

MEET THE DRAGON



*An introduction to
Beowulf's adversary*



Bill Griffiths

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20 August 1948 – 13 September 2007

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Beowulf's adversary*



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Heart of Albion

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Meet the dragon: an introduction to Beowulf's adversary

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Also by Bill Griffiths and published by Heart of Albion Press:
User-Friendly Dictionary of Old English

Heart of Albion

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Marlborough, SN8 1RF

web site www.hoap.co.uk

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St George and the Dragon from
the first edition of Spenser's
The faerie queen of 1590.

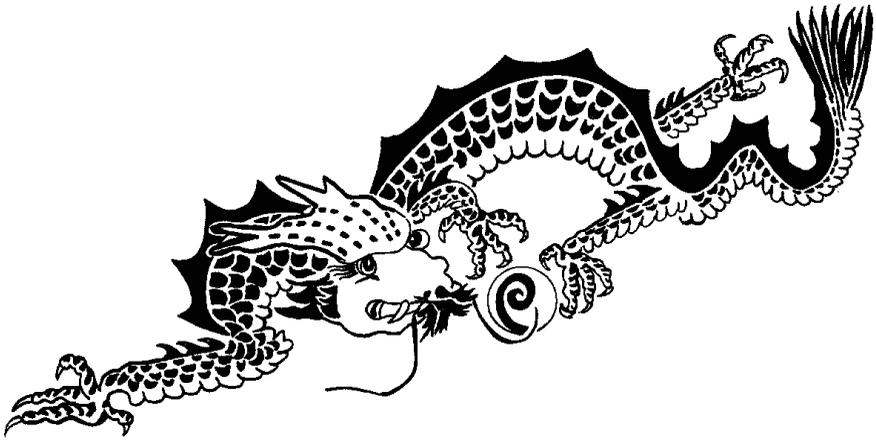
1. In General

The ‘modern’ dragon, if I may so term it, is the sort we are probably all familiar with from Rupert Bear books, or the sort King George V had tattooed on his arm as a budding sailor. Surprisingly, this is not English at all but basically a Chinese or Japanese creation. It has conventionally the head of a camel, horns of a deer, ears of a cow, neck of a snake, body of a fish, scales of a carp, claws of an eagle, eyes of a devil, paws of a tiger. Clearly it belongs to the genera called *Mischwesen* (‘composite beings’) in German. It is long-bodied, with four legs, but not usually explicit wings. In Chinese they are called *lung*, in Japanese *tatsu*; and both exist in a variety of types, according to their elemental role: for example, the “*t’ien lung* supports the mansion of the Gods; the *shen lung* brings rain; the *ti lung* controls rivers; and the *fu-tsang lung* guards hidden treasures and deposits of precious metal.”¹ Nor are these various dragons in themselves constant, but each develops over its 1000-plus years of existence, evolving ultimately into a winged dragon or *ying-lung*; nominal wings are found in some depictions, of a wispy or thread-like character; otherwise the power of flight is attributed to a bump located on their head or to possession of a small magical staff.

That this sort of dragon should dominate, pictorially, over our own native European or Western, dragon is apparently a consequence of our forebears’ contempt for crude local folk design and admiration for fashionable Eastern ornament over the last two or three centuries. They adopted the pattern for factory ware but did not necessarily appreciate the generally peaceful nature of this Eastern wonder (for example, what could be more self-effacing than the white Chinese snow-dragon on its background of a snow-field?).

It is questionable whether the Western dragon received any direct input from the Far East before the modern period. Some indirect connection may be assumed during the Middle Ages and the Crusades (see Chapter 7). An uncertainty here relates to the role of Persian dragons, which exhibit some of the combative tradition of the West (e.g. in the *Shanama* or ‘Book of Kings’ of Firdausi, completed in the twelfth century, which may well go back to myths of the Zoroastrian period), but are illustrated in the medieval texts in an oriental fashion, due to influence from Chinese art in Persia from the fourteenth century onwards.² The dragons of Firdausi have fiery and venomous breath, no wings, no horns, but in one case, long trailing hair.³

The difficulty of demonstrating the transmission of dragon concept or form fits with the visual and conceptual dissimilarity between Western and



Characteristic Chinese dragon with the Pearl of Wisdom

Eastern dragons. Furthermore, the futility of ascribing to borrowing when mythological matter could have arisen in separate areas spontaneously leads me to reject any dependence in Europe at an early date on a Chinese prototype. Though, as we shall see, there is some input into the Roman image of the dragon from peoples to the North-East of the Empire, we cannot take this as direct influence from China itself or even be certain it forms an indirect link.

2. The Mythic Dimension

Monsters are loved, or love to be feared, all over the world. There is no lack of candidates in the Western world for the origin of the ‘dragon’, though the tendency to call any monster from the past that is gross and vile enough a ‘dragon’, can be confusing and misleading.

The trail starts in ancient Egypt where “a huge serpent Apophis, probably a personification of darkness, was thought to oppose the sun-god on his nightly journey through the under-world.”⁴ In Sumerian texts a dragon named Kur is tackled and defeated by various gods in turn. In the Babylonian *Enuma elish* (‘When on high . . .’ – the opening words of their creation myth), Apsu and Mother Tiamat were among the first primordial entities, and have been deemed to represent the chaotic forces of nature;⁵ Tiamat led the opposition to a new regime of gods (representing order?), but was defeated in single combat by Marduk and dis-assembled - cf. Zeus asserting control over the analogous Typhon. Now the Typhon is pictured by the Greeks as a winged human-torso, with double-snake lower body,⁶ but it is

uncertain which Babylonian depiction really shows Tiamat. Near-Eastern sculpture abounds in unpleasant scaly-skinned, winged beings (veritable *Mischwesen*), some of which stand on their back legs and have heads like chickens, and could be the ancestors of griffins, and others have seven heads like the Greek hydra; Hogarth⁷ labels as ‘Tiamat’ a bird-like being on two legs with forearms and wings, but the same illustration in Allen & Griffiths⁸ is said not to be Tiamat, but a demon pursued by Ninurta. Simpson⁹ shows the likelier form of Tiamat, from a Babylonian cylinder seal: it has a long tubular snake body, whose forepart rears up, with two almost human forelimbs. To add to the confusion, Tierney suggests that Yahweh, the Hebrew God, started out as a similar snake-based being.¹⁰

This chaotic or devilish image does not correspond to the Greek role of a ‘dragon’ though combat with such monsters is common in Greek legend. But the Near Eastern form may be assumed to have influenced Jewish and later Christian belief. Monsters are mentioned in the Old Testament (e.g. Behemoth, Leviathan, Rahab), and when not specifically named are often conventionally translated into English as ‘dragons’; and the Christians subsequently identified the dragon with the devil, which could go back through Jewish tradition to Babylonian concepts of the forces of evil, or to the dualism of Persian thought.¹¹ Medieval depictions of the dragon often show a beast with two legs only, and although I cannot demonstrate pictorial continuity from the many composite (including winged) animals of Babylon to the Christian era, it is just possible that Tiamat is the origin of one strand of the Western dragon tradition, either through Jewish or Greek intermediaries.

The principal early evidence for the Western tradition of the dragon comes from Greece, and it is there that the name ‘dragon’ has its certain origin. Greek *drakon* is traced back by Bosworth and Toller¹² to a root in the verb *darkomai* “to flash or gleam” (referring to its shiny reptilian scale – cf. Keats’ *Lamia* Book 1 line 54 “rainbow-sided” etc.); Hraba-



From a cup of the Sumerian King Gudea of Lagash dated c.2025BC. Two winged beasts hold back a pair of doors to reveal a caduceus of uniting serpents, incarnations of the god Ningizzida.

(After Baring and Cashford)

nus Maurus¹³ derived it from the Greek *derkein* “seeing” (referring to its role as a vigilant guardian). Associated with the Greek root are the Latin *draco*, gen. *draconis*, and thence the Welsh *dreig*¹⁴ and Anglo-Saxon *draca* (oblique *dracan*)¹⁵ – noted as an early Latin loan-word by Campbell.¹⁶ Also Old High German *trahho*, Old Norse *dreke*. Its role as a loan-word is confirmed by its absence from Wulfilas’ Gothic Bible where only the terms *nadre* and *waurms* are used.¹⁷ While we think of such loans as taking place during the contact between Rome and Germania under the height of the Roman Empire, such borrowings could have continued throughout the settlement period, by contact between Gaul and England (see Wollmann 1990).

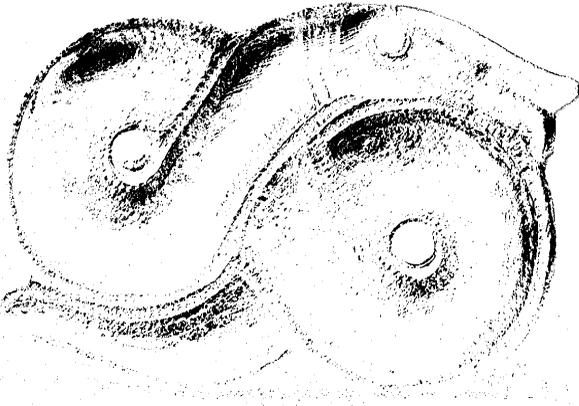
But the Greek dragon has no limbs or wings, and no particular affinity with fire. In both literature and art it is conceived of as a giant serpent, and the simplicity of this image is still present in the dragon in Beowulf and in Viking carvings of a doubtless related tradition.

The Greek (and Roman) dragon was often a treasure-guard, as in one of the earliest surviving myths, that of Jason and the Golden Fleece. This is a role it shares with the griffin which Herodotus¹⁸ tells us is a gold-guarding beast. In the fourth book of Apollonius’ *Voyage of the Argo* (composed about the middle of the third century BC, and so a particularly early literary reference), the fleece hung on an oak in a sacred grove, guarded by a hissing serpent, who “in his sheath of horny scales rolled forward his interminable coils, like the eddies of black smoke that spring from smouldering logs and chase each other from below in endless convolutions.” Medea charmed him with magical song and “the giant snake... was soon relaxing the whole length of his serrated spine and smoothing out his multitudinous undulations, like a dark and silent swell rolling across a sluggish sea.”¹⁹

But if the direct ancestor-candidate of the Western dragon was a snake-like being, whose prime unnatural attribute was great size, whence came the almost supernatural features of fire-breathing and flying, which are first noticed in literature in Latin texts of the fourth and fifth centuries AD? There seems to be a composite tradition here, a fusion of different mythical traditions, and to untangle it, it seems best to consider the various attributes of the dragon one by one, to see where, when and how each of these aspects is recorded, and whence perhaps derived.

3. Dragon as Large Serpent

The belief in very large snakes may be viewed as a matter of natural history rather than mythology. Snakes “*swa greate swa columnan*” are mentioned in the Old English *Letter of Alexander*, itself based on a classical



Seventh century
Swedish serpent or
dragon.

source, perhaps a Greek novel; Pliny (first century AD) in his *Natural History*²⁰ mentions dragon-elephant combats in India (the dragon squeezes the elephant to death, the elephant then falls and crushes the snake to death, implying parity in size and strength between large snake and elephant). Snakes in nature can have considerable length and strength, so the origin of the serpent-dragon may be no more than the exaggeration of a real marvel. In nature snakes can be poisonous too of course, and this is a standard attribute of the dragon in turn, leading perhaps to an association between dragons and contagious disease (asserted notably in various later saints legends, e.g. as presented in Aldhelm's *De Virginitate* lines 552, 1308, 2385).

The poisonous aspect is emphasised in Statius' (born AD 40) *Thebaid* Book V lines 505ff: "...loosely dragging huge bulk, now bears it forward, now leaves it behind him. A livid gleam is in his eyes, the green spume of foaming poison in his fangs, and a threefold quivering tongue, with three rows of hooked teeth, and a cruel blazonry ["*crudelis gloria*"] rises high upon his gilded forehead."²¹

The apparently corrosive nature of poison (whose chemical composition was scarcely understood then) might have led to a connection with heat: thus in subsequent lines (527–8) Statius describes how "*percussæ calidis adflatibus herbæ... cadunt*" ('the herbiage falls flat, struck by the hot breath [of the dragon]); and from Book V line 521 comes the image "*furit igne veneni*" ('it rages with the fire of poison'), again associating the two factors. This links too with the thirstiness of snakes ("*incensus siti*" *ibid.*, 524); perhaps as reptiles that like to bask in the Sun they seem to humans in risk of getting over-hot (thus Sigurd's dragon in *Beowulf*, after its slaying, decomposes: "*wyrm hat gemealt*" (897) ('the hot body of the dragon melted'); cf. Cassiodorus' mid-sixth century commentary on Psalm 148:7, talking of a

dragon as typified by “naturali fervore”); or perhaps the fact that snakes are most often visible to man when they come into the open to drink from a water-source (cf. D.H. Lawrence’s poem on the subject), has suggested their thirstiness and thus their hotness. The dragon tackled by Cadmus seems to have been especially the guardian of a spring sacred to Mars;²² and compare this to Fafnir coming out from his lair to drink in Wagner’s opera *Siegfried*. But there seems no explicit reference to fire-breathing in this classical period, and indeed the attributes of poison and fire would seem incompatible on a (modern) common-sense basis.

There are however occasional hints at possible connections with real fire as opposed to simply heat. Thus a domestic hot-water boiler in the late Roman Empire was known as a *draco*; Typhon, after its defeat by Zeus, was imprisoned under Etna; this same Typhon was described in the Homeric Hymns²³ as ravaging and destroying crops, meadows and woods, something most conveniently achieved by the medium of heat or fire. This association between venom and heat is carried through into or independently present in some later Germanic stories. Thus Saxo²⁴ tells how Frothi attacks a dragon on an island, preparing himself with a shield and clothes of ox hide to afford protection from “the biting venom”, so that he should not “be burnt by the slaver it spews . . . nor the virulence shot from its darting jaws.”



