

# **There is no hero without a dragon: a revisionist interpretation of the myth of St George and the dragon**

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## **The dragon in Western lore**

It could be that, in some pre-literate community, the skeletal remains of dinosaurs gave rise to the concept of dragons. In literate societies the dragon's lineage is ancient and varied. In Oriental cultures, most notably Japanese and Chinese, dragons were imagined as benevolent creatures and depicted as atmospheric or celestial manifestations. Western dragon lore, by contrast, has its origins in Babylonian myth in which *Tiamat* was the mother of all Dragons and the daughter of primordial Chaos. Thereafter the Western mind associated the dragon with the serpent, which in the Genesis myth blames it for all evil that befell the human race. In the Apocalypse the red dragon is a seven-headed beast with ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads, which threatens the Virgin who is in labour, but is slain by the archangel Michael. In popular Western depictions and descriptions the dragon assumed monstrous proportions and is most often described as an enormous, winged serpentlike beast, half reptile, half mammal, with a scaly body and a powerful tail, four-legged like a crocodile, with protruding teeth and eyes, sharp claws and the capacity to exhale fire or noxious gases.

Primordial dragons were associated with springs which flow day and night; they never sleep and their eyes are always open. Thus dragons were associated with springs, called "eyes" in Italian, Arabic and Hebrew in which "*ayin*" means both eye and spring. The eye of the fountain represents the dragon's head and the serpentine movement of his hind part is the appropriate form for the flow of its water. A volcanic crater was also considered to be a fiery spring, so that the dragon could also be a fire-dragon spewing forth lava torrents, or exhaling noxious fumes.<sup>1</sup> However, there are also other interpretations of the dragon's illusive nature. The earth dragon may become a cloud-dragon and cause ruinous thunderstorms, so that the dragon "can be considered as able to live either in water, air, or on the earth, and as a salamander, even in fire" (Burckhardt 1967: 138). Clearly, these four possibilities of dragon-life were derived from the ancient belief that the universe is comprised of four elements: air, water, earth and fire.

## **Dragon slayers**

Because the dragon is, in the Western mind "the personification of life within the earth - of that life which, being unknown and incontrollable, is *eo ipso* hostile to man" (Douglas 1928:132), it follows dragons would be feared. It therefore comes as no surprise that Western people tell many legends of heroes who single-handedly engaged and vanquished ferocious dragons which threatened communities. Some famous dragon slayers are Perseus, Beowulf, Utter Pendragon, Deodatus de Gozon and Jason. In rare medieval depictions the Christ child is also represented as a dragon slayer. Because of the obvious symbolism of evil vanquished by a noble hero, many Christian dragon slayers were dignified with sainthood and acquired a dragon emblem as their popular attribute. These include St Martha of Tarascon, St Philip the Apostle, St Radeguis of Provence, St Clement of Metz, St Armentaire of Drahuignan, St Michael the Archangel, St Margaret, St Magnus, St Marcel and, most notably, St George. Depictions of these saint show them slaying a dragon with a sword or a lance and trampling it

under foot, thus symbolising the triumph of Christianity over evil and the banishment of paganism from the earth.<sup>2</sup>

### **Perseus and Andromeda as the prototypical myth**

Passing through the land of Aithiopia Perseus found it suffering from the ravages of a great monster sent by Poseidon to punish the boast of Queen Kassiopeia that she was more beautiful than the sea-nymphs. In an endeavour to appease the monster in a manner counselled by an oracle, Kepheus, the king, bound his daughter Andromeda to a rock beside the sea, but Perseus arrived as the monster was about to devour her. Moved to pity and love at the sight of her as she cowered before the great creature, Perseus without delay forced from her father the promise that she would become his bride if he could succeed in releasing her. Then, approaching the monster, Perseus drew from his pouch the Gorgon's head and turned the dragon into stone.

### **The legend of St George of Cappadocia**

The St George that has always been venerated in the Greek Orthodox Church was said to have been born in Cappadocia in Asia Minor, of Christian parents. His father died for his faith and his mother fled to Palestine. When he grew up George joined the Roman army and served with distinction. On his mother's death he used his inheritance to establish a position at the court of the Roman Emperor, Diocletian, who ruled from 248-305 CE. However, George did not avoid persecution when Diocletian turned against the Christians, but openly proclaimed his faith. Consequently, he was sentenced to die. It is told that he resurrected each time after a series of gruesome tortures, but eventually his head was chopped off and he died. His body was taken to Lydda in Palestine for burial.

