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### Dragons Around the World

Dragons are a phenomenon that has amazed people young and old around the world for centuries upon centuries. While they appear in movies and art and games and celebrations today, the idea of dragons dates back over two thousand years ago, and references to these creatures can be found as far back as fifth century B.C. Early paleontologists used the words “dragon” and “dinosaur” interchangeably, and a number of early reputable zoological sources have dragons among their many entries, describing them in painstaking detail, as if they were real creatures. Many European epics feature heroes going out and slaying monstrous dragons who kidnap maidens and steal treasure, while legends from the Orient speak of people raising dragons and using them for medicinal purposes. It was not uncommon for western pioneers to come back with reports of dragons in the tribal lands they explored.

However, the descriptions of these dragons varies greatly. Some are big, some are small. Some have scales, others have fur or feathers. Some have one head, some have many. There are countless variations that all fall under one name. There are common variations that people have separated into different species. Some say that a true dragon has four legs and two wings, a wyvern has two legs and two wings, a drake has four legs and is flightless, a wyrm has a long, snake-like body with no legs or wings, but can sometimes fly, an amphithere has no legs, two wings, and is sometimes feathered, and a lindwurm has two legs, no wings, and a long body.

However, for the sake of simplicity, all of these variations can be referred to as dragons. There is almost no limit to what a dragon could look like, and with that being the case, it is difficult to assign a definition to dragons based on imagined physical characteristics. Therefore, many sources describe the general idea, and leave the details up for interpretation, or they focus on dragons from a specific area. The Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend sums up a dragon as “a fantastic beast that appears in world mythology and folklore as either demonic or beneficent”. Aside from that, it simply gives general descriptions of more specific dragons, focusing on important details, such as Ladon, a Greek dragon with one hundred heads, but leaving the rest up to the reader to decide.

Many people question where dragons come from. Some sources claim that in Christianity, which is found heavily in Europe, the devil is synonymous with dragons, and is derived from the Old Testament dragon, who in turn is derived from Tiamat, the Babylonian female dragon monster, lending to the idea the European dragons are demonic monsters. Oriental dragons do not have the same monstrous background, developing from constellations and ancient artistic designs that evolved over time, and manifesting as ideas of benevolent animals. The Smithsonian Magazine says that the idea of dragons evolved independently in Europe and Asia, but they likely came from dinosaur fossils, whale bones, crocodiles, and human fears of large predators. None of these ideas are outrageous when one takes a moment to examine each of them individually.

As stated earlier, earlier paleontologists used “dinosaur” and “dragon” to refer to the same thing. After all, those massive bones had to belong to an incredible creature. The same goes for whale bones. Large, unidentified bones had to come from something, and until further

advances were made in the scientific fields, people could only guess as to the kinds of creatures that had such remarkable bones. Mistaking crocodiles for dragons is also easy to see. The reptiles are massive on average, and record-holding crocodiles have been measured at lengths greater than twenty feet, just within the past century. Prehistoric crocodiles were found to be almost twice as big as modern record-holders, so one can only imagine how big they were when human minds started filling with the ideas of dragons. Human fears of large predators is the most abstract out of the possible sources for dragons, but it is not unreasonable. As proven by a series of viral videos, most cats will jump and run away from cucumbers when the gourd is placed near them. This comes from the fact that cats are afraid of snakes, as snakes can prove to be deadly predators to cats. Even if the cat in question has never seen a snake, it will still likely have a frightened reaction to the cucumber, as it resembles a snake. Therefore, it is not a far stretch to imagine that images of predators that terrorized human ancestors are still implanted in the human subconscious, manifesting as stories of terrible monsters.

If the dragon had been mentioned in one or two records or by one or two people, it would have likely been written off as a silly trick. However, the dragon has been mentioned again and again and again. Desmond Morris, an evolutionary zoologist who is still alive today, notes how unique the dragon is compared to other mythical creatures, as it has many different forms. "It is as though there was once a whole family of different dragon species that really existed, before they mysteriously became extinct.". Flavius Philostratus, a third century historian, said that India was filled with dragons. During the sixteenth century, there were many recorded accounts of dragons. Pigafetta, an Italian explorer, reported that the Bemba province of Congo had natives who worshipped the dragons who lived there. Swiss naturalist and medical doctor Konrad