Sigurd killing Fafnir on the door jamb of Hylestad stave church, Norway.

A fuller and indeed earlier version of the story of Cadmus and the dragon than Statius' is found in the *Metamorphoses* Book 3 of Ovid (first century BC). In seeking water for a libation to Jupiter in connection with founding the city of Thebes, Cadmus' companions are attacked (bitten, squeezed to death, or poisoned by deadly breath) by a dragon guarding the spring. It has a golden crest ("cristis praesignis et auro"), eyes glinting with fire, a body swollen with poison, a triple tongue and three rows of teeth. It lives in a cave from which the spring issues. It hisses ("horrendaque sibila") and, when attacked by a hurled rock, the toughness of its iron-like scales and skin protect it. The dragon falls a victim in the end to Cadmus' spear on which it is induced to impale itself, and in its death agonies is shown to be, uncoiled, as tall as a tree or perhaps the mast of a ship ("longa . . . trabe"). With considerable latitude, the description nonetheless is clearly derivable from the attributes of a snake.

We should note also that the serpent-dragon is most often the form found in Germanic illustration: an engraved stone from Uppland, Sweden,²⁵ shows Sigurd attacking Fafnir, who is portrayed as a long snake with a crested head and long, poking-out, triple-ended tongue (cf. three-forked tongue mentioned by both Statius and Ovid and the Old English reference "preo-snaeccc tungan hæfð seo næddre.")²⁶

Similar is the basically snake-like nature of the twelfth century dragon carved in wood as it battles with Sigurd, in the Hylestad Church in Norway (though this has a more mammalian or ferocious head, with a ruff or crest and two ears, and a long tongue with a triple end, and two big upper teeth²⁷). A late eleventh century door-hinge from Staplehurst, Kent shows a limbless dragon, with two wings, a short neck, head with long toothed jaws, and a long tapering tail. Brinsop Church in Herefordshire has a twelfth century tympanum²⁸ showing St George fighting a limbless, wingless, snake-like dragon.

4. *Eaten Alive!*

One cause of terror was the possibility of being swallowed alive by a dragon, based presumably on the way some snakes swallow their prey whole and digest it internally without the need to chew.

There is of course the case of Jonah, swallowed by a whale or sea-monster; in *Jeremiah* ch.51, we find a similar image: "absorbuit me quasi draco, replevit ventrem suum teneritudine mea, et effecit me." ('It absorbed me as a dragon would, filled its inside with my tenderness, and finished me'). More surprisingly, an Attic vase²⁹ shows Jason, apparently unconscious, being vomited from the maw of a giant serpent at the intervention of



Early fifth century Greek cup by the famous painter Douris, depicting Jason being swallowed (or regorged) by the snake.

a goddess, a version of the legend not otherwise known and not much to Jason's credit. In a more easterly form of legend, Indra contends against the dragon Vritra, found in the *Mahabharata* Book 5: Vritra swallows Indra, who can only be released when the gods invented the Yawn.³⁰

A variation on this swallowing theme is found in Book 2 of Gregory's *Dialogues*, later translated into Old English: this tells how an unsettled monk complained and importuned until he got permission to leave the monastery. No sooner was he outside the gates however, than he thought he saw a dragon confronting him with gaping mouth, ready to swallow him up. He had to call the other brothers to help him, and although they assured him there was nothing there, the recalcitrant monk was glad to be taken back into the safety of the monastery.³¹

Similar again is the legend of St Margaret which tells how she was imprisoned for being a Christian, and in her confinement was confronted and in some versions swallowed by a dragon (who here has a satanic role), but was later regurgitated; in other versions it attempted to swallow her but was prevented by the sign of the cross.

I see this widespread phobia as being based in the same Graeco-Roman tradition that gave us the dragon as exaggerated snake. It may also link to the phobia concerning the eating up of the buried Christian body by worms – thus the startling images both of many worms and of one dramatic worm (possibly a dragon?) attacking the dead body in the closing lines of the Exeter Book *Soul & Body*: “rib reafiað reþe wyrmas, drincað hloþum hra, heolfres þurstge... Gifer hatte se wyrm, þam þa geaflas beoð nædle sceapran.” (‘Fierce worms strip the ribs bare, suck at the body in swarms, greedy for blood... Greedy One the worm is called, whose jaws are sharper than a needle.’)³²

5. Dragons & Treasure

The role of the serpent-like dragon is that of a guardian or tutelary spirit in many Greek and Roman examples. One of the earliest, as we have seen is the golden-fleece-guarding dragon that Jason encounters. But there are many other references to dragons and treasure. Other mythological beasts were associated with treasure: the Ladon that Heracles killed was a treasure-guardian, and the griffin or gryphon (a combination of lion and eagle) dug up gold and made nests of it that it then guarded, according to Herodotus.

Other references include:-

Cicero (*In M. Antonium Oratio Philippica*, ca.44 BC): “domini patrimonium circumplexus quasi thesaurum draco” (‘he grasped the inheritance of his master like a dragon its treasure’).

Phædrus (*Fables*³³) in the first century AD has: “draconis speluncam intimam, custodiebat qui thesaurus abditos” (‘the deepest part of the cavern of a dragon who guarded hidden treasure’). The story of this fable is that of a Fox reproving a Dragon for miserliness: a fox digs down through a system of little tunnels to reach the remote cavern of a dragon and there upbraids him: “What reward do you get for this work except loss of sleep and a lot of time passed in darkness?” The dragon replies that indeed he gets little out of it, but that was not the point, for this was the work Jupiter fashioned him for from the beginning. There is therefore a sense of mission in all this, though it becomes degraded into human-like greed; perhaps in such satire we have a comment on the rich capitalists typical of the emergent Roman Empire.

St Augustine also mentions dragons “in speluncis requiescere” (that ‘lie quite in caves’). But Philostratus (writing in Greek, early third century AD of suitable subjects for paintings) places his dragon on an island (cf. the legend in Saxo), though still in an underground den of some kind: “This hill encircled by the sea is the home of a serpent (*drakon*), guardian doubtless of

some rich treasure that lies hidden under the earth. This creature is said to be devoted to gold and whatever golden thing it sees it loves and cherishes; thus the fleece in Colchis and the apples of the Hesperides, since they seemed to be of gold, two serpents that never slept guarded and claimed as their own....”³⁴

Artemidorus (Greek, second century BC) says that to dream of dragons signifies wealth to come.³⁵ Most affecting of all, “there were even some little money-boxes made in the shape of a coiled snake with a coin-slot in its body.”³⁶

But does the dragon guard buried treasure or is it associated at some elemental level with precious ores in the ground, as the griffin? It seems primarily to be a guardian of anything valuable, a sort of tutelary spirit or genius of a particular site, and thence commonly a guardian of treasure. The hibernatory habits of the snake may have given it the appearance of having some special affinity to or mission in a place: it often lives in holes or burrows in the ground; if awoken or provoked, it is liable to be dangerous. So something of this tutelary aspect also may be derived from the natural habits of the snake.

For a wider custodial role for the dragon, support comes from two fifth-century AD texts:

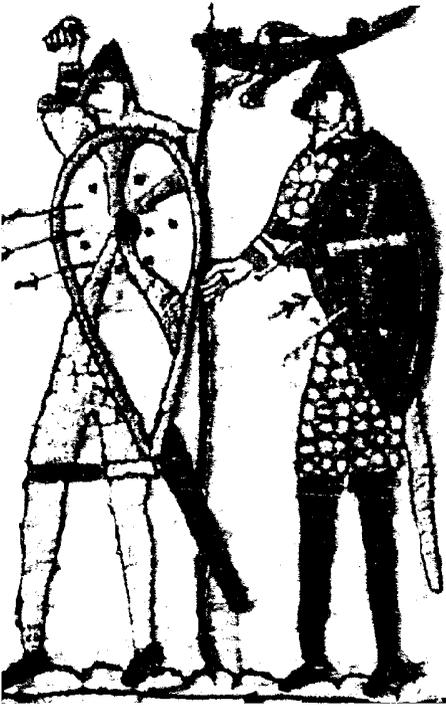
The *Macrobii Convivia* (ca. AD 400): “aedium, adytorum, oraculorum, thesaurorum custodiam dracontibus assignavi” (‘the guardianship of temples, sanctuaries, oracles and treasures I have accorded to dragons’).

Marcus Servius Honoratus (ca. AD 400): “angues aquarum sunt, serpentes terrarum, dracones templorum” (‘sea-snakes are proper to water, serpents to land, dragons to temples’).³⁷

It has even been suggested that the dragon who intervenes between hero and maiden may originally have been guarding some temple and its virgins from outside marauders – which turns the good-and-evil aspect of the dragon-combat rather on its head!

This dragon-guard seems violent only in a defensive role, and this is hard to square with its later use as an aggressive symbol (on war-banners etc.). The classical serpent-dragon, in some of its aspects, seems almost benevolent or useful; certainly quiescent, and the many gold-guarding dragons to be found in Germanic tradition suggest that this image also existed in their folklore or was transferred from Roman lore, perhaps with the name itself, at an early stage, along with the potential for dragon-combat, quite separately from any actively aggressive or fiery or flying image.

King Harold's dragon standard as depicted on the Bayeux tapestry.



6. Dragons & the Dead

As well as guarding treasures and sanctuaries, classical dragons are occasionally associated with the dead and the protection of tombs. Thus Pliny³⁸ says “...in quo specu mane eius custodire draco traditur” (‘in which cave a dragon is said to keep guard over the spirit [of Scipio]’). Cadmus – himself a dragon-slayer – and his wife did not die but, by the intervention of the gods, were transmuted into dragons and transported to the Isle of the Blessed.³⁹ Perhaps here too we should take the legend that Alexander the Great was sired by a dragon.⁴⁰

These are, as far as I know, isolated examples, and may be no more than a transformational fantasy of a type common enough in classical literature and famous in our century through Kafka's short story; but it is interesting as exactly this metamorphosis is typical of Norse beliefs. Greedy men turn into dragons to guard their treasure beyond their expected life-time; e.g. from Iceland: “Hellir the strong was under a waterfall and father and son lay there under the water and sat upon their gold and became flying dragons and had helmets on their heads, and swords under their shoulders and lay there

until Gul-Thorir won the waterfall.”⁴¹ Another well-known example is that of Fafnir, who from long and covetous contact with treasure was likewise transformed into a dragon, as in Wagner’s opera *Siegfried*.

There are similar themes in a number of sagas e.g. *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Barðar Saga*, *Halfdanar Saga Eysteinnssonar*, *Porskfirðinga Saga*.⁴² In a more modern context, there is a legend of a Somerset dragon formed out of the corpses on a battlefield⁴³ – a fearsome concept indeed.⁴⁴

One of the more perceptive comments on the topic in Old English comes from Byrhtferth, the monk of Ramsay Abbey, writing in the early years of the eleventh century: “Hwæt synt þa wyrmas buton lyðre men 7 geflitgeorne 7 Godes fynd 7 heora agenra sawla forwyrd?” (‘What are dragons but depraved men and ones keen for conflict and the enemies of God and their own souls’ destruction?’) This is compatible with the idea of the physical transformation of the (evil) dead person, changing into an otherworld being *within* the grave, rather than in a demarcated hell. H.R. Ellis Davidson⁴⁵ further links this type of belief with the cult of Odin, emerging in the north in the first centuries after Christ, and so as old as or older than dragon as snake-like treasure-guardian, especially if the latter is indeed a borrowing from Rome.

The Viking belief is explained by G.V. Smithers⁴⁶ in terms of “the early Scandinavian conception of ‘the living corpse’. This is due to a view of the human being as having a single indivisible form and substance, and not a spirit or soul as distinct from, and separable from, a body: at death; he occupies the grave, and there is no question of a life of the spirit (as such) elsewhere.” Confusingly, such a motivated corpse is called a *draugr*, though this is said to be related to the same root as ‘to deceive’ and ‘dream’ not to that of ‘dragon’; yet not impossibly, in post-Viking England, there might be some confusion here, and a popular linking of the two traditions, a point of some potential interest when it comes to *Beowulf*.

This afterlife in the grave itself is explained in the following example from the *Eyrbyggja Saga*:

“Thorolf called that mountain Helga Fell and believed that he and his kinsmen would go into it when they died.” (p.41)... “One evening in the autumn... Thorstein’s shepherd... saw the whole north side of the mountain opened up, with great fires burning inside it, and the noise of feasting and clamour over the ale-horns... he was able to make out that Thorstein the Cod-Biter and his crew were being welcomed into the mountain, and that Thorstein was being invited to sit in the place of honour opposite his father.”⁴⁷

A specific reference to a dragon in a tomb comes from a Latin vision of Bishop Eucherius, and concerns the bad reputation of Charles Martel, the Frankish leader, after his death in 741: “Qui [Eucherius] in se reversus,

sanctum Bonifacium et Fulradum monasterii sancti Dionysii abbatem summumque capellanum regis Pippini ad se vocavit, eique talia dicens in signum dedit, ut ad sepulchrum illius irent et, si corpus eius ibidem non invenirent, ea quae dicebat vera esse crederent. Ipsi vero pergentes ad monasterium, ubi corpus Karoli hum-atum fuerat, sepulchrumque illius aperientes, viderunt subito draconem exisse, et totum illud sepulchrum interius inventum est denigratum, acsi fuisset adustum [variant: exustum].⁴⁸

‘Eucherius came to himself [after a vision of Charles Martel’s body being in Hell], and summoned to him Saint Boniface and Fulradus, abbot of the monastery of St Denis and King Pippin’s arch-chaplain, and telling them his vision, suggested as proof that they should go to his tomb and, if they found his body missing, then they should believe what he was asserting. Proceeding to the monastery where Charles’ body was buried, and opening the tomb, they saw a dragon immediately come out, and the rest of the inside of the tomb was found to be blackened, as if it had been burned out.’