George's popularity in the West dates only from the thirteenth century when the *Legend aurea* or *Golden legend*, written by the Dominican Jacques de Voragine, became popular. The legend, which clearly harkens back to the myth of Perseus and Andromeda, appertains that George, a Christian warrior, slew a dragon in a heathen country. The dragon which threatened the community had to be appeased by offerings of two sheep a day, then children and young people. Eventually the turn of the king's daughter came, but before she could be devoured George arrived in the form of knight errant. He asked the princess what was happening; she told him and beseeched him to save his life by fleeing. George, however, stood his ground and when the dragon emerged he smote it with his spear, wounding it so seriously that it could be leashed and meekly led back to the city by the princess. There George made a brief oration, baptises the king and 15 000 others. Before he departed he killed the dragon and it is recounted that, at the place, a magic well sprang up whose waters possessed the power to heal those poisoned by the dragon and restore the wasted land.<sup>3</sup>

### **First interpretation of the legend: the dualism between good and evil**

The world view that upholds the duality between opposites attributes to the dragon no other purpose than to be conquered by a saviour. The vision of the St George's triumph over evil is based on earlier prototypes, for example Mithras slaying the bull in Roman ritual, or the archangel Michael slaying the dragon in Christian mythology. In this regard Helmut Appel (1938: 134) tells us that, "in the old (i.e., pre-Reformation) comfort literature ... man is the fighter. The devil and other hellish powers, as long as they appear at all are powerless adversaries over against the brave warrior of faith". Besides the allegorical meaning of a hero's triumph over evil, the legend also signified the triumph of the true faith over paganism. At times when schism threatened the Roman Catholic Church the dragon motif could also be adapted to signify heresy.

### **Representations in Christian art**

As a devotional image St George is most often shown in armour, either on horseback or on foot, slaying a dragon either with a sword or a lance and trampling it under foot. A first level of meaning of this act is religious because George is willing to kill the dragon to release the princess whom the monster held captive, provided the king's subjects convert to Christianity. George triumphs over the dragon and becomes a Christian hero who forever after represents the triumph of Christianity over paganism. This interpretation dignifies George as the symbol of good and condemns the dragon as the personification of evil and this dualism is basically the theme of all emblematic artistic representations of their combat, of which those by Raphael and Uccello are most notable.

### **Second interpretation: beyond good and evil and beyond dualism - the play of opposites**

No art historian has ever put forward an alchemical interpretation to the representation of St George slaying the dragon, and indeed it may be postulated that the artists themselves were unaware of the alchemical symbolism inherent in the theme. In the case of Raphael's representation of the theme, art historians found references to contemporary ideas and ideals in the representation. No doubt, artists elaborated on existing representations and, ultimately, the myth of the hero survived without attributing to the dragon the meaning it originally had as a manifestation of the four elements.

The four elements with regard to alchemy, Titus Burckhardt (1967: 74) writes:

As applied to the soul, "earth" is that aspect or tendency which causes it to sink into the body and which attaches it to the latter. "Fire" has the same purifying as transmuting character as outward fire. "Water" is capable of assuming all forms. ... For the soul, "air", free and mobile envelops all forms of consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

Allusions to the dragon in medieval alchemy, considered to be a pseudo science whose practitioners were often persecuted, was part of the practice to develop

misleading terminologies to dissuade the curious and keep necessary but uninitiated helpers in the dark. Simply stated, the dragon symbolised "matter in its imperfect unregenerate state". The slaying of the dragon would reduce metals to a non-metallic state. ... Accompanying the treatises describing alchemical processes were illustrations in which the dragons for the most part conform to the European winged type ... (Canby 1995: 40-41).

However, the symbol of the dragon, is derived from complex sources. It "closely resembles that of the Far-Eastern world-dragon, which first lives as a fish in water, and then as a winged creature, soars into the heavens. It also recalls the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, which successively moves under the earth, on the earth, and in the heavens" Burckhardt (1967: 138). Most importantly, it is symbolically included in the alchemical macrocosm which shows the hemaphroditic creator and his/her creation within the elliptical outline of a cosmic egg (figure 6 in Mahdihassan 1976: 147) and the creation which consists of four elements: the dragon as water, flames from its mouth as fire, the winged globe on which he lies as earth and air.

