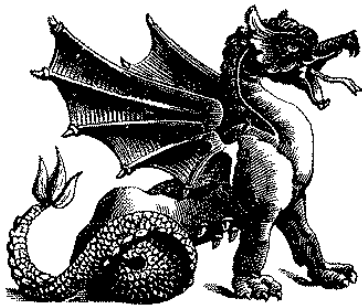


What do creatures of myth and legend truly represent? Growing up almost purely on fantasy novels and Greek myths, I have often wondered this myself. What messages do animals, such as tortoises, birds, or fictional creatures, such as dragons, and unicorns, give us? For what purpose were they put into a story? It varies greatly, but in myths of many cultures, animals, real or fake, are used to represent something of much greater value. With fables, there is always a moral, told in a story almost exclusively about animals. In children's books, and even books suited for older audiences, guidance comes in the form of an animal, such as Sebastian and Flounder in Disney's *A Little Mermaid*, or Fawkes the Phoenix in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. However, the symbolism of animals, and their ability to teach us a lesson goes much deeper than fables and children's stories. For example, Chinese, Greek, and Hindu myths, use creatures prevalent in their culture to represent a concept, lesson, or idea. Christians use animals to symbolize different Christian values. Animals have played an important role in storytelling, from ancient times to the current day. I will explore the dragon, a creature that has played a role in the mythology of almost every culture across the globe. Dragons have played a large role in the stories of many different civilizations, and they have represented a variety of different things—from being emblematic of Satan to a highly worshipped rain god. Even today, there is a fascination with dragons in popular culture and modern literature, acting both as friendly companions and terrible antagonists.



Mythical creatures, and animals in general, have been used in many cultures as religious, and spiritual symbols. For example, dragons have been a part of the mythology of about every culture in history. They play significant roles in the mythology of people such as the Aztecs, Sumerians, Greeks, and even the Inuits, and they represent very different things to different people. For example, to Europeans, dragons were notorious for being associated with the devil, or Hell. In China, however, dragons were ferocious, powerful beings, but still revered, and considered to be the protectors against evil spirits. Even in modern times, dragons play a prominent role in many stories. For instance, they are creatures of pure evil in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, while in *The NeverEnding Story* by Michael Ende, Falkor, a "luckdragon," offers help and guidance to the main characters.

In Western mythology, dragons are considered one of the biggest symbols of evil in western tradition. In ancient Greek myths, for instance, there are many stories involving malicious dragons, or dragon-like creatures. The Drakon is a giant serpentine creature, often shown with rows of sharp teeth, deadly poison, and multiple heads. One of these is the Drakon Hesperios, or Drakon Ladon. He was a Drakon with a hundred heads, which guarded the golden apples of the Hesperides, nymphs who lived in a beautiful garden. He was killed by Heracles, and sent to be among the stars, as the constellation Draco. Those related to Ladon are said to represent the dangers of the sea. And Ladon himself represents dangerous sea currents (Hesperion Dragon). Many Greek dragons were the



inspiration for many medieval European legends, such as the Chimera, which were fire-breathing hybrids of lions, goats, and serpents, and were supposedly the inspiration for the imagery of the dragon of Saint George (Chimera).

Dragon of Saint George



Greek Chimera



In ancient Sumeria, many myths that involved dragons were about the dragon Kur, who had done wrong to a God or Goddess, who then appears to vanquish it (*Dragons of the Ancient World*). In