Here, the dragon is specifically not the body (which is assumed to be in Hell), yet the association of body and dragon is suggestive, the more so as no Christian or Classical source for such a linkage is apparent.

But the question here is that not only of the relationship of the dragon to the dead, but of its role as a representative of the ‘undead’. Bertram Colgrave, in his notes to *Two Lives of Cuthbert*⁴⁹ remarks that “an incorrupt body... is often regarded in popular tradition with the greatest suspicion”; and examples from all periods of Christian history are assembled in Dudley Wright’s *The Book of Vampires* (New York, 1987).

It is not impossible that the dragon does participate in a sort of vampiric tradition, of which there are hints elsewhere in Old English literature: e.g. the *Beowulf* dragon’s avoidance of daylight; or from *The Wife’s Lament*: “þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge under actreo geond þas eorðscræfe” (‘when I before dawn make my way alone into the earth-cave under the oak-tree’);⁵⁰ and again from the Exeter Book *Soul and Body* poem lines 61–4: “Sceal ic þe nihtes seþeah nyde gesecan, / synnum gesargad, ond eft sona from ðe / hweorfan on honcred, þonne halege menn / gode lifgendum lofsong doð.” (‘Yet by night I must necessarily seek you [the body] out, troubled with sins, and again turn away from you at cockcrow, when holy men make praise to the living God.’) Such night-ranging might not be typical necessarily of evil entities, but could be a facet of the actions of the soul itself which may be deemed to travel out of the body during sleep: “forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreperlocan, min modsefa mid mereflode ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide.” (*Seafarer* 58–60 - ‘therefore my mind now poises over the body, my spirit travels wide over the whale’s domain.’) And from *Alfred’s Boethius*,⁵¹ “Swa eac ure gast biþ swiþe wide farende urum unwillum... þonne we slapað” (‘So too our soul is travelling very widely without our conscious knowledge... when we sleep’).

The point is worth making, I feel, because snakes are not naturally nocturnal: like any other reptile they need warmth and sun to be active, so that the affinity with darkness (typical in fact of all three monsters in *Beowulf*) suggests a particular and separate tradition. For while Germanic and Classical dragons share a treasure-guarding role, the transformation of dead into dragon is unusual in Classical but common in Germanic story, which could mark a basic distinction. Perhaps this is indeed the key to the origin of the Germanic dragon, to which the Classical role of treasure-guard is easily assimilated, as later are the attributes of fire and flying.

7. Legs

Though out of strictly chronological and evolutionary order, we may deal with the matter of legs next. Babylonian ‘Tiamat’, with two forelimbs, has already been noted. A Roman patera in the British Museum⁵² shows a dragon-like sea-monster, snouted, long-eared or horned, long necked, with a bulbous body, two forelimbs, and a long-diminishing coiled tail ending in a triple flourish. This may indicate a continuity in the tradition that we know as a ‘wyvern’.

A wyvern⁵³ is a winged dragon with two feet like those of an eagle, and a serpent-like barbed tail. Something like this is shown in a military standard on the Bayeux Tapestry, where we see a doughty little beast, gripping the pole with its jaws, its body sticking out horizontally with two forelegs, wings and tail. Similar representations are fairly common at that time:⁵⁴ there is the wyvern on the Jedburgh slab; the Kingswinford tympanum of Michael and the Dragon (early twelfth century), with apparent leg and wing; the similar-dated tympanum from Moreton Vallance also with leg and wings; the earlier (ca.1030) tympanum at Southwell, with ruff or crest on its head; the rather lion-like dragon of BL Cotton Tib. C.vi f.16, with ears, hairy or scaly body, two forelimbs, two wings and tapering tail; the (manuscript) Vatican Regin. lat.12 f.108 dragon has both ears and horns (mid-eleventh century); a thirteenth century painting at Wissington Church, Suffolk⁵⁵ has a thick body, one visible leg, bats’ wings, long neck and beaked head. In the *Bamburger Apocalypse* (ca.1000 AD) the illustrations of dragons from the Book of Revelations have snake-like bodies, with two forelimbs and wings,⁵⁶ while by the thirteenth century Harley MS 3244 there is an orange dragon with four limbs, four wings, horns, long serrated tail and breathing fire - which remains a more or less standard image for many centuries to come.⁵⁷

This gaining of legs may be a variant of the dragon proper or a fusion with a slightly different tradition. While the Graeco-Roman dragon, as also



Moreton Vallence tympanum

the dragon in *Beowulf*, is legless, the form with legs becomes increasingly popular and eventually dominates representations in the art of the Middle Ages - possibly as a result of some Eastern influence during the period of the Crusades?

8. Dragon Combat

There are many examples of combat against dragons in Classical literature; sometimes the dragon is the aggressor, sometimes the hero challenges it to obtain some treasure; but perhaps conflict between hero and dragon is inevitable, whichever be blamed for starting it.

Thus Perseus delivers Andromeda, who was staked out as a sacrifice to a sea-monster. Heracles defended Laomedon's daughter Hesione against a *ketos*, also a sea-monster; Zeus tackled the Typhon; Heracles killed the Ladon to gain its treasure; Apollo killed the Python to clear a sacred site; Jason, with Medea's help, overcame the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece; Cadmus killed a dragon to found Thebes; etc.

Such combats may well owe something to Babylonian myth; and are found also in succeeding ages when St George defeated a dragon; and so did St Michael the Archangel (based on the hints in the *Book of Revelations*). From the Zoroastrian tradition of Persia, there is the story of Vrtra (Vritra), a

sort of dragon associated with dryness and drought, who is tackled and killed by Indra. In the Persian *Book of Kings*, mention is made of the dragon-slayers Gushtasp and Rustem, whose stories are perhaps a part of Western dragon lore.⁵⁸ With so many examples, we might be



Kingswinford tympanum



Southwell tympanum.

safer regarding this as a universal theme without any real coherence.

There is one aspect of the Greek legends that stands out, however - that often an innocent human victim is being saved, perhaps stemming from a stage when the Greeks resented such crude rituals as human sacrifice and told stories of victims who fought back – like Theseus against the Minotaur, or who were saved, like Andromeda, or avenged, like Iphigenia by Clytemnestra.

Typical of the medieval combat story is St George, who, if historical at all, seems to have been a figure of the early fourth century AD, reputedly born at Lydda (in Palestine? in Cappadocia?), who encountered his dragon at Silne (Beirut? Sylena in Libya). Cappadocia was a small kingdom in the Near East annexed into the Roman Empire in the first century AD. In Silne the inhabitants sacrificed youths and maidens to an insatiable and hostile dragon who lived in the swamps nearby. Eventually, only the king's daughter was left to sacrifice and, as she faced death, George arrived and confronted the dragon. "Tunc Georgius equum ascendens et cruce se muniens draconem contra se advenientem audaciter aggreditur at lanceam fortiter vibrans et se Deo commendans ipsum graviter vulneravit et ad terram dejecit." ('Then George mounts his horse and arms himself with the sign of the cross and advances bravely on the dragon coming towards him, and brandishing forcefully his lance and commending himself to God inflicted a grievous wound on the dragon and bore it to the ground.')

The popularity of St George as patron saint of England really developed in the reign of Edward III who formed the Order of the Garter in his honour and dedicated the chapel at Windsor to him (1348). Yet the ready acceptance of this hero-saint may also have owed something to the undoubted popularity of the dragon-concept in Anglo-Saxon times and thereafter; and gained some confirmation via Eastern influence through the Crusades.

It is not always an individual but sometimes a community that is to be protected by the hero who challenges the dragon. There is an element of this



in the St George story; *Beowulf* itself is the outstanding example; and there is St Petro (sixth century, Cornwall) who tames a destructive, man-eating dragon.

Dragons may be encountered in Cornwall and Wales, but not so far as I can determine, in Ireland. Is this because St Patrick drove out all snake-kind, or does it indicate that dragon stories only flourished in areas that came into close contact with

Roman secular tradition? I can locate no early references to dragons in Welsh even: in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* of the early ninth century, a legend is mentioned of how a white and a red dragon were seen fighting in the sky in the fifth century, an omen of the eventual expulsion of the Saxons from Britain in the victory of the red dragon of Wales, but there are apparently no references to dragons in the *Gododdin*. Tatlock⁵⁹ indeed notes the scarcity of early Welsh dragons and would attribute all such references to the twelfth century or later.

9. The Flying Dragon

During the centuries of the Roman Empire, there is a major change in the nature of the dragon. He throws off his purely serpent-like origins and gains new attributes, specifically the power of flight and the ability of breathing fire. I will deal with these two aspects separately, for it is not certain that they were added simultaneously. What does accompany the first step, the new power of flight, seems to be the adoption of the dragon as a war-standard in the Roman army.⁶⁰

The earliest portrayal of this is on the column of Trajan in Rome, of the early second century AD. Here is depicted Trajan's victory over the Dacians in the opening years of that century; the Dacians lived just across the lower Danube, in what is now Roumania, and the column shows a foot soldier bearing aloft a banner which streams out horizontally in the form of a scaly and rather fish-like dragon, without legs or wings, and lacking any projec-

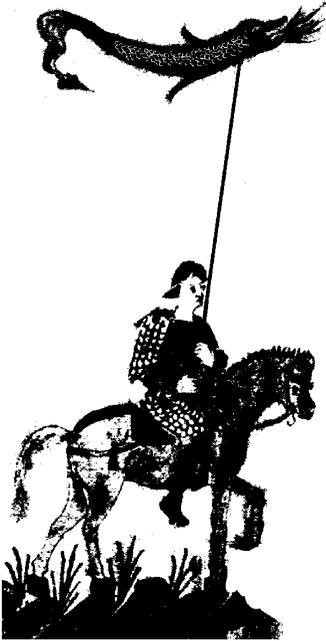
tion from the mouth that could be interpreted as fire, but none the less a fairly acceptable dragon. I impute to this dragon the power of flight, because it is a banner designed to play in the wind, and H.R. Ellis Davidson⁶¹ interprets it as a sort of wind-sock, that is a hollow cloth construction, designed to bellow out in the wind.⁶² Friedrich Wild, in the most perceptive study of dragons of this time currently available, says “Diese bei Indern, Persern, Skythen [,] Parthern und Dakern verwendete Heereszeichen uebernahmen die Roemer von den Parthern oder Dakern und machten es zur Kohortenfahne.”⁶³

The first literary reference comes from a Greek writer, Flavius Arrianus, a friend of the Emperor Hadrian, in the mid-second century AD. He says the dragon standards were Scythian in origin and “made by sewing together scraps of dyed cloth and look like serpents from head to tail... When the horses are urged forward the wind fills them and they swell out so that they look remarkably like live creatures and even hiss in the breeze which the brisk movement sends through them.”⁶⁴ Although visually they resemble the legless, wingless Graeco-Roman dragon, such symbols come from an alien source and fulfil a different role: they are to stream out in the wind when carried by horsemen, and fulfil an exclusively military and aggressive purpose - in Roman terms to unite a cohort and cause awe and terror to the onlooker and even the listener.

It seems, then, that the dragon symbol was adopted at the beginning of the second century AD and slowly spread in favour through the army. In this case we should expect it to play a role in Mithraic mythology, since Mithraism dominated the Roman Army in the second and third centuries AD, but that is not clearly so.⁶⁵ Relatively little survives of Mithraic culture (as a rival to Christianity it was eclipsed with more than usual thoroughness). This is a pity inasmuch as Persian influence might just be a source for the fire-breathing attribute.

By the fourth century the dragon emerges to literary notice, a new interest that may be related to the popularity of symbols in Constantine’s time (cf. the Cross, the Phoenix). It is mentioned by Flavius Renatus Vegetius, Ammianus Marcellinus and Flavius Vopiscus Syracusius in its role of Roman war-symbol, while *draconarius* is the late Latin word for the standard-bearer of a cohort (a tenth of a legion).

Claudian, writing an almost contemporary satire against the acts of Rufinus about the year 400 AD, gives, in his graphic Latin, a fine description of such banners. In *In Rufinum* Book II lines 364–5: “spirisque remissis / mansuescunt varii vento cessante dracones” (‘the multi-coloured dragon-standards sank, their coils relaxing with the decreasing wind.’) Again, in his *Panegyric* on the Sixth Consulship of Honorius, lines 566–8, Claudian pictures a girl looking admiringly at the standards and asking, “Do they but



Dragon war-banner from
the *Golden psalter*.

wave in the air or is theirs a veritable hiss, uttered as they are about to seize an enemy in their jaws?”⁶⁶ Claudian was a pagan, and the dragon-standards clearly part of the Roman pagan tradition; the Christian Prudentius, writing in the late fourth century, is not so admiring of them: in the *Peristephanon* or Stories of the Martyrs, Book I lines 34–6, he talks of Christians refusing to honour such pagan war-symbols, which often indeed received a veneration of almost divine significance that must have been irksome to Christians: “They abandoned Caesar’s ensigns (*vexilla*), choosing the standard (*signum*) of the cross, and in place of the swelling draperies of the serpents (“pro... ventuosus draconum... palliis”) which they used to carry, led the way with the glorious wood which subdued the serpent” (i.e. the Cross).⁶⁷ There is even a possible identification here of the dragon with Satan. In his *Liber Cathemerinon* Book 5, lines 55–6, Prudentius ascribes such dragon standards to Pharaoh’s army in Moses’ times, again probably not a flattering

reference. (Of course one of the earliest references to a serpent ensign is in *Numbers* ch.21 where Moses makes a brass serpent standard to heal the people from a plague initiated by snakes, so its background is not uniformly evil.) On the positive side, Ammianus Marcellinus, also writing in the late fourth century, is more admiring of the tradition; in his *Histories* Book 16 ch.10 para.7, dealing with the triumphant entry of Constantius, the son of Constantine, into Rome in AD 357, he says: “And behind the manifold others that preceded him: he was surrounded by dragons (*dracones*) woven out of purple thread and bound to the golden and jewelled tops of spears, with wide mouths open to the breeze and hence hissing as if roused by anger, and leaving their tails winding in the wind.”⁶⁸ This is clearly a special imperial form of dragon-banner, which confirms the idea of a century or two of assimilation into the Roman Army before the mid-fourth century. Such standards were not rejected by the Christians, it seems, and indeed the veneration later shown to the Cross has almost something of the divinity accorded to Roman legionary standards.