Gesner published an encyclopedia called *Historiae Animalium*, where he mentioned dragons as “very rare, but still living creatures”. The *Aberdeen Bestiary*, a compilation of known animals written in the early sixteenth century, included a detailed description of dragons, saying that the dragon “is bigger than all living things on earth, has a crest, a small mouth, and narrow blow holes through which it breathes and puts forth its tongue”. It also said that dragons used their tails to wrap around prey as big as elephants and kill them by suffocation like a boa constrictor, and that dragons were born in Ethiopia and India “where it is hot all year round”. There is also a report that details the encounter that a village had with a dragon who was “vast in body, with a crested head, teeth like a saw, and a tail extending to an enormous length”. This dragon killed a shepherd and many sheep, but then fled into the marsh when the other villagers grouped up and attacked it. The description of the dragon also resembles a possible description of a crocodile, leading back into the possibility that the idea of dragons came from crocodiles. While the next description is nothing like the previous one, it is still regarded as a dragon. Samuel Bochart, a seventeenth century Bible scholar, said that dragons existed in the Old Testament and in his time, and described them as “winged and flying serpents that can be found who are venomous who snort and are savage and kill with pain worse than fire”. While most descriptions depict dragons with magical and supernatural powers, not everyone thought so. Charles Gould, of the nineteenth century, said that dragons were nothing but giant serpents without magical abilities. Saint John of Damascus, an eighth century eastern monk, said similarly, though he did provide a report of a dragon that he had heard from Roman historian Dio. Dio claimed that a Roman army had killed and skinned a dragon that was one hundred and twenty feet long, and had sent the skin to the

Roman Senate. It is highly unlikely that these figures would have just made up such a story, though whether or not it is exaggerated or not is debateable.

European dragons are generally maleficent monsters who terrorize people who cross them. There are a few rare stories of good European dragons who assisted kings, but these few dragons are greatly overshadowed by the far greater number of dragons who harbor ill intent towards humans. Among the first mentions of dragons in Europe is the Epic of Gilgamesh, dated back to 2000 B.C.. In this story, there is a monster, likely a dragon, who could change faces and guarded the Cedar Forest of Amanus in Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh, the hero of the story ends up killing the monster, a fate that many similar monsters faced in European epics. In Christianity, there are multiple evil dragons, as they represent the devil. There are many stories of saints slaying dragons, the most famous of these being Saint George, the patron saint of England. Saint George is famous for killing a dragon and freeing the maiden it had been holding captive. The scene of Saint George is depicted in many artworks, almost all of them depicting an armored man on a white horse delivering a fatal blow to the dragon with a sword. Another Christian story of a hero killing a dragon centers around Daniel from the Bible. Biblical Daniel killed a dragon because it was being worshipped as a false god, and one of the laws of Christianity is to not worship false idols. Daniel killed the dragon by feeding it a cake of various ingredients that made it explode. The ingredients of this cake vary among different sources. Some say that the cake was made of baking pitch, fat, and hair, some say it was made of straw and nails, some say it was camel skins and hot coals, and some say it was poison and tar.

Not all European dragons come from Christianity. In Greek mythology, the eleventh labor of Hercules involved getting golden apples from a tree. This tree was guarded by a

ferocious dragon named Ladon, who had one hundred heads, each head having a different voice. Hercules killed the dragon and completed his eleventh labor. Norse Mythology also references dragons. One Norse myth is about a dragon named Fafnir. Fafnir was human originally, the son of Magician Hreidman. However, he was corrupted by a cursed ring called Anduarinaut, and this curse made him lust after gold and other treasures. This curse drove him to kill his father for his gold rings. As the curse grew stronger, it turned him into a monster inside and out, transforming him into a dragon. As a dragon, Fafnir hoarded his growing collection of treasures, and killed everyone who tried to take from him until Sigurd, the mythological hero, killed him. Jormungand is a far more feared dragon, known as the World Serpent. Jormungand is the serpent son of Loki, the god of mischief, and was thrown into the Midgardian oceans by Odin, the god king, where he grew large enough to encircle the world. Once he was large enough to lay in the seas and encircle the globe, he bit his tail, holding it in his mouth. This is similar to Ouroboros, an Egyptian dragon who represents the infinite cycle of creation and destruction. Norse mythology claims that at the end of the world, Jormungand would be killed by Thor, a powerful god, and Thor would die by Jormungand's venom. The most feared dragon in Norse mythology is Nidhogg. Nidhogg is said to be coiled around the base of Yggdrasil, the tree of life. There he eats the corpses of evil-doers and gnaws on the tree's roots. Since Yggdrasil represents life, and Nidhogg tries to eat its roots, Nidhogg represents evil. Both Yggdrasil and Nidhogg are the only things that Norse mythology says will survive the end of the world.

Dragons on the other side of the Eurasian landmass, dragons are considerably different. Oriental dragons are described as benevolent creatures, and are almost always seen as gods. The Chinese word for dragon is "Lung" (龙) or "Lung Wang" (龙王), and the Japanese word for

dragon is “Ryu” (竜). The Chinese have other names for different kinds of dragons. Hornless baby dragons are known as “qui” or “chi”. A dragon with wings or fins is called a “yinglong”. The most well known version of Chinese dragon is called a “qiao”. Even though there are some differences between Chinese dragons and Japanese dragons, there is no clear boundary or distinction between the two groups. This is because Japanese dragon mythology was derived from Chinese dragon mythology. The only noteworthy difference between the two is the number of toes. In Chinese dragon mythology, the number of toes is an indicator of power. Dragons linked to the imperial family, and therefore the gods, have five toes, while dragons with no such link have four toes. In Japanese dragon mythology however, the number of toes is of no importance and most of the Japanese dragons have three toes. Aside from that, the dragons are essentially the same. They are generally large in size, have long, snake-like bodies covered in scales, four comparatively short legs, and no wings. On their heads, they usually have whiskers that look like a long mustache, a round nose, fur under their nose, along their jaw and around the top of their neck like a lion’s mane, ears like a deer, and a pair of horns or antlers on the back of their skull. These dragons are often described as a mix of many creatures, which leads to the speculation of dragons being created by combining the totem animals of early Chinese clans.