Christian stories and legends, dragons are directly related to the devil, often a demon or representing Satan himself. In the Bible, a red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns is depicted appearing in front of a woman about to give birth, and getting ready to eat her child as it was born. However, the child, who was going to rule one day, was rescued, and a war between the angels and the dragon broke out in Heaven, and the dragon, called Satan, was sent falling to the ground. (*International Standard Version*, Revelation 12, 3-9) There is another dragon in the Bible, Leviathan. He is a fire breathing sea serpent, and is said to be better than man in that he is stronger, more powerful, and more intelligent. His eyes shine like the sun, and his scales are so tough it's as if they are made of shields. In all of these, dragons are known as dangerous, and ferocious (*Dragons of Fame*). They are representative of all things evil, including the devil. In Christianity, perhaps their resemblance to snakes, which are a renowned symbol of evil in the religion, contributes to the way Christians view them. They were also similar in physical characteristics to the devil, with bat-like wings, horns, and red bodies (Tresidder, 157). Not all dragons of the West were evil beings, however. In Celtic lore, dragons were a symbol of the power of the chief (the Celtic word for chief dragon is "pendragon"). Areas that were inhabited by dragons were believed to hold special powers. Druids believed the Earth was like the body of a dragon; they also thought that dragons connected us with the Earth's magnetism and healing waters, and that dragons had the gift of wisdom, vision, and prophecy, and they were the guardians of all knowledge and wisdom. Dragons guarded both heaven and the underworld,

and many were depicted in a circle, swallowing their tale, a symbol of never-ending life (Celtic Dragons : Mythical Power Source). To the Celts, they were a symbol of fertility, wisdom, immortality, and the untamed forces of nature. They also worshipped snakes, which they believed to be a close relative to the dragon. Snakes were associated with healing, and the “serpent’s” egg, a stone shaped like an egg, had the same powers. Snakes were often shown with horns, guarding a gold torque, a symbol of the divine right. Christians who saw the Celts worship snakes and dragons believed them to worship the devil because of it. It was only after Christian influence that dragons became a symbol of chaos and evil in the Celtic regions (Celtic Animal Symbols: Dragons and Serpents). Christians have often equated Paganism and other Celtic beliefs with Satanism and Devil worship, because Pagans worshipped many horned gods. Horns were a symbol of protection to the Celtic Pagans, while a symbol of evil to Christians. Perhaps the fact that Celts revered snakes and dragons reinforced the Christian notion that they were Satanists.

There have been a lot of medieval European myths and legends involving dragons. Some of the most prominent being the symbolism of dragons in the tales of King Arthur, the devil disguised as a dragon in the story of Saint Margaret of Antioch, and Grendel the dragon, and his mother, in *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* is a Danish story about Grendel, a terrible beast who terrorizes King Hrothgar’s kingdom for years. He terrorizes the people of Hrothgar’s kingdom each night, killing many, and for years the Danes suffer from this monster. One day, however, a warrior named Beowulf hears of Grendel, and sets off to fight the dragon. Hrothgar accepts Beowulf’s offer to fight the monster, and holds a feast for him. When Grendel arrives, Beowulf fights him unarmed, and is proved to be stronger than the monster. He tears Grendel’s arm off, and the monster, mortally wounded, dies. There is celebration in the kingdom after that, but Grendel’s mother, hearing of her son’s death and seeking revenge, kills Aeschere, one of the king’s most trusted advisors. To avenge his death, Beowulf goes to the swamp and fights Grendel’s mother in her underwater cave, and kills her with a sword forged for a giant. He returns home after that, where he is met with his own king and queen, and tells of his adventures. He gives them most of the treasure he acquired. Eventually, Beowulf assumes the throne, after the king and queen, and their son die. He rules for 50 long years. Finally, when he is an old man, a fierce dragon begins to terrorize his kingdom. Beowulf fights the dragon, and succeeds in killing it, but it mortally wounds him as well, and he dies not long after the fight. In this story, dragons are demonic, evil creatures that terrorize kingdoms, and can be directly related to Christian ideas of dragons, and their representation of sin and chaos. They are the antagonists, the embodiment of pure evil, and the direct opposite of Beowulf, who is the pure-hearted, brave hero. It can also be seen that they are greedy, as the dragon that Beowulf slays as an old man is guarding his treasure, when a thief disturbs him, causing the dragon to wreak havoc on Beowulf’s kingdom. *Beowulf* is a classic story of good versus evil, the theme of “good” represented through the kind, courageous savior, and “bad” shown through ugly, terrorizing monsters.