But did this banner-dragon have the power of flight? Its aery role, for the banner was only fully realised when rushing through the air, inclines me to

believe, that though no wings are indicated in the earliest portrayal, this must have been the case. This may be supported by an example of a possible Scythian prototype⁶⁹ which shows crested neck, forelimbs, wings and coiling tail. This image may be related to the words *smoku* (Old Slavonic) and *smakas* (Lithuanian).

The learned St Augustine mentions their power of flight, “sine pedibus... in aerem sustolli perhibentur” (‘without feet... yet they are able to sustain themselves in the air’). In his commentary on Psalm 148, he says: “Dracones circa aquam versantur, de speluncis procedunt, feruntur in aëra, concitatur propter eos aër. Magna quaedam sunt animantia dracones, maiora non sunt super terram.” (‘Dragons are coiled around the ocean, come forth from caverns, are carried through the air and the air is agitated into wind on that account. Dragons are very large beings, there are none greater on the earth.’) Here he seems to be merging the Graceo-Roman cave-dragon with the new banner-dragon.

In the seventh century the Spanish Bishop Isidore in his *Etymologies* Book 18 ch.3 ‘De Signis’ tells us that “The principal signa of the legions are: eagles, dragons and balls... and that the signa of Dragons were instituted by Apollo from his slaying of the serpent Python, and that thereafter it was carried in war by the Greeks and Romans.” This contradicts our picture of their introduction from Dacia and is unlikely to be accurate in view of the lack of corroborative evidence for the early use of a dragon-standard in Greek or Latin literature, but does show how the dragon-standard was accepted by the end of the Roman Empire in the West as a traditional and fairly harmless part of Imperial military regalia; that is, it was not condemned (as banner) through any association with Biblical evil or imperial paganism, but continued in honour, as far as we know, even or perhaps especially in a Christian context.

There are specifically, for example, references to its continued use in the imperial army at Constantinople.⁷⁰ In the West, it appears in a Carolingian MS (of which more later). Hansmartin (1955, p659) associates dragon standards with Vandals and Langobards. Wild⁷¹ notes a dragon-standard as one of symbols of the continental Saxons in Widukind’s tenth century *Res Gestae Saxonicae*, and a golden dragon as the royal symbol of the West Saxon army.⁷² This latter reference is to the Battle of Burford in AD 752, when an advance is led by a West Saxon ealdormann “regis insigne draconem scilicet aureum gerens” (‘carrying the royal and golden dragon symbol’), but comes from Henry of Huntingdon’s much later twelfth century account. Similarly the reference to Uther Pendragon’s connection with the dragon symbol comes only from the twelfth century.⁷³ And, as we have seen, it appears on the Bayeux Tapestry.

It is uncertain whether the flying dragon came into Germanic tradition at the same time as the guardian dragon, or during the period of the Roman Empire at all. There are many winged beasts in Germanic ornamental tradition (e.g. on the Sutton Hoo shield, and later in Anglo-Saxon art, as in the Tanner Bede MS), but these could be entirely different animals, and not strictly relevant to the evolutionary dragon-theme I am concerned with here.

Since the flying- or banner-dragon was known to the Roman army from the second century AD, some transfer into Germanic lore should not be impossible. But there is no reason to assume it did: most Germanic legends about dragons do not include the attribute of flight, but do agree with the standard Graeco-Roman image of the guardian-dragon. Nor is there any archaeological or literary evidence, as far as I am aware, of the use of flying dragon as symbol in fourth to seventh century England. This does not disprove awareness of the flying dragon or dragon banner at this time in England, but does make it more probable that the image had to wait until contact with Roman Christianity was established for this next stage in the dragon's image to be fully appreciated in the Germanic West.

10. *The Fire-Drake*

As noted above, under the snake-like attributes of the dragon, there is no specific reference at any point to fire-breathing. There is some association with heat, perhaps because of a supposed link between the corrosive power of venom and burning – or between dragon and underground fire. A reference to a 'glance like fire' is presumably metaphorical of the deadly powers of the snake (it is also found in Homer's account of Hercules' shield).⁷⁴

The Greeks and Romans did have myths of fire-breathing animals, but they were not dragons (except perhaps the serpents as great as columns, who also breathed fire, in the ultimately Greek-based *Letter of Alexander*). The following references come from the Leipzig *Thesaurus* (s.v. *ignis*) col.293: the horses of Diomedes "spirantes naribus ignem" ('breathing fire through their nostrils'), and the same phrase is also used of the bulls of Colchis. Cacus the thief is described "ore vomens ignis" ('spewing out fire from his mouth'). Even Pegasus is noted as having fiery breath. But references centre on the Chimaera.⁷⁵ It is the Chimaera that is found "efflantem...ignis" ('blowing out... fire') and Lucretius (perhaps after Homer) twice notes the Chimaera as emitting fire: "ore foras acrem flare[t] de corpore flammam" and "flammam taetro spirantis ore".⁷⁶ This chimaera comes from the Greek *chimaira* for 'goat', and is described by Lucretius as being in its foreparts a lion, in its rear a dragon; by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 9.647 as having the

chest and muzzle of a lion and the tail of a serpent; in another gloss as having the foreparts of a lion, the middle parts of a goat, and the rear parts of a dragon. This could be taken to produce a wyvern-like dragon figure, but some interpret the chimaera as being a double-ended beast, with a lion's head one end and a dragon's head the other. The chimaera is a beast that became involved in combat – Bellerophon is credited with slaying it; and it becomes a byword for the fabulous or impossible.⁷⁷

The first literary references to a fire-breathing dragon (Martianus Capella of Carthage, around AD 500, and Blossius Æmilius Dracontius, late fifth century AD, also from Carthage) significantly lag behind references to the flying dragon or dragon standard. We cannot therefore be certain whether fire was inherent in the banner-dragon but not explicit till later or whether fire was an input from another source. It could, for example, be simply a transfer from the nature of the Chimaera or some other mythical beast, or a fusion with such. Or it could have come from without the Empire, as did apparently the flying dragon, but at another time e.g. via Persian legend through Mithraic influence in the Roman army. Possibly it could be reinforced in the Eastern Empire (where legends like those of SS Margaret and George seem to originate) by the development of Greek Fire, a primitive explosive, used in the middle of the seventh century in Byzantium, and fueling flame-throwing tubes by the ninth century⁷⁸ – the later Renaissance canon was often cast in the form of a dragon, and thence we get the later term of dragoons. In fact, the use of petrol was known in the early centuries AD in the Roman Empire and, by the sixth century, mixtures of sulphur, bitumen and naphtha were being used as incendiary weapons by the Persians (might this explain the meal Daniel gives the dragon, noted below per Ælfric?)⁷⁹

Yet a further possibility is that fire was a Christian input, from association of the dragon with Satan and the fires of Hell e.g. *Apoc.* XII.3 mentions a 'draco magnus rufus' with seven heads as an adversary of God's cause; and a volcano (as associated with the Typhon) might be considered an entrance to Hell. And there is one early Christian context, in the use of the word *flammivolus* ('flying with fire') in Arator's *De Actibus Apostolorum* 2, 531, of the mid-sixth century AD.

It is useful therefore to establish what sort of context Martianus Capella and Dracontius mentioned fiery dragons in. Dracontius was a Christian, whose poems nonetheless abounded in Classical mythical allusions. In his poem *Satisfactio*, the reference is functional in a simile: "despicit et talpas flammeus ore draco" ('and the dragon fiery of mouth is contemptuous of moles'), though the Leipzig *Thesaurus* also provides a reference to Dracontius talking of a "draco... evomens venenum" - that is, a more traditional poison-spitting dragon.

Martianus Capella wrote his *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* before AD 439. It is a master-piece of debased Classical learning, with apparently Mithraic leanings, in which in Book One, in the section on Saturn and Ops, mention is made of “*flammivomum quendam draconem, caudae suae ultima devorantem*” – that is, spitting out fire, something not easy to do if one is biting one’s own tail at the same time. The epithet may thus be conventional, or could be associated with the Mithraic mythology that occupies Book Two of the poem, where a journey through the spheres of heaven is undertaken, perhaps providing a link with astronomical fire?

Further West, an important depiction of such a fiery dragon is in the Golden Psalter of St Gall,⁸⁰ dating from AD ca.900. This MS includes a series of pictures on the history of David, with one⁸¹ showing apparently contemporary mounted soldiers, with chain-mail and stirrups, carrying a banner in which a rather carp-like dragon in the tradition of Roman *signa* is shown, with no limbs but with two wing-like appendages, a tail ending in a spade-like knob, and forward from its mouth there are flickering lines emerging whose branchy frond-like nature may be fairly interpreted as flames.⁸²

I am not capable of asserting the source of the illustrations, though I will say tentatively that the style of the art seems in keeping with that Classical admiration typical of Charlemagne’s own culture, and in line with late-Antique or Byzantine originals. A curiosity here is that the soldiers in the MS are depicted in apparently contemporary armour, for example, on horseback with stirrups. Lynn White (1962, pp20, 27) notes that stirrups originated with the Bulgars or Avars, reaching the Eastern Empire about AD 600 and the Franks by the early eighth century. Such a representation could not thus be a copy of an antique MS from the Roman Empire, unless heavily adapted, but could originate in either the Eastern or Carolingian Empire in the post-Classical period. Lynn White assumes the Franks of the eighth century are the technical innovators in warfare rather than the Byzantines. But in the matter of the fiery dragon it is not impossible that this is something Byzantium inherited from the army of the Roman Empire (or indeed developed itself) and transmitted to Western Europe. Of Charlemagne himself it is noted that he followed classical Roman military tradition in taking impedimenta with him and building permanent or temporary camps (*castra*) on his expeditions; and that his library contained a number of Roman military works e.g. Tacitus and Caesar;⁸³ his imperial aspirations are well known, and the dragon of the Emperors might well have appealed to Charlemagne as a symbol. It is also noted that Clovis had absorbed many Roman troops into his army (e.g. the army of General Syagrius) and was keen on enlisting Gallo-Roman soldiers, so here is a possible alternative earlier route of transfer.⁸⁴

Some further hints of possible dissemination may be gained from the lives of those saints who have associations with fiery dragons, deriving from the Eastern part of the Empire. We have noted above the legend of St George from the Middle East. St Margaret is said to have lived in the third century, and became popular in Greece and the East in the fourth century, being declared apochryphal by Pope Gelasius in 494 to little effect. Her first appearance in the West seems to be in the *Martyrology* of Rhabanus Maurus,⁸⁵ which has a brief mention of the dragon but not of any fire. A Latin life with fire is printed from the eleventh century MS Harley 5327 ff.1–34b by Bruno Assmann⁸⁶ where the dragon appears in ch.12: “Et ecce subito de angulo carceris exivit draco horribilis totus variis coloribus, deauratis capillie, et barbae eius aureae videbantur, dentes eius farrei. Oculi eius velut margaritae splendebant. De naribus eius ignis et fumus exibant... factum est lumen in carcere ab igne, qui exibat de ore draconis.”

In Old English⁸⁷ this became: “And hit þa færna gewearð sona æfter þam, þæt þær inn eode an grislic deofol; his nama wæs Ruffus. And he wæs swiðe mycel on dracan heowe and eall he wæs nædderfah. And of his topan leome ofstod, eal swa of hwiten swurde, and of his eagan swilces fyres lyg and of his nasþylum smec and fyr ormæte mycel; and his tunge þreowe his sweore gelygde.” (‘And suddenly soon after that it happened that a grisly devil entered, whose name was Rufus. He was very large and of a dragon’s appearance and spotted like a snake. And from his teeth fire emerged, as from a shining sword, and from his eyes also came the flame of fire and from his nostrils smoke and great fire, and his three tongues extended down to his neck.’)

In the case of St Michael, J. E. Cross (1986) notes that the legend of this saint is unlikely to have entered collections of saints’ lives before the 820s, with the first surviving MS of the tenth century. This dragon is described in Latin as follows⁸⁸ “draco enim ingens mirae magnitudinis, montem quendam altum occupans in illis regionibus uenit, cuius flatus flaminosus quantoscumque in giro suo tangi potuisset omnes interficiebat.” (‘For a huge dragon of marvellous size came to occupy a high mountain in that area; its fiery breath destroyed everyone that it could reach at around it.’). I have no note of a specifically eastern source for the cult of St Michael, but that does seem the likeliest area for the development of such saints’ legends, in view of their later transmission to the West.

To recapitulate, the fieriness of the dragon could have been part of the flying dragon symbology, and cultivated within the Roman Army. If so, it was implicit in the banner-dragon derived from Dacia. Or it might have been developed within the Roman Army from Mithraic sources, though the evidence for that is far from clear. Alternatively, it may have fused with traditions of Graeco-Roman fire-breathing monsters, with the aim of in-

creasing its horrific impact, which seems a viable motive for this increase in scope within a military sphere. A further possibility (considered in the next chapter) is that the biblical Satan, associated with fiery hell, was the (Christian) source for or a confirming element in this attribute.

Of the possible routes from Rome to north-west Europe, either by direct contact in Gaul, or from the Roman Army to Christian Byzantium and thence again to the Carolingian West, either militarily, or through literature or Christianity, there is perhaps some evidence that Charlemagne and the Franks may have provided the link, reviving or continuing a specifically imperial symbol in the interests of their own status.