Oriental dragon mythology dates back at least six thousand years, and is still very popular in modern times. These dragons are strongly associated with rivers, clouds, rain, and any other source of water. This association makes them incredibly important, as they were credited with bringing the rain that the people needed for their crops. A Chinese legend tells of a sage named Ch’en Nan. Ch’en Nan could create rain by commanding dragons. Chinese dragon mythology also says that when an emperor dies, he ascends to heaven like a dragon. As a dragon ascends to

heaven, the pressure of its feet on the clouds creates rain. The emperor and the dragon are also seen as one and the same because the emperor's throne can be called the dragon's throne, and the emperor's face can be called the dragon's face. Even though most Oriental dragons are described as benevolent creatures, the Kojiki, a sacred text from the Shinto religion, describes a giant, evil, eight-headed dragon in Japan. This dragon, named Yamata no Orochi, feasted on local maidens every year, stealing daughters from families one by one. The god Susanoo-no-Mikoto devised a trap for the dragon, setting out a giant vat of sake (pronounced sah-KAY) as bait, since all dragons loved the rice wine. Yamata no Orochi drank the all of the sake with all of his eight heads, and once he had finished drinking, he passed out. Once the dragon had passed out, Susanoo-no-Mikoto came out of hiding and chopped the dragon to pieces with his sword, killing the monster and ending its reign of terror.

A common motif in Chinese art is a dragon with outstretched claws reaching for a disk. What the disk represents can vary from piece to piece and from interpretation to interpretation. Sometimes the disk represents a pearl. Other times it represents the sun. Other times it represents the moon. The idea of Chinese dragons is believed by archeologists and anthropologists to have evolved from constellations and ancient designs in pottery. The dragon is one of twelve symbols on the Chinese zodiac, and one of four constellations in Chinese astronomy. Certainly, if such a creature was found in the stars, it had to have great power. In pottery dating back to the fifteenth century B.C. and earlier, there were swirling patterns that resembled the dragons depicted on later pottery. Over time, the artwork had gradually evolved from simple swirling patterns into dragons as the artists' imaginations were filled with stories of the magnificent creatures. The differentiation between an imperial dragon and a normal dragon in Chinese culture was very



important. If a common man had an imperial dragon, a dragon with five toes, depicted in his house or on his clothes, he could get in trouble.

While European and Oriental dragons are the most well known types of dragons, there are dragons in other cultures as well. In Native American culture, there are stories of Angont, aggressive, poisonous reptiles with four legs and no wings, who lived in caves, forests, lakes, and other dark places of the world. These dragons could cause disasters and plagues among people. Due to this, they were often sought out by medicine men who hoped to create magical cures from parts of these dragons. Unfortunately for the medicine men, the poisonous skin of the Angont thwarted their attempts to gather ingredients from the dragon, proving fatal according to legend. Another legend speaks of a dragon named Amhuluk, a water serpent with big horns, who lived in the waters near Forkend Mountain in what is now the northern part of Oregon. Amhuluk was a legend created to scare children away from the water, the adults warning them that if they got too close, the dragon would come out and impale them on its horns before taking them back into the water, where they would never surface again.

In Buddhist mythology, there is a legend of a water dragon named Apalala. Apalala was originally a man named Kasyapa Buddha, and he had the power to control the weather by controlling the evil dragons who could bring storms. As payment for the good weather, the local people gave him grain as payment. However, over time, the people started to forget to give him grain. This angered Kasyapa, so he prayed that he would become a dragon so he could punish them. After he died, Kasyapa was reborn as the dragon Apalala. Once he was reborn, he made his home in the Swat valley, where he could punish the people who forgot to pay him. Apalala destroyed the area with huge storms and heavy rain. He continued to do this until Sakyamuni

Buddha came through the area and persuaded him that what he was doing was wrong. Once Apalala was convinced that he was doing wrong, they came to an agreement where he would stop destroying the area in exchange for one crop every twelve years. Instead of relying on the people to provide this crop, he was allowed to flood the area and take it himself.

In modern time, the presence of dragons in cultures around the globe has evolved and grown. Most of them are still easily identifiable by their origins, but there have also been significant changes in some of their roles in culture. Due to globalization and the evolution of pop culture, dragons can be found in nearly everything that involves a fantasy element. They are found in countless games, movies, and books. They are even found on clothes, on cars, on walls, and in tattoos. If dragons have survived this long in cultures everywhere, it is likely that they will continue to evolve and survive in the years to come. How they will do so will be quite interesting to observe.

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