Saint Margaret of Antioch first appeared in ninth century Greek Christian stories, where she was known as Marina, and often depicted battling a demon. In the story, she successfully defeated the demon, and therefore became known as a protector against demonic powers. Once her story moved to the West, her protection narrowed down to that of newborns against demonic possessions or other birth defects. Then, according to Western stories, Romans persecuted her for her Christianity, and her refusal to marry Olybrius, a Roman governor. As punishment, the devil in disguise of a dragon swallowed her; however, she saved herself by making the sign of a cross, which caused her to burst from the dragon, unharmed (Reames, Blalock, and Larson). In this

story, the dragon obviously plays the role of the devil, representing everything that is evil, but is overcome by Saint Margaret's faith. In both *Beowulf* and the story of Saint Margaret, dragons, which are symbolic of evil, are overcome by goodness, which, in *Beowulf*, is his heroism, and in Saint Margaret's story, it's her faith. Both hold the message that goodness overcomes evil.

Dragons play a small but crucial role in the famous legend of King Arthur. First, Arthur's surname is Pendragon, which, as stated previously, means "head" or "chief" dragon. And his family crest is a red dragon. At the start of the legend, long before Arthur's birth, Merlin, the prophetic wizard informs the King Vortigern that the tower he is building will not stand, because it is being built on top of a den of two fighting dragons. One red, one white. Once the dragons are released, the white dragon kills the red one, and then dies itself. Merlin tells the king that the dragons represent him and the ones who will defeat him. However, the dragons hold a second prophecy, about the fall of Camelot, and King Arthur. The red dragon represents Arthur, and the white one Mordrid, who will eventually kill Arthur, then die himself (*Many Monsters to Destroy*). In the legend of King Arthur, the purpose of the dragons is for more prophetic and symbolic reasons than other stories. They do play an important role, however, as they foresee the downfall of Arthur, who, according to legend, is the best king Britain has ever known, long before he was even born. The dragons show that Arthur's fate was set in stone. They also represent, as they do in so many other legends, an uncontrollable rage and passion.

Dragons in Eastern and Asian mythology have very different meanings to Western dragons. In China, they are known as one of the four primary spiritual animals, along with the phoenix, the unicorn and the tortoise. They are known as majestic animals that lived in rivers, lakes, and oceans, and roam the skies (*Chinese Dragon: A Powerful Metaphor in Chinese Cultural History*). In original mythology, dragons were a rain divinity, and there are rain rituals that date back to the 500s, and are still performed today, involving dragons. There are four types of Chinese dragons; Celestial dragons, known in Chinese as Tianlong, which guard the gods; the Dragons of hidden treasure, or Fuzanglong; the Earth dragons, known as Dilong which control the waterways; and the Spiritual dragons, Shenlong, which control the rain and wind. Many people believed that Earth and Spiritual dragons were the most important, and they were made dragon kings, Longwang, gods who lived in the ocean and made it rain, and protected sailors (long). One of the dragon's greatest powers was transformation. It had the power to become human or animal, but still maintain a dragon's true nature. It's highly associated with wisdom, and feared and revered because of its control over the weather. It is said that they were able to create lightning with their eyes, wind with their wings, and rain with their breath. They were known as the "rain masters," and every river and lake was home to a dragon. Chinese dragons took thousands of years to reach maturity. They mated in the form of snakes, and left their eggs by bodies of water. The eggs took a thousand years to hatch, and when they did, it was accompanied by rain and thunder. They took over a thousand years to become fully-grown, and five hundred more to grow their wings. They were a symbol of the emperor, who supposedly had dragon's blood in him. Only the emperors could have dragons with five claws, every other dragon had three or four. Dragons are also associated with the seasons, as they made rain for crop in the spring, and hibernated in their underwater homes during the fall. Their color depends on what power they have, blue dragons were associated with spring, red and black with storms and clouds, and yellow with the sun (*Chinese Dragon: A Powerful Metaphor in Chinese Cultural History*). In China, there were a lot of stories and myths surrounding dragons. These magnificent beasts had many different meanings and purposes, and were some of the most worshipped creatures in China.