But it also possible that fire develops as a concomitant of flying, for those things which are most obvious in the sky are fiery astronomical bodies, and there was a constellation already known in the classical period as Draco. The Phoenix in the Old English poem of that name is presented rather like a comet, attracting people's wonder and amazement, in lines 331-340 of the poem, which I cannot trace in the Latin original of Lactantius. A similar striking image occurs in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for AD 793, (in versions D, E and F, but not A, suggesting a non-West Saxon origin for the entry):

“In this year terrible portents appeared in Northumbria, and miserably afflicted the inhabit-ants: these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and soon followed a great famine, and after that in the same year the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.”⁸⁹

Any unusual meteorological portent was liable to mean something special or disastrous, and in this case the disaster was considerable – the arrival of the Vikings in force and the sacking of the monastery at Lindisfarne. The source of this entry is thought to be a lost set of Northern annals, dubbed the *Gesta Veterum Northan-hymbrorum*, compiled around AD 800, which was incorporated into the main Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tradition around AD 900. Assuming the imagery to be part of the original entry, this reference to a fiery dragon must be the earliest dateable one in Old English texts, and plausibly refers to an exhibition of the northern lights, whose flashes could well be compared to the activity of flying fiery dragons, at least by the imaginative.

I therefore include some notes on these northern lights:

“A folio of ‘Apparitions and Wonders’, preserved in the British Museum, records that at Durham, on the 27th of September, 1705, when the evening sky was serene and full of stars, a strange and prodigious light spread over its North-Western quarter, as if the sun itself was shining; then came streamers, which turned to armed men, ranked on horseback. This may be accounted for on the supposition that it was an extraordinary display

of the Aurora Borealis, or ‘merry dancers’. That beautiful phenomenon is still known in the ‘North Country’ as ‘the Derwentwater lights’, in consequence of their having been particularly red and vivid at the time of the unfortunate last Earl’s execution. Myriads of fighting men were seen in the sky, night after night throughout the county of Durham, before the French revolution.”

William Brockie *Legends & Superstitions of the County of Durham*
(Sunderland 1886) p177

“Warm and placid was the last night but one of that September. Away from the city lights, where Nature brooded solemnly silent, a mystical glow suffused the northern horizon long after the sun had departed. Towards eight o’clock a clearly defined luminous arch could be seen stretching from N.E. to N.W., with its crown some fifteen degrees above the sky-line. It was like a star-surmounted silver portal that led to the region of eternal ice and snow.

“Barely had I time to remark upon the beauty of the same, when an auroral ray shot up over Arcturus in the north-west to level with Corona Borealis. It had no tint; merely duskily luminous against the greater luminosity on which it was projected. Then other rays darted upward under the Great Bear, whose gigantic figure was feet down toward the horizon...

“Shortly before nine o’clock a fan-shaped series of streamers appeared under the western side of Bootes and the tail of the Bear. One inexpressibly beautiful beam immersed Cor Caroli, which almost had its light extinguished.

“For nearly an hour afterwards the northern sky remained quiescent. Yet there was still that fascinating, mystical flow...”

Joseph H. Elgie *Star and Weather Gossip* (London und. ca. 1915) p602
re Middlesbrough

Again:

“While the possibilities are infinite, a typical aurora might develop in something like the following way: The night is moonless, dark, cold, and clear. At first, one sees only a simple, broad white arc in the northern sky with a smooth lower edge, its ends never touching the earth. The lower border then develops folds and kinks, and colors now show themselves, turning the silent glow from white to yellow, green, or red. The once-tranquil arc begins to pulse and becomes irregular in shape. With luck, the observer, by now completely enchanted, might see the magnificent ‘corona’, which appears like streams of rippling light spreading out from a common centre high overhead.”

[Zajonc, 1993, pp240–241]

Finally, in the Old English *Finnsburg Fragment*, of uncertain date, a night-time blaze is described as not being a dragon (“ne her draca ne

fleogeð”), which indicates both familiarity with the attributes of the dragon and a firm association between dragons and light in the sky. Whether this type of portrayal is a separate astronomical tradition or a rationalisation of the flying, fiery war-like dragon it would be hard to say, but it is curious that some of clearest evidence for this aspect of dragon-kind should come from Anglo-Saxon texts.

11. Dragon as Satan

The dragon – or a legendary beast later translated as dragon – appears occasionally in the Old Testament, though we are also reminded there (*Ps.* 103.25) that even so baneful an entity as the dragon is a creation of God. Satan is also present in the Old Testament, and as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, may seem to already have a distinctly dragon-like caste.⁹⁰ But it is not till the end of the New Testament that the equation is specifically made: *Revelations* 12:9 connects them: “the great dragon... that ancient serpent that was called the Devil” – and that was formerly cast out of heaven i.e. Lucifer.

The equation was known and is often mentioned in Old English literature: “Deofol” and “draca egeslice” are found in apposition in the verse *Solomon & Saturn* line 25. Ælfric notes⁹¹ that “we rædað on bocum þæt se reða feond come swilce egeslic draca”; and in Ælfric’s *Lives of the Saints* 24 (Michael) “þis is se halga heahengel, Sanctus Michael, se ðe ær þisse worulde ende ofslihð þone ealdan feond þæt is se micla draca se ðe æt frymðe middangardes gesceapan wæs to ðam beorhtestan engle.”⁹² The *Apocalypse of Thomas* records the notion that the Devil would be chained a thousand years: “Se ytemesta draca, þæt is þæt ealdordeoful, se lihð gebunden onbecling mid raceteage reades fyres, to tacne Cristes rode, in hellegrunde.”⁹³ (Stretching the physical contours of the reptile-like dragon a little.)

We need to note here Thomas Hill’s article “Satan’s Fiery Speech: ‘Christ and Satan’ 78–9” in *Notes & Queries* 1972 pp.2–4. This relates to the Old English poem where Satan ‘sparked with fire and poison when he started speaking’ – I immediately think of the dragon in terms of the combination of fire and poison. But in the article Hill cites the editor of the poem, M.D. Clubb⁹⁴ as listing some possible Biblical sources for fiery speech: *Jer.* 5:14 “Ecce ego de verba mea in ore tuo in ignem, et populum istud in ligna et vorabit eos”; *Ecclus.* 48:1 “Et surrexit Elias propheta, quasi ignis, et verbum ipsius quasi facula ardebat”; *4 Esdras* 13:110 “Quoniam emisit de ore suo sicut flatum ignis, et de labiis eius spiritus flammae, et de

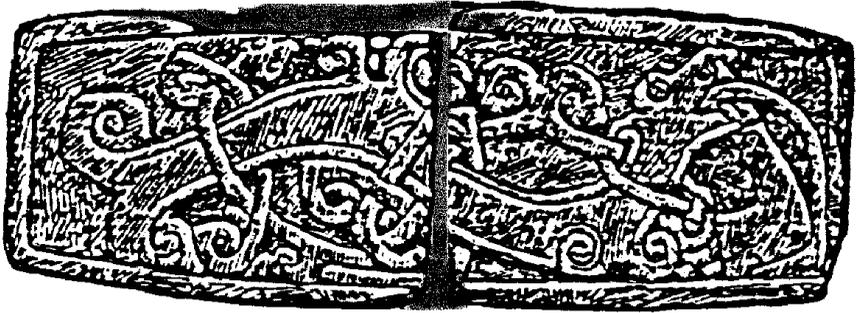
lingua eius emittebat scintillas et tempestates”; *Rev.* 11:5 “Et si quis voluerit eis nocere, ignis exiet de ore eorum et devorabit inimicos eorum”. The problems with these images, of course, as Hill realises, is that they all apply to good guys, and fire is almost equivalent to the power of prophecy or the spirit of God. He therefore cites a more apt parallel from the apocryphal *Visio Pauli*, where the fallen angels in Hell are described as follows: “... quorum vultus plenus erat furore et dentes eorum extra os eminentes; oculi eorum fulgebant ut stella matutina orientis, et de capillis capitis eorum scintille ignis exiebant, sive de ore eorum.”⁹⁵ And further, a description of Astaroth that occurs in the *Old English Martyrology*,⁹⁶ whose “eagan wæron swylce fyren iren, ond him sprungon spearcan of þam muðe, ond ful rec him eode of þæm næsþyrlum”. In both these cases, it seems to me unsure whether some Christian symbology is developed that may well have influenced the concept of dragon, or whether the Christians have taken advantage of the spectacular attributes already developed for the dragon. (Might the wings of a dragon equate with the wings of a fallen angel?)

The military tradition of the dragon and the aggressive nature of his added powers suggests the fusion between flying and fire could well have been made in the Roman Army later in the Classical period; but the association may have confirmed or been confirmed by Christian traditions of Satan and fire; and in turn may well have influenced Christian hagiographical writing.

12. Anglo-Saxon Dragons

The dragon may not have been primarily an image of Satan in either folkic or Christian art during the first millennium AD. Myres, in his survey of pagan Anglo-Saxon pottery (1977), includes many illustrations of alleged dragon symbols on funerary pots; but they prove to be S-like squiggles of single, double or triple line, capable of varied interpretation. There is a similar lack of definition about the often partial mythical beasts decorating Anglo-Saxon MSS including gospel books; and we are told that dragons served as (Christian) war banners in Wessex and elsewhere. The dragon of course is a major element in *Beowulf*, but without it ever being asserted that the dragon is equivalent with Satan; if the poet was aware of the connection he ignored it, wishing neither to imply that Beowulf could overcome the Devil nor that the Devil defeated Beowulf: his dragon is terrifying and perhaps evil, but never demoniacal.

Some of the earliest recorded references are in the work of Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury, whose verse *De Virginitate* was written about AD 700.⁹⁷ There are some 19 mentions of the word ‘dragon’ in the long poem,

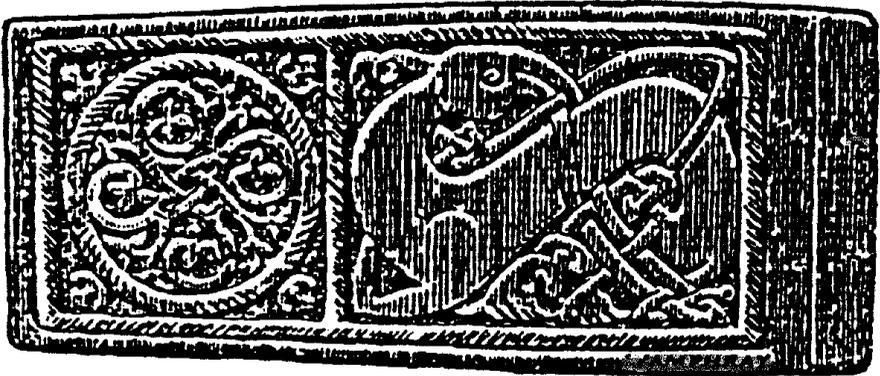


Anglo-Scandinavian tomb slab from Levisham, Yorkshire.

which covers many accounts of the bravery of female saints. Favoured adjectives are *squamigerus* ('scaly') line 545, the related *squamosa* line 2402; and *funestus* ('dire, mournful') lines 545, 2385. There are references to the dragon's breath: *funesto flamine spirans* (line 545) – 'breathing a dire blast'; but the direness of it seems not to be heat but poison, as in other references at line 552 (*morbida pestiferi. . . flabra draconis* – 'the unwholesome breaths or blasts of the disease-spreading dragon'), lines 1308–9 (*draconis atra venena* – 'the dragon's foul poisons'), and lines 2395–6 (*draco funestus ructabat flamina ventis limpida letiferis corrumpens aera venenis* – 'the dire dragon belched out clear blasts of deadly wind, polluting the air with poison'). I can find no references to flying or to fiery breath, indeed, Aldhelm's dragon is once dubbed *serpens* i.e. serpent or snake-like.

It must be clear here that either Aldhelm or the sources of saints lives (presumably martyrologies) Aldhelm used did not recognise the latest developments in the dragon image, for were they absent from the source but known in England anyway, Aldhelm would surely have felt justified in including a little extra vivid imagery in his Latin verse. The probability is that the fiery flying attributes were not present in England in AD 700, but were appreciated by AD 800 (see above, re *Chronicle*). The likeliest route of change becomes the Carolingian Renaissance. Further this means that while the word *draca* and the treasure-guarding nature of the beast certainly had its parallels on the continent in previous centuries, fire and flying were not appreciated at the same time in the Germanic West.

In the (as yet undated) poem *Beowulf*, the dragon is arguably a function of the plot - the only way a climax could be provided to the crescendo of the two previous fights: a fight with a monster, a second with another but underwater - for how could this be capped but by invoking the dragon, as the ultimate symbol of the powerful and inimical? Of which Ælfric notes: "Hwæt is betwux fiþerfotum reþre þonne leo? oððe hwæt is wælhreowre betwux næddercynne þonne draca?"⁹⁸ Perhaps *Beowulf* might have ended up fighting a further variant of Grendel in the hands of a lesser poet, but to pitch



Anglo-Norse beast from Wamphray, Dumfriesshire.

him against a dragon seems the true and convincing climax. He is almost inadequate to the task, but this is never attributed to his opponent being the Devil himself.⁹⁹

Ælfric, who notes the elephant as the largest of land animals, also notes that this elephant can live to be 300 years old. Is it a coincidence that this is the same number of years that the dragon enjoys the treasure in *Beowulf*? (But note the phrase “eald uhtsceaða” ‘old dawn-raider’, *Beowulf* line 2271, suggesting the dragon could already be old before commencing his 300-year occupation of the mound.) In another passage, in his *Sermo de Falsis Deis*, Ælfric tells the story of how Daniel destroyed a dragon by feeding it pitch and fat, so it exploded. Despite this attempt to reassure, the dragon has become in the Anglo-Saxon period a symbol of almost grotesque power and quasi-immortal endurance. Though applied bitterly to the role of signalling the danger of the coming Viking raids, might not this image more justly reflect the state itself - especially the new emperor-centred Carolingian rule, or indeed the post-Viking renaissance of Wessex?¹⁰⁰

Though power may be an obvious feature of the total image of the developed dragon, it surely remains a composite being, evolving slowly to its full nature. The variety of contributory images I see as going back to two (or more) underlying prototypes of dragon-kind: one earth-fast, the guardian, who is associated with gold, passivity, longevity, poison, and perhaps even wisdom; and the other aggressive and war-like, a flier and destroyer, fiery, and a suitable theme for battle-standards (and perhaps suggesting a further association, with Satan). These two traditions may have fused in the fourth or fifth centuries, but with some delay in their transmission to the Germanic realms. If I have assessed the evidence from Aldhelm correctly, this transfer had not occurred by 700, but probably had by 800. If so, then the composition of *Beowulf* should not be sought before the ninth century,

and as others have argued, might well suit the early tenth century. Indeed it could be a fairly novel feature of *Beowulf* that the diverse forms of the dragon – treasure guarder and fiery flyer – are presented simultaneously, not without some contradiction perhaps, or at least some inconsistency, in terms of detail. It is a point that requires rather closer attention.