Having established the alchemical attributes of the dragon, the attention may now be

focussed on the multiple tortures that St George the martyr underwent. During the first round he was body was hacked into 10 parts and thrown into a lake. Then he was put into a cauldron with boiling metal and what remained of his bones was buried in the earth. Then he was tortured with fire and left on a mountain where birds devoured his flesh. From this we may deduct that the corpse of St George was successively metamorphosed into water/earth; into air and water/fire. Thus Pol-Pierre Gossiaux (2000: 312) concludes that his body “Réalise ainsi l’alchimie de l’univers tout entier: il transcende les composants matériels du monde cosmique en éléments spirituels. Il est à la fois terre (comme le suggère l’etymologie même de son nom: “*geos quod est terra et orge quod est colere*” Voragine, lvi), eau (il rend vie aux arbres et ... il s’impose comme saint pluviator), air (corps offert aux oiseau) et enfin feu solaire et stellaire.”

Given this analysis, the combatants in the fight between St George and the Dragon, seem to be constituted by the same elements. They both seem to strive towards the wholeness of their one and eternal prototype, as Burckhardt (1967: 125) explains:

Sulphur, the original masculine power, and Quicksilver, the original feminine power, both strive towards the wholeness of their one and eternal prototype. The latter is at the same time the reason for their opposition and of their mutual attraction - just as the masculine and feminine natures long for the integrality of the human state, and as a result of this seek both to separate from one another, and to unite with one another. By means of their physical union both try to re-establish the image of their common eternal prototype. This is the marriage of man and woman, sulphur and quicksilver, Spirit and soul.

### **The dragon-fight as a release of radiant energy from matter**

The primary meaning of the conflict between good and evil conceals an alternative interpretation, namely that of an alchemical transubstantiation. Allan and Griffiths (1979: 72) explain in this regard: “The dragon, or serpent symbol in alchemy, was a symbol of matter in its imperfect state which had to be slain; that is the base metals had to be rendered down as a necessary stage of transmutation.”

The story of St George and the dragon is symbolic of the force of radiant energy which releases the power of dark and dense matter. At birth the human soul is like a coiled-up dragon which has the potential to be transformed into a being in whom the darkness of matter has been transformed into light.

The spear of the saint represents the spiritual ray of light piercing the dragon of matter - the sleeping, coiled-up vortex of matter. The penetrating light awakens the dragon who keeps himself secluded in a dark cave. As he unwinds from the earth his energy spirals upwards through his spine to the crown of his head where it is transmuted into solar light, which manifests as the beautiful princess of the myth.<sup>5</sup>

### **Notes**

1 For a survey of “Dragon history”, see <http://www.angelfire.com/sd/shedevil/DragonHistory.html>.

2 See [http://dragons.monstrous.com/dragons\\_killers.htm](http://dragons.monstrous.com/dragons_killers.htm).

3 See Weatherby (1987: 135).

4 Burckhardt (1967: 74-75) continues:

The signs of the four elements derived from the Seal of Solomon are particularly lucid when it comes to their application to the soul. From them can be seen that the plurality of the elements derives from the opposition of fire ▲ and water ▼, that is, from the pair activity-passivity (which of course corresponds to the pair *forma-materia*). It is the same opposition we shall ... encounter in the form of sulphur and quicksilver. Through the union of opposites ☆ the soul becomes “fluid fire” and “fiery water”, and at the same time also acquires the positive qualities of the other elements, so that its water becomes “stable” and its fire “non-burning”; for the “fire” of the soul is that which confers stability on its “water”, while the “water” of the soul confers on “fire” the mildness and ubiquity of “air”.

... The highest meaning of alchemy is that the knowledge that all is contained in all, and its *magesterium* is none other than the realisation of this truth on the plane of the soul. This realisation is effected by means of the creation of the “elixir”, which unites in itself all the powers of the soul, and thus acts as a transmuting “ferment” on the psychic world and, in an indirect fashion, on the outward world also.

Burckhardt (1967: 125) also explains:

Sulphur, the original masculine power, and Quicksilver, the original feminine power, both strive towards the wholeness of their one and eternal prototype. The latter is at the same time the reason for their opposition and of their mutual attraction - just as the masculine and feminine natures long for the integrality of the human state, and as a result of this seek both to separate from one another, and to unite with one another. By means of their physical union both try to re-establish the image of their common eternal prototype. This is the marriage of man and woman, sulphur and quicksilver, Spirit and soul.

In this regard Peter Dawkins (1998: 8) explains:

In the Indian Vedic tradition the radiant energy is associated with the three primary gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and the spiral energy with their shaktis or consorts ... . The goddesses are also known under the name Kundalini, the dragon energy. Western tradition has a similar symbology, with the Triple Goddess, under the name of the three Marys, being the three consorts and dragon energy of the male trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The mythological story of St. George and the Dragon contains all this in allegorical form.

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