Dragon mythology from other Asian countries, such as Japan, Korea, and Indonesia, is largely based off of the dragons from China. China had introduced the idea of dragons to Buddhism by the ninth century, and by that time it had spread to other places in Asia, and the dragon became known as one of the protectors of Buddhism. In both China and Japan, the same character for dragon is used in many temple names, and dragons have been carved into the walls of many temples. The number of claws a dragon has seems to have some significance in dragon lore in all of these countries. Japanese dragons only have three claws, while the common Chinese dragon, has four, and the imperial dragon, or the dragon of the imperial family, has five. Korean imperial dragons have five claws as well, and Indonesian dragons have four. According to the Chinese, dragons originated in China, and further away from China they are, the fewer claws they have. Dragons only exist in China, Korea, Indonesia, and Japan, because if they went any further, they would lose all of their claws. In Japanese mythology, dragons originated in Japan, and the further dragons went from Japan, the more claws they would have, which is why they can't go further than China, because they would gain too many claws (*Dragons, Dragon Art, and Dragon Lore in Japan, Buddhism & Shintoism*).

There are countless Asian myths involving dragons, most attributing to the Chinese belief that dragons were powerful, spiritual animals to be revered. In many of these myths, dragons are a source of goodness, as opposed to their Western counterparts. One myth in China goes that six or seven thousand years ago, the early Chinese believed that certain plants or animals were able to overcome nature's fury. Different tribe used animals or plants as their totem or guardian to protect them. One tribe had a snake as their totem, which they called a dragon. Whenever they conquered another tribe they would add a part of their totem to the snake. Soon, the dragon had the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, eyes of a hare, ears of a bull, neck of a snake, belly of a clam, scales of a carp, claws of an eagle, and the paws of a tiger. Later, it was said that the dragon also had whiskers, and the voice of a gong. The dragon is often shown with a pearl, which is its most precious possession, and the source of its power (*Chinese Dragon: A Powerful Metaphor in Chinese Cultural History*). Other myths tell of the dragon kings, which were dragons that lived in the sea. They can change their form, and they live in a giant underwater palace, ruling over their subjects. They can bring rainfall and change the weather. There are four types of dragon kings, Dragon King of the East Sea (Ao Guang), Dragon King of the South Sea (Ao Qin), Dragon King of the West Sea (Ao Run) and Dragon King of the North Sea (Ao Shun).



Chen Rong's Nine Dragons, representing each animal part that makes up the dragon

Not only have dragons managed to influence almost every civilization across the globe, they have managed to stay incredibly relevant in literature and pop culture throughout the centuries. As a culture, there is a fascination with dragons. No fantasy novel is complete without one. They are seen in movies, games, television shows, and even on clothing. They have a very different connotation nowadays than they did during the Middle Ages, however. While they're still seen as fierce, violent, and dangerous, more often than not, they are good, rather than bad. They are often sources of help and guidance. Many times, they are a dying race, driven to the remotest corners of the Earth by humans when they began to take over the world with Industrialism. There are periods of time when dragons are in the background of pop culture, lurking in the midst of obscure novels and low-budget movies, but they always make a comeback. Recently, their popularity has risen with that of the HBO television show, *Game of Thrones*, in which one of the characters, Daenerys Stormborn, has three dragons at her bidding. As well as the three-part movie adaptations of *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien, in which a great dragon, Smaug the Terrible, is the primary antagonist. Dragons have managed to stick around throughout the centuries and throughout cultures. Their meaning changes, and varies depending on the time and place, but no matter what they symbolize, they are prevalent in any story or myth they are a part of.

In conclusion, many animals, real or imaginary, have been used to show ideas, symbolize things, and teach lessons. One of the predominant figures in mythology of almost every recorded culture or religion, is the dragon. The dragon has played a large role in stories and myths from places all around the world, and to each place, they have a different significance. Two of the most well known examples of this are the Western dragon, and the Eastern dragon, each meaning very different things to their people. One being benevolent, and the protector against evil spirits, and the other *being* the evil spirits. It's fascinating that virtually the same creature should have such different effects on these cultures.

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