13. *The Beowulf Dragon*

The dragon in *Beowulf* occupies centre-stage in the third part of the poem, as a climax to the two preceding combats the hero of the poem has faced, providing a new, exciting, and as it proves, fatal, challenge. That very fatality is, to a structural cynic, an element in heightening and concluding the plot.

The dragon is clearly the enemy and the *Beowulf* poet is not in any sense sympathetic towards it. He calls it “nacod niðdraca” (2273) (‘naked and violent or dangerous dragon’; Swanton translates *nacod* as ‘smooth-skinned’), “weard unhiore” (2413) (‘unnatural guardian’), “aglæcean” (2534) (‘monster’), “atol inwitgæst” (2670) (‘horrendous and malicious invader’); it is evil, therefore, though nowhere given Satanic or demoniacal attributes.

In terms of elements, it is associated with the earth and the air (perhaps contradictorily), and of course fire, but not with water, except in that hot water issues from its mound; it is named as *eorðdraca* – ‘earth-dragon’ (2825), but also as *legdraca* and *fyrdraca*.

The size of the dragon is clearly announced by the poet: in lines 3041–3: “grimlic gryrefah, gledum beswæled, se wæs fiftiges fotgemearces lang on legere” (‘horribly mottled, scorched by fire, it was fifty feet long as it lay’). This stunning statistic is reserved for nearly the end of the dragon episode, when one may imagine, as it were, the more curious of the Geats uncoiling the dead dragon and pacing its length out, tip to tail. An exact measurement is perhaps a gesture of verisimilitude, and of course seals Beowulf’s (posthumous) reputation in showing how tremendous a monster he had tackled.

Nowhere in *Beowulf* are we told that the dragon had legs or a large leg-compatible body or even wings: it simply flies; on land, it “stonc ða æfter stane” (2286), where *stonc* seems to mean ‘moved rapidly or leapt’, perhaps a sort of uneven heaving motion (or zigzagging?) appropriate to a serpent.

It is described as being coiled, looped or arched, all like a snake. Hence *hringbogan* (2561), a compound of ‘ring’ and ‘bow’ or ‘arch’; line 2827 has “wyrm wohbogan” - ‘reptile mis-coiled’ or ‘crooked’; “gewat ða byrnende

gebogen scriðan” (2569) (‘then burning it went away, gliding all looped-up’); “se wyrm gebeah snude tosomne, he on searwum bad” (2567–7) (‘the reptile coiled itself swiftly together; it waited in its armour’). *Searwum* here seems to mean a defensive device or armour, suggesting reptilian scales (though an adverbial sense, ‘craftily’ is not impossible). Whether these scales were naturally multicoloured (*gryrefah*, line 3041, like the multicoloured Phoenix or Panther in Old English poems), or are simply discoloured by the effects of its own fire, during the fight, we can hardly tell.

In the above examples, you will note that I have translated Old English *wyrm* as ‘reptile’ rather than as ‘worm’ or ‘serpent’; bearing in mind that the Anglo-Saxons did not classify nature rigidly like Linnæus, *wyrm* (and *wyrmcynn*) may seem useful general words in Old English, covering anything non-mammal-like, from small insect to giant serpent.

The *Beowulf* dragon probably had something like teeth: lines 2691–2 “heals ealne ymbefeng biteran banum”, where it grips the whole of Beowulf’s neck “with cruel bones”; these are probably teeth or fangs, as Beowulf is later found to have a poisonous wound which can only be attributed to a bite.

Though worm-kind does not, I think, possess ears as external projections, the dragon can certainly hear: he is roused by Beowulf’s challenge - “hordweard oncniof mannes reorde” (2554–5) (‘treasure-guardian recognised the human’s voice’) though he is not credited with understanding human speech or differentiating Beowulf’s voice as such.

In terms of intelligence, the dragon is elsewhere called “wintrum frod” (line 2277) (‘wise in age’) but this may be a conventional epithet. It is also used in the Cotton Maxims: “Draca sceal on hlæwe, / frod, frætwum wlanc” (‘the dragon belongs in a burial mound, wise, proud in its treasures’) – not something found in classical sources, so perhaps an attribute of dragon as identified with longevity or even the dead?

What Beowulf’s dragon does not do is make any noise; it is as silent as a phantom, unlike the *hwistlung* of snakes in the *Letter of Alexander* or the terrifying hissing of Jason’s dragon; or indeed the inanimate whistling of the dragon-banners. Indeed, the absence of Classical features like whistling or the triple tongue might of itself call into question the likelihood of any direct Latin source for the *Beowulf* dragon.

Perhaps the clearest attribute of the dragon in the poem is its nocturnal habits – something it shares with Grendel’s kind but not with reptiles as a class. Indeed, the dragon is introduced with the words “oð ðæt an ongan deorcum nihtum draca ricsian” (2210–11) (‘until there began on dark nights one beast, a dragon, to show its power.’) ‘Dark nights’ may even imply that strong moonlight disturbed it. It is at any rate only truly active at night: “nihtes fleoged, fyre befangen” (2273–4) - ‘it flies at night, engrossed in

fire' which surely has something of the comet about it (and comets, like shooting stars, are best observed on moonless nights). When it wants to get out and avenge the theft, "hordweard onbad earfoðlice oð ðæt æfen cwom" (2302–3) ('treasure-keeper waited with difficulty until evening arrived') and "hord eft gesceat, dryhtsele dyrnne, ær dæges hwile" (2319–20) ('back to the treasure it dashed, its secret lordly hall, before day-time') – not surely because it feared attack in daylight, it was too strong for that, but rather as though some sort of vampiric spell held it from appearing before the sun. And yet the last combat is apparently in broad daylight; perhaps this is deliberate on Beowulf's part, rather like tackling Dracula's coffin in the day-time. This nocturnalism is not noted as an attribute of the Classical dragon; it derives either from fusion with the *draugr*-concept of life in the grave or possibly from the tradition of dragon flying comet-like through the sky.¹⁰¹

The dragon can also be found, and perhaps is even more terrifying, in the period just before dawn, presumably on its home-journey: "eald uhtsceaða" (2271), "ealdes uhtflogan" (2760); *uht* in Old English is not one of the recognised divisions of the night listed by Ælfric or Byrhtferð, but is appropriately glossed by Bosworth and Toller as "the last part of the night, the time just before daybreak", a particularly cold and soul-questioning (even suicidal) era, if you have ever got up so early or stayed up so late.

The dragon's fire is primarily associated with his night-flying – "Ac mid bæle for, fyre gefysed" – 'but with flame he moved, enthused by fire'; indeed, it could be mentioned then primarily for its effect, since it is only at night that his fire would show to real effect.

The fire or heat is associated with the animal's breathing: compare "hreðer æðme weoll, niwan stefne" (2593–4) ('its chest swole in respiration with a new breath') with "lig yðum for" (2672) ('the fire travelled in waves') which suggests the pulse of breath. But the dragon is also associated, like many snakes, with poison: in line 2839 we have "attorsceaðan oreðe" ('the poisonous thug's breath'), suggesting that it is not just fire that makes the dragon's breath dangerous but a element of poison too. Such poison could be inherent in the air he breathed out, much as contagions were attributed in old days to marshy or foul air; or it could specifically imply his saliva. The phrase "wearp wælfyre" (2582) ('he cast forth deadly fire') and "ða se gæst ongan gledum spiwan" (2312) ('Then the enemy began to spit out with flames') and "wide sprungon hildeleoman" (2582–3) ('widely sprung up battle-fires') though concerned more with fire, suggest the sort of coverage achieved by a practised spitter; his breath is described also as "oruð... hat hildeswat" (2557–8) ('a hot exudation of battle'). Fire and poison would seem to be contradictory attributes, one physically the other chemically destructive; it makes better sense in terms of multiple origin: the

dragon-guard is serpent-based and poisonous, the dragon-warrior the totally mythical fire-breather.

The dragon has something of the predator or hunter in him, “Hordweard sohte, georne ofer grunde; wolde guman findan” (2293–4) (‘The treasure-keeper sought round eagerly on the ground; he wanted to find the thief’). When the dragon emerges from his lair, he casts about for scent rather like a dog:¹⁰² “hlæw oft ymbehwearf ealne utanweardne” (2296–7) (‘time and again he circled all the outside of the mound’) and (2288–9) “stearcheort onfand feondes fotlast” (‘the stout-hearted one discovered his enemy’s footprints’).

The battle-anger or aggression of the dragon could be based on human or animal pattern: he is physically strong, *eacencræftig* (2280), and brave, *stearcheort* (2288); he is “hat 7 hreoh-mod” (2296) (‘hot and fierce-minded’); he glories in war: “hwæðre wiges gefeh, beaduwe weorces” (2298–9) (in the ‘battle-work’); and “ða wæs hringbogan heorte gefysed sæcce to seceanne” (2561–2) (‘then was the ring-coiled one’s heart roused to seek trouble’). Recognizing the theft, “he gebolgen wæs” (2220) (‘he was enraged’) even though the theft was not entirely deliberate or culpable (2221–6), nor the treasure properly his except by finding; and of course exacts a terrible retribution. These seem in these emotions characteristics that imply a deliberate measure of humanisation (in line with dragon as associated with the dead?) and certainly a new element in the dragon’s evolution.

To summarise, the dragon in *Beowulf* is basically a guard-dragon of the Graeco-Roman type, an earth-dweller, looking after gold, and with many snake or serpent-like attributes. But in other passages he is aggressive, a warrior, a flier and destroyer, and the master of fire: this image is the one appropriate to the Roman war-standard or later. I feel the two aspects are not fully merged in the poem: the fire has little structural plot significance; it assists the dragon as a wide-scale ravager and hampers Beowulf in the final combat, but Beowulf would have had to tackle the dragon however it made its resentment known, and dies seemingly from poison not from heat as such.¹⁰³ The story-line of *Beowulf* could have been much the same if the dragon could not fly or breathe fire. It seems to me, therefore, that the basic story on which the episode is based is a combat-story based on the dragon as treasure-guarder. To this is added, with good effect, the startling attributes that gathered round the dragon in the later Roman Empire but which may not have been more widely distributed until as late as the Carolingian Age. I do not by this mean to imply that the extra attributes are in any sense interpolations in the poem; they are functional to demonstrating the power of the dragon, but even so highlighted in particular episodes as suits the poet and the plot at that moment.

Had a fusion of these two traditions occurred before the date of the poem's composition? Or was the poet consciously using a variety of traditions, some perhaps fairly new to North-Western Europe, to achieve this awe-inspiring effect? We know of no precedent for the sort of dragon portrayed in *Beowulf*, for the Roman military dragon-banner was purely a war symbol, not associated with passive guardianship underground. The same applies to the limited references in the *Chronicle*, or the *Phoenix* and *Finnsburh* references. They are one strand of dragon attributes only.

In terms of sources, the poet did not need to know Ovid or any other classical account;¹⁰⁴ the dragon-combat could have come entirely from Germanic legends where versions of such encounters had been developed for centuries (but without, as far as I am aware, involving flying or fire). The fire element seems to have come from Roman/Byzantine/Carolingian/Christian tradition, and may well have been fairly novel in England when the poem was composed.

14. *The Hoard*

What then of the hoard the dragon is guarding? We are given something of its history: it was deposited by the dying leader or leaders of some heathen race (line 2216) who constructed the mound apparently on purpose to hold it (2233+); later in the poem, in a sort of flash-back, we are told that these first depositors cursed the treasure they buried (ca.3070).

We do not know who hid it, but something of the time-scale is apparent. The dragon stayed on it 300 years (2278) and we are told the treasure looked like it had been in the ground a thousand years (“swa hie wið eorðan fæðm þusend wintra þær eardodon” 3049–50), so the treasure was at least as old as the Romans (mighty depositors of metal artefacts in the ground as any metal-detectorist knows only too well). The hoard was, we are told, consigned to the guardianship of the earth (2247+), in a formal committal not unlike a spell or incantation; but in fact this was a futile gesture, for nothing is eternally secure, nor should be, for hidden treasure can, like the biblical talents, do no good at all. The *Beowulf* poet plays both on the excellence of the hoard, and looks beyond this into the Christian view that possessions are vanity, and this second theme dominates the end of the poem where the treasure was re-buried with Beowulf for a complex of reasons (including grief, respect for the dead and the belief that the treasure was cursed) “eldum swa unnyt swa hit æror wæs” (3168) (‘as useless to men as it was before’). The treasure in short did no good to him that hid it (3058–60), no good to the dragon (“ne byð him wihte ðy sæl” 2277) and no good to Beowulf or the Geats, who as a people, face extinction as the poem draws to a close.

