describe disastrous floods, not only in India, but in the Middle East, Japan and other parts of the world, and is looking for underwater evidence of lost civilizations. Marine archaeology is a relatively new branch of exploration and its findings already arouse controversy, but so far there do not appear to be any other dragons involved.

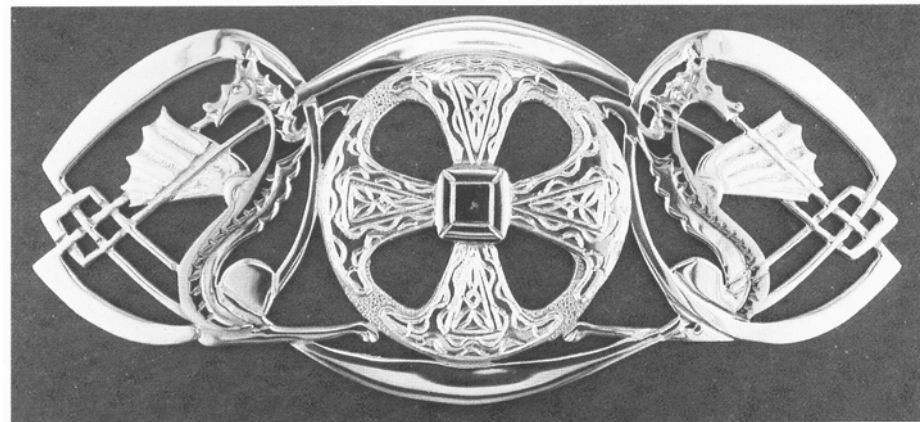
FEEDBACK (1)

Kevin Greaves had strong feelings about the Uccello painting shown in No 32, saying, “How that cutesy elf could get to be the patron saint of anything beats me.” He adds a few lines of his own to Una Fanthorpe’s poem - the Dragon speaks again:-

Not my wrong side only, sirs.
The artist at least showed my
Service in the RAF by the roundels on my
Wings, but those damned commentators on
Uccello’s work missed the point entirely.
When that nimby youth with the pointy
Stick was still in diapers, I was defending
His land among the Few. So who would begrudge
Me a rather homely maiden? Some people don’t
Take any thought for veterans. It’s too bad.

(When it was pointed out that the roundels were actually those of the French Air Force and not the RAF, Kevin said that artists were never too fussy about details.)

FEEDBACK (2)



In No 30 we asked if anybody had a picture of the clasp made of Welsh gold that the Archbishop of Canterbury wore at his enthronement. Now Roland Symons has sent in a couple of pages from the **NADFAS REVIEW** for Autumn 2003 which includes such a picture (*above*) in an article on *Heraldic monsters - the role of the dragon as a clerical ornament* by Julian Litten. We learn that the correct name for the clasp is a morse, and that there are two other exquisite examples of this type of jewel featuring dragons; one, made in 1901 by Carl Krall to a design by Sir Ninian Comper for the Bishop of Norwich, shows St George killing a particularly angry dragon, and the other, with enamels showing St Michael and St George with their dragons, is to be seen in the Treasury at St Paul’s Cathedral. Litten also deals with dragons embroidered on liturgical vestments (rare, but including one illustrated on page 6 of