Of the barrow in which the treasure was enclosed and which the dragon guarded, the poem says: “Beorh eallgears wunode on wonge, wæteryðum neah, niwe be næsse, nearocraftum fæst” (2241–3 MS. f.179v, clear) (‘a mound all ready waited on the plain, near the sea, new on the headland, protected by secure arts’). Proximity to the sea, prominence of site (“be næsse”) and some sort of wall or defence are therefore the main features of the barrow. The word *niwe* strongly suggests that the barrow was built specifically to take the treasure.

But there are discrepancies in the poet’s portrayal of the site. In one approach, the barrow is a traditional burial-mound (without a burial), built prominently on a headland over looking the sea. This could be appropriate to Southern Sweden where the Geats lived, to British examples at Hengistbury Head on the Solent, Boulby in Cleveland, Sutton Hoo etc. as this is a fairly widespread prehistoric and historic phenomenon. Alternatively, but unprovenly, the source may be from Classical models like *Iliad* Book 7 where Hector constructs such a mound for a defeated Greek, and *The Odyssey* Book 24, where another is constructed for Achilles’ body.

A puzzle here is, if such a mound existed on a headland already, why did Beowulf’s followers go to the trouble of constructing another for his body and moving the treasure there? The headland with the dragon’s mound is called *Earnanæs* (3031) ‘Eagles’ Ness’; the nature of the site is confirmed by the words “on næsse” (2417), “holmwylme neh” (‘near to the surge of the sea’) (2411), “on heaum hæpe, [insecure in MS?]... stig under læg” (2212-3) (‘on the high heathland... a path lay up to it’); the headland Beowulf was buried on was called *Hronesnæs* (3136) or ‘Whale’s Ness’, but is otherwise similar (see lines 3156+). Perhaps there was a traditional burial site for the Geatish kings to which Beowulf had to be taken, or some discrepancy in his information that the poet did not trouble to reconcile.

A possibility for the need to move Beowulf’s body is that the dragon lived in a cave at the foot of the cliff, and that the fight took place on the foreshore. In support of this we can muster “under stancleofu” (2540), “under Earnanæs” (3031); and Beowulf’s body being found “on sande” (3033), while his death is announced to the other warriors “up ofer ecgclif”¹⁰⁵ (2893); but the sand could be the soil of the heath-land, “under” could mean ‘close-up-to’, ‘directly-by’ etc., and we are told that the dragon’s body was shoved over the top of the cliff after the fight (“dracan ec scufun, wurm ofer weallclif, leton weg niman” (3131–2) – ‘and the dragon they shoved over the steep cliff, let the waves take him’) which also suggests there is no foreshore, but the sea came right up to the foot of the cliff (at least at high-tide).

In earlier passages the dragon’s mound is described as a rather straightforward earthen burial mound: an “eorðsele... hlæw under hrusan” (2410–11) (‘earth-hall... burial chamber under the ground’), and “eorðscrafa”

(3046) ‘earth-cave’, “dryhtsele dyrnne” (2320), (‘a noble, hidden hall’) and once simply as “wyrmes denn” (2759), (‘the dragon’s den or lair’). Access was not easy: “nealles swæslice sið alyfed inn under eorðweall” (3089–90) - (‘not convenient at all was the way-in afforded under the earth-rampart’).

We are also told that the barrow comprises stone as well as earth. It is a “stanbeorh steapne” (2213) (‘sheer-walled stone-refuge’) and there are the phrases “on wealle” (2307), “æt wealle” (2526), as well as the sentiment “beorges getruwode, wiges 7 wealles” (2322–3) - (‘the dragon trusted in his own strength and that of the wall’). I suppose *weall* on its own could be taken as some sort of earthen rampart encircling the mound or even a natural barrier, but is more conventionally applied to something man-made (cf. Latin *vallum*) so in the context here we may expect something more than a natural feature. Alternatively, may be a combination of built and natural features implied. A clue may lie in some surviving mounds of the Romano-British period: a mound-tomb in the Roman cemetery at Warbank, Keston near Bromley, Kent, was originally a mound of earth with a retaining ring-wall and buttresses, 29 feet in diameter; another at West Mersea was an earth-mound with a three-foot thick retaining wall and a closed brick vault at the centre; a similar design in a prehistoric mound is found on Cairnapple Hill near Bathgate in Scotland - cf. Newgrange in Ireland. Or the ‘wall’ could be a ring-wall round the site e.g. as at Foel Trigarn in Preseli where earlier mounds exist inside a ring of stone walling when the hill-top was later made into a fort.

In two passages this theme of man-made masonry is expanded with almost baroque grandeur: “Geseah þa be wealle... stondan stanbogan, stream ut þonan brecan of beorge” (2542+). The *stanbogan* must surely be stone-arches, typical of Roman architecture (I cannot agree with Bosworth and Toller that the word is used of a “natural arch”, for there is nothing natural about a stone arch in a man-made earthen mound). The significance of the stream issuing from the *stanbogan* is that the water is unbearably hot, evidence of the dragon’s fiery nature. I recoil from the suggestion by Lawrence¹⁰⁶ that the dragon is relieving itself; rather the stream is permanent, a spring that because it wells up near the dragon (or perhaps provides his drinking water?) is hot by the fact of its proximity to the dragon, or from the dragon’s association with hot sites.

This account also recalls a description of Carlisle from the Anglo-Saxon period: “Sabbato ergo die... hora nona considerantibus illis murum civitatis, et fontem in ea a Romanis mire olim constructam, secundum id quod Waga civitatis praepositus ducens eos revelavit....” (from the *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert*, written ca. 699, Book 4 ch.8: ‘Then on Sunday... at the ninth hour, while viewing the walls of the city and the fountain in them once constructed wonderfully by the Romans, as Waga, prefect of the city told them as he led them round...’). This was also entered into Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*

written about 721 (ch.27): “Venit ad Lugubalium... Postera autem die deducuntibus eum civibus ut videret moenia civitatis fontemque in ea miro quondam Romanorum opere extractum...” (‘He came to Carlisle. On the next day the citizens took them round to see the walls of the city and the spring or fountain built into them long ago in fine Roman work...’).

The combination of hot water and Roman arches brings to mind a bath or spa of the sort mentioned in the Old English poem *The Ruin*: “stream hate wearp widan wylme” (‘the stream hotly cast forth a wide-spreading flow’) or some such. There were several such spas in Roman Britain and many hot springs,¹⁰⁷ but the most famous (and hottest, at 109–120°F), is at Bath itself; thought to have been decayed and swamped over in the fourth century, it was not re-excavated until 1871. There was however an equally famous set of baths in the Roman manner at Aachen, serving Charlemagne. Association of dragon and hot-water spa is not made, as far as I am aware, in any Classical source; indeed it would only seem to be in the colder climate of north-west Europe that warm water would be a feature worth notice at all. This could be significant for it suggests that this Romanesque scenic colouring is not a Classical source feature at all, but a piece of atmospheric painting within the poem, to give dignity and pseudo-antique dimensions to the dragon’s lair.

By virtue of this passage in *Beowulf*, the rough retaining-wall now features some sort of dignified arch or arcade with a hot spring issuing from it. And the theme is pursued in a second passage, from just after the fight when Beowulf is temporarily recovering from his wounds: “he bi wealle... gesæt on sesse: seah on enta geweorc, hu ða stanbogan stapulum fæste ece eorðreced innan healde” (2716–9) (‘he sat by the wall on a bench and gazed on the handiwork of giants, how the stone-arches, supported on columns, held up the underground hall inside’). *Sess* is perhaps the Latin word *sessio*, ‘a formal session, or a public bench on which such took place’; a *stapol* is a wooden pillar or stone column. So Beowulf is seated outside, near the entrance, and can see into the mound; but what he sees is not an earthen cave but a well-constructed chamber with a vaulted roof on stone columns, apparently in the Roman manner (cf. “enta geweorc” of Roman remains in *The Ruin*).

This explains why the mound has not collapsed, burying treasure and dragon alike; it also fits into a poetic progression, that as the tension of the fight develops, the chamber transforms with it, from some sort of dingy cave into a well-constructed treasure-chamber fitting the great occasion and the valuable contents. But it may also be significant that the dragon, who started as a rather folk-like, earthen sort of figure, now takes its place in a more a grandiose setting as though the poet was aware and expected his audience to be aware, of the relationship between high status, Romanesque work, and the distant past, as apparent in Britain and Gaul through poems like *The*

Ruin, or the work of Venantius Fortunatus.¹⁰⁸

It remains to examine the relationship between the dragon and the treasure-mound. We are told “hordwynne fond eald uhtsceaða opene standan” (2270-1) (‘the aged dawn-raider found the pleasurable hoard standing open’) i.e. the mound was vacant, unclosed, awaiting the dragon. For the dragon did not either make the mound or collect the treasure, but found the two awaiting him in happy conjunction. That the mound was unsealed seems unlikely, for if someone had gone to the trouble of constructing it and hiding the treasure in it, they would surely take the trouble to close it too. But the poet, with an eye for realism, has to leave the barrow open, so there is a way in for the dragon. (Unless we are dealing with a cave?) Yet it is tempting to feel that this detail is included to avoid any implication that the dragon somehow evolved in the mound from a human body; rather his external origin is stressed.

How did the dragon happen along? This is explained in the following line (2272) where the dragon is called “se ðe byrnende biorgas seceð” (‘one who burning hot seeks out barrows’) i.e. the dragon is actively looking for desirable treasure-mounds to occupy. He has almost a duty to do so: hence “He gesecan sceall hord on hrusan, þær he hæðen gold warað wintrum frod” (2275-7) (‘he has to seek out [or is in the habit of doing so] treasure in the ground where he guards heathen gold, wise in the many years of his age’). This duty to guard is also met in lines 26-7 of the gnomic verses called the Cotton Maxims mentioned above: “Draca sceall on hlæwe, frod, frætwum wlanc” (‘A dragon belongs in a mound, wise, proud in his treasure.’)

Unlike the unsleeping habits of Graeco-Roman dragons on guard (Phaedrus stresses the vigilance of the dragon), the *Beowulf* dragon falls asleep, and is not even woken by the intrusion of the thief. It may be that the thief entered during daylight hours (though this would hardly apply underground?) or that the dragon took a while to awake after a 300-year sleep; or it may be simply a convenience of the plot (for had it been otherwise, there would have been no theft leading to discovery of the hoard, and no third part to *Beowulf*.)

Here we need to pause a minute and take into account the enigmatic lines 3058-60 which open Fitt 42: “þa wæs gesyne þæt se sið ne ðah þæm ðe unrihte inne gehydde wræte under wealle” (‘Then it was clear that the act had had no advantage for him who unrightly had hidden the treasure under the stone-work’). This ought to refer to the heathen – the ‘lone survivor’ – who put the treasure there, and whose aim to hide it for ever had just been frustrated by Beowulf’s heroism; but the following lines in fact refer to the dragon’s death, as though he was the one who gained no advantage and therefore was also the one who hid the treasure.

Tripp (1983) addresses this exact point. He feels (and the damaged state of the text in this part of the poem gives him some latitude) that the treasure

mound was a burial mound and that the body in it turned into a dragon, from the need or desire of the dead man to guard his own gold. This body may in fact have been that of the lone survivor who consigned both his treasure and himself to the earth. Or, if we follow Tripp further, it may be the transformed body of Heremod himself, though this involves a major reinterpretation of the geography of the poem. We have noted examples of such human transformation in Norse legend earlier (Chapter 6), and in the context of *Beowulf*, the arrogant Heremod may seem a valid if inconvenient suspect.

But however appealing such speculations are, it must be stressed that it is not endorsed by the *Beowulf* poet. Indeed he may well have known of this theory of dragon-origin and actually cast his verse in such a way as to rebut it; for him, the treasure and the dragon have separate origins, and are brought together by chance. (His preferred word for the treasure-barrow is *beorg* “hill, mound”, not so often *hlæw* “burial mound”.) I speculate that the *Beowulf* poet is willing to indulge images of the heroic pagan past that seem to him positive and interesting and picturesque and harmless, but draws the line at including material that contradicts the basic Christian philosophy of the sanctity of the dead and the future of the soul.¹⁰⁹ Such a selective sensitivity may point to an immediate post-pagan context for the composition of the poem i.e. either close to the Conversion or to the new Viking incursions, which would both ensure interest in and knowledge of such subject matter and yet require careful handling. This could be particularly relevant if H.R. Ellis Davidson is correct in associating such superstitions with Scandinavia.¹¹⁰ Might the early tenth century be exactly the sort of period when Christianity felt sufficiently confident in itself to use the pagan past and its symbology to gain effect, but only in a controlled and carefully censored way?

Let us round off the account with a brief view of the final conflict. Beowulf’s attack is hampered by the dragon’s most vicious weapon, fire; and when he does get close enough to stick his sword into the dragon’s head, the sword breaks off and spoils the blow (2680+), and Beowulf has his neck seized in the dragon’s jaws and is soundly bitten. The image of Beowulf hanging limp in the dragon’s mouth like a rag-doll or a rat in a dog’s muzzle, springs to my mind, not to make mock of his predicament, but simply because it is one of memorable images in which the poem abounds, for us to mull over. His friend Wiglaf is the one who comes to the rescue, and strikes the dragon ‘a little lower’ (2699–2700), without any hint as to why this proves a more successful tactic. (Saxo’s Latin ‘History of the Danes’ tells us (Book XI ch.3) that a dragon can only be killed by stabbing through its navel – could this be a clue?). Wiglaf’s blow takes effect. The fire abates. Beowulf then recovers consciousness in time to finish the dragon off by slitting it down the middle (*forwrat*, line 2705, from *writan* ‘to write/engrave’, could be interpreted variously here, but could well be relevant to the action of

skinning a snake). That this was done with a dagger, not a sword (2702–4, 2904–6) seems to be emphasised, though I cannot see why, unless to bring out the parallel with skinning an animal. Beowulf then dies, with the possible comforts of knowing that the dragon is also dead and the treasure his. (Pardon my bald language; if you want great literature you must read the poem in Old English, not this.)

Conclusion

I have suggested that the dragon in Anglo-Saxon England is not a stable, unified concept, but one that draws on various traditions, and shows little consistency within the Anglo-Saxon (or Roman) period. That form of the dragon which is likely Germanic is as a representative of the dead, a transformation of the soulless body within the grave. Dragon as treasure-guardian may also be a valid Germanic concept, or borrowed from Graeco-Roman tradition early enough to become absorbed into authentically developing Germanic legend. The dragon as fiery flyer seems neither native to Germanic nor Graeco-Roman belief, but to have been imported to the Roman world and developed there primarily as a military standard with some later association with astronomical phenomena and with the Christian portrayal of Satan. Though all these features might have been expected to have blended together by the end of the Roman Empire, they seem to retain some individual significance, so that the dragon is multi-faceted, with many possible associations and attributions available as alternatives.

The *Beowulf* poet based his work on the treasure-combat type of story, in part three of the poem, of a kind not unusual in Germanic lore. He expands the concept of the dragon to include the fiery-flying nature, but does not associate it with Satan. This is in keeping with the ostensible non-Christian setting and style of the poem, which admits moral arguments but seldom any overt religious reference. He may also be deliberately avoiding seeming to endorse any connection between dragon and the human dead. While the arrival in north-west Europe of any one specific attribute of dragon-kind cannot be easily or precisely dated, the absence of fire and flight from Aldhelm's portrayals ca. 700 suggests this new aspect of dragon-nature may have become popular in the eighth century, perhaps from Charlemagne's revival of imperial culture. (In this general line of argument I am happy to acknowledge the prior work of Jeremy Harte (1982) whose article concisely covers a great many salient points.) The use of fusion of such variety of attributes detectable in the *Beowulf* poem may provide some backing for a later date for the poem. Specifically, the poem seems to expand the nature of the dragon beyond what might be expected in a simple treasure-combat

narrative and to show awareness of a width of traditions that may derive from a number of hitherto unreconciled sources.

The evolution of the dragon continued after the Anglo-Saxon period. The attribute of flying became regularised in the depiction of wings; a standard elongated body and four legs became the medieval norm, and may owe something to Crusaders' experience of Eastern models.¹¹¹ The modern form is re-confirmed and influenced further by the closeness of this final Western form to Chinese and Japanese images. An equally radical change has been apparent over the last 2000 years in the role of the dragon, which covers the state of the afterlife, treasure-guardian, dangerous combatant, and identification with Satan. It remains a significant and potent image; but few critical interpretations or portrayals in literature are likely to match the grandeur and archetypal malevolence of that built up so many years ago in the poem *Beowulf*.

Sources

Note: Time and funds have ruled out the construction of anything like a full bibliography. The following is therefore more a list of works I have quoted from in the text. For Latin quotations in general I have used The Leipzig Thesaurus and for Old English word meanings, Bosworth and Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary. Regrettably other standard reference works and editions of texts remain in abbreviated form in situ in footnotes or text.

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- 1: Hogarth 1979, p50
- 2: see Titley 1981, pp3-7
- 3: *ibid.*
- 4: Brandon p57 fn1
- 5: See Gray (1969) pp29-32; D.S.Russell *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London 1964) p123
- 6: Illustrated in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* p91
- 7: 1979, p15
- 8: 1979, p24
- 9: 1980, Plate 1
- 10: Patrick Tierney *The Highest Altar* (London, 1989) ch.19, based on the work of Hyam Maccoby. On p393 he prints examples of amulets or seals with double snakes for legs, a (male) human torso, and chicken head.
- 11: Ahriman, 'the principle of evil', can take the form of a serpent in Zoroastrian belief - Simpsom 1980 p23. For a possible illustration, after a bronze, see Allen & Griffiths, 1979, p19.
- 12: s.v. *draca*
- 13: *Opera* III
- 14: The source of West country 'drake'?
- 15: *Dræcca* in 'The Durham Ritual.
- 16: *Old English Grammar* para.495
- 17: Wild 1962 pp.10-11
- 18: III,116 etc
- 19: Trans. E.V.Rieu
- 20: Book 8
- 21: Trans.J.H. Mozley
- 22: See Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book 3 line 32
- 23: 3.355; see Fontenrose (1980) p58
- 24: Book 2
- 25: Illustrated in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* p259
- 26: Ælfric *Grammar*, from Latin *trisolcam*: and see Wild 1962 p7 for further

Latin references.

- 27: See Allen & Griffiths 1979 illustration p101
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- 29: Illustration Allen & Griffiths 1979, p32
- 30: See J.M. MacFie *Myths and Legends of India* (London, 1924) p89; for a further account see Donnass Rosenberg *World Mythology* (London, 1986, pp358-60)
- 31: The same story is retold in Ælfric's *Cath.Hom.* II, 18 (Philip & James).
- 32: H.R.Ellis Davidson 1969 p120 notes "the link between dragon and grave-mound might be explained not only by the idea of a guardian of treasure in the earth, but also by the imagery of the funeral pyre and the fierce flames devouring the dead...."
- 33: Book 4 no.21 ed. e.g. B.E.Perry *Babrius & Phaedrus* (Harvard, 1965) pp147-8
- 34: *Imagines* Book 2 no.17, trans. A. Fairbanks.
- 35: per Newman 1979 p38
- 36: Simpson 1980 p22 after *Folkminner och Foktenkar* vol.29 (1942) p81-5.
- 37: Per Leipzig *Thesaurus*
- 38: *Nat.Hist.* 16.234
- 39: Allen & Griffiths 1979 p31, but Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book 3 lines 97-8 makes it sound more like a punishment than a boon. See further John Pinsent *Greek Mythology* (London, 1969) p57
- 40: Hogarth, 1979, p113
- 41: Quoted in Tripp 1983 pp18-19 re *Gull-Thoris Saga*
- 42: See Pettit 1976 p531
- 43: Simpson 1980 p38
- 44: "Sandy's fear returned as soon as she had stopped laughing. She saw the slow jerkily moving file tremble with life, she saw it all of a piece like one dragon's body which had no right to be in the city and yet would not go away and was unslayable." Muriel Spark *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1961, ch.2, re a queue of unemployed waiting to enter a dole office in pre-war Edinburgh.
- 45: 1969, p28
- 46: 1961, p8
- 47: p51, *Eyrbyggja Saga* trans. Pálsson and Edwards, New Saga Library, Edinburgh, 1973.
- 48: *M.G.H. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, vol.7, 1920, pp51, 70.
- 49: Cambridge, 1940 p338
- 50: Perhaps in this case 'wife' and 'husband' represent parted body and soul, to be reunited at doomsday?
- 51: Ch.34 §11
- 52: Illustration plate 166, Buchthal 1983
- 53: The word 'wyvern' is a mystery word - it apparently comes from Latin

- ‘viper’ at a time when the semi-vowel ‘w’ had not yet ceded to ‘v/b’ - could it come to us via Celtic? - cf. Welsh *wiber*. But M.F. Wakelin *English Dialects: An Introduction* (London, 1972) notes, pp95-6, that v/w changes are also evidenced in the Middle Ages
- 54: See Talbot Rice 1952, Payne 1990 and Wormald
- 55: Illustration Simpson pl.9
- 56: Harnischfeger, 1981
- 57: We perhaps are now more conscious of the dinosaurian nature of dragons - “Man’s Mesozoic ancestors, Dacqué theorized, must have lived with dinosaurs and other great reptiles; and these beasts would have made so strong an impression upon their developing minds that the impressions became hereditary and has continued on in our imaginations.” Thus re 1924 Herbert Wendt *Before the Deluge* (London 1968) p298. Jacqueline Simpson (*British Dragons*, 1980) also considers that dragons were developed as myths based on chance finds of dinosaur bones.
- 58: “a cycle of later legends with an Aryan basis” - *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* p322
- 59: 1933, p229
- 60: There had early been the legend that a dragon’s teeth, sown in the ground, produced warriors (e.g. Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book 3 lines 106ff), but its symbolic role as a standard seems of a different era; similarly the occasional ref. to winged dragons e.g. Ovid *Met.* 7,234 “pennisque draconum” where dragons draw a chariot through the air, seems untypical.
- 61: 1969 p119
- 62: Cf. Cyprianus Gallus, early fifth century in his notes on the Heptateuch, quoted by Leipzig Thesaurus s.v. draco col.2062 - “tumidum formare draconem aere flavo iussus” - ‘ordered to form a swelling dragon with golden air’
- 63: 1962, p8. ‘These war-symbols, associated with the Indians, Persians, Scythians, Parthians and Dacians, were adopted by the Romans from the Parthians or Dacians, and converted into standards for cohorts.’
- 64: Arrian *Tactica* quoted by Graham Webster *The Roman Imperial Army* (London 1969) p136 fn3
- 65: Except as a detail - see reference to Martianus Capella below
- 66: Trans. N. Platnauer
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- 68: Trans. J.C. Rolfe
- 69: In Schrader’s *Reallexicon der Indogermanischen Altertumskunde* p409
- 70: Quoted by Tatlock 1933 p224 and fn1-2
- 71: 1962, p45
- 72: p45, cf. Tatlock 1933 pp224-5

- 73: See Hansmartin 1955
- 74: Also, recall that in classical belief, light *proceeded* from the eye to illuminate an object to permit vision - see Arthur Zajonc *Catching the Light* London 1993, p28
- 75: See also Leipzig *Thesaurus C-Supplement* s.v. *chimaera*
- 76: 'It omits a bitter flame from its mouth forwards'; 'breathing out a flame from its hideous mouth.'
- 77: Thus Cicero per *Supp.* cit.
- 78: See White 1962 p96 and p98 fn5
- 79: See J.R.Partington *A History of Greek Fire and Gunpowder* (Cambridge 1960 pp5-7
- 80: The Psalterium Aureum, St Gall Stiftsbibliothek MS.22, so called for its golden lettering
- 81: p141
- 82: For further description see J.Rudolph Rahn *Das Psalterium Aureum von Sanct Gallen*, St Gallen 1878 pp33, 42-3 and Plate X; Adolf Merton *Die Buchmalerei in St Gallen*, Leipzig 1923 p41, who noted the possibility that its exemplar was a Latin-Hebraic Psalter; and Norman 1971 pp35-6..
- 83: See Norman 1971 pp35-65
- 84: See R Chamberlain *Charlemagne* (1986, p118)
- 85: *Patrologia Latina* vol.110, col.1156 sub. III Id.Julii
- 86: *Bibliothek der anglosaechsischen Prosa* 3
- 87: MS.CCCC303 (post-Conquest) via Assmann p175
- 88: Via Cross
- 89: F. trans. Garmonsway
- 90: On the possible early equivalence of Yahweh and dragon-image, see section 1 above, and section 9 re *Numbers* ch.21.
- 91: Homily 11 ed. Pope; the passage translates: 'we read in books that the fierce fiend shall come in the form of a terrible dragon'
- 92: 'This is the archangel, St Michael, who will cut down before this world's end the ancient fiend, who is the great dragon who at the start of the world was created as the brightest angel.'
- 93: 'The ultimate dragon, that is the chief devil, who lies bound on his back with chains of red-hot fire, spreadeagled in the form of Christ's cross, at the bottom of Hell.'
- 94: 1925, p65
- 95: '...their visage was full of anger and their teeth extruding from the mouth; their eyes shone like the eastern morning star, and from the hairs of their head fire came out, or from the mouth.'
- 96: Ed. Herzfeld p152; the passage translates: 'eyes were like fiery iron, and sparks sprang from his mouth, and a foul smoke came from his nostrils.'
- 97: Quoted from the edition in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, vol.14, 1914.

- 98: Catholic Homilies I.32; ‘What is fiercer among four-footed beasts than the lion? Or what is savager among reptiles than the dragon?’.
- 99: If anything, *Beowulf* appears more like a normal human in this third part of the poem. See Petit, 1976.
- 100: I do not want to stress this point, as it implies a quasi-political setting for *Beowulf*, with the failure of the Geats paralleled by the absorption of the smaller Anglo-Saxon kingdoms by Wessex; the poet however seems particularly to want to avoid any such glib parallels.
- 101: See discussion above re vampires, section 6.
- 102: This connection is realised by Gwyn Jones 1972 p19 fn2 re lines 2293-2300
- 103: A possible third element - the dragon’s wisdom, human-like emotions and avoidance of daylight may be concerned with the dragon as associated with the dead; this however is far from accepting that the dragon is *Beowulf* is actually the posthumous form of Heremod, as Tripp, 1983, does.
- 104: See e.g. Andersson 1976
- 105: Bosworth Toller suggest *egclif*
- 106: pp201, 208
- 107: At Buxton, Bakewell, Stoney Middleton, Matlock, Taafe’s Well (Cardiff) and Clifton (Bristol) - not all I believe discovered so early e.g. that at Matlock was only uncovered ca.1700
- 108: At a more practical footnote level, we seem to be talking here of something equivalent to the vaults of a large Roman building (like the surviving vaults at Colchester Castle; though these were only recognised as Roman in 1919, they may have been known to the Anglo-Saxons), or perhaps an underground sewer system (like that discovered at York this century). The story-line however does not go back to any known Latin dragon-fiction.
- 109: The Christian soul after death is consigned to penitence in purgatory, not continuity in the grave, indulging in riches.
- 110: See section 6 above.
- 111: Thus Harley MS 3244 has an orange dragon with four limbs, four wings, horns a long tail and breathes fire. The illustration is from ca.1250 - see Payne 1990. Bats’ or reptilian wings are presumably accorded the dragon on some satanic model.