



Dragons

A dragon is a legendary creature that can be found in many cultures worldwide. Dragons are usually reptilian. A reptile is a class of animal which includes lizards, crocodiles, snakes, turtles, and tortoises. These animals have dry, scaly skin and lay soft-shelled eggs on land. The way many imagine dragons can vary greatly. Dragons in western cultures are often seen as winged, horned, and able to breathe fire. Dragons in eastern cultures are usually wingless, very intelligent creatures with four legs and long, snake-like bodies. Some dragons have cat features such as a thin tail or eyes with a slit iris. Some dragons look more like birds with scales. Some look like giant, colorful lizards or dinosaurs. Most dragons seem to live in forests, swamps, or caves.

Many scholars believe that the idea of dragons may have come from extinct, migrating crocodiles or were how ancient cultures explained the dinosaur fossils that they discovered. They would not have had the science to understand what the fossils were and so they made up stories to explain these terrifying animals that they found buried in the earth. Scholars also believe that the name “dragon” probably comes from the Greek word “drakon” which means “serpent” or “giant seafish.”

Stories and pictures of dragons can be found in cultures all around the world. In Korea dragons had long beards and were the symbol of the monarch. Some of their kings were described as descendants of dragons.

In China, dragons were thought to mean good fortune and many East Asian deities and demigods have dragons as their personal mounts or companions. Dragons became associated with the emperor. During Chinese imperial history, the emperor was the only one allowed to have dragons on his house, clothing, or personal articles.

Japan seems to have borrowed many of their legends about dragons from China. However, their dragons are mostly water deities associated with rainfall and bodies of water. They are usually large serpentine creatures with clawed feet and no wings. It was believed that dragons could be appeased with metal.

In India, dragons also had a lot of connection with water. Indra, the god of storms battles Vrtra, a giant serpent who represents drought. In the stories, Indra uses a thunderbolt to battle Vrtra and clears the path for rain. This may explain why the country of Bhutan has Druk the Thunder Dragon as one of its national symbols.

Dragons are often associated with gods or deities. In Egypt they believed that they lived in the underworld. In Iran (formerly known as Persia), dragons were considered demons, but were also used on some banners of war. Dragons are even mentioned in the Bible. In Israel and Judah it is said that the sea dragon Leviathan is slain by The Lord, God of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah as part of the creation of the world and that this destruction is part of the Lord's impending overhaul of universal order.

Another dragon similarity can be found in Vietnam where the god dragon, a mythical creature, was often used as a deity symbol and associated with royalty. Similar to other cultures, dragons in Vietnamese culture are associated with creation and life.

Albania has a long list of mythical figures that are described as serpentine dragons. In their folklore, a demonic water serpent goes through a metamorphosis with four distinct phases if it lives many years without being seen by a human. In the last phase, it is described as a huge, multi-headed, fire-spitting female serpent which causes drought, storms, flooding, earthquakes, and other natural disasters against mankind. In their stories, she is usually fought and defeated by a drangue, a semi-human, winged, divide

hero and protector of humans. When Albania would have heavy thunderstorms, it was believed that this was the result of their battles.

Of course, Ancient Greece is famous for its myths, deities, and legendary creatures. While the Greek word “drákōn” is usually translated as “dragon” it can also mean “snake”. However, it usually refers to a kind of a serpent that either has supernatural characteristics or is controlled by some supernatural power. The Iliad is a major epic ancient Greek poem written by Homer and contains the first mention of a dragon in Greek literature. The king in the story is named Agamemnon and has a blue dragon motif on his sword belt and an emblem of a three-headed dragon on his breastplate.

Interestingly, in Mesopotamia, the ancient people across the Near East believed in creatures similar to what we call “dragons”, even though they were not aware of dinosaurs or similar creatures in the distant past. There must have been no fossils in their area. Ancient Mesopotamian literature references both benevolent or kind dragons and malevolent or evil dragons. In Sumerian poetry, great kings were often compared to a gigantic, serpentine monster. Ancient Mesopotamian artwork from as far back as 2334 BC had a draconic creature with the foreparts of a lion and the hind-legs, tail, and wings of a bird.

We are, perhaps, most familiar with the dragons that developed in western Europe during the Middle Ages. The period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries shows the height of European interest in dragons as living creatures. Many are familiar with the name Merlin in English literature and there are many dragons in his adventures.

Dragons continue to be featured in many works of modern literature and art. This fantasy genre is very popular among adults and children. In children’s works, dragons are not frightening but are harmless, kind, and inferior to humans. They often fulfill the role of a magic, fairy tale helper. They are shown living in contact with humans or in isolated communities of only dragons. This portrayal of dragons grew more and more rare after the 1960’s because of a demand for more serious children’s literature.

For adult literature, dragons are most often set in Medieval times and are almost always in the fantasy literature genre. Once in awhile you may find a dragon in the more technological world of science fiction. Modern books that contain dragons include J.R.R Tolkien's "The Hobbit", J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, Anne McCaffrey's "Dragon Riders of Pern", Ursula K. LeGuin's "Earth Sea Cycle", George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series, and Christopher Paolini's "Inheritance Cycle".

Of course, older adults would probably say the most famous dragon was very kind and friendly. A poem written by Leonard Lipton inspired Peter Yarrow (of the singing group Peter, Paul, and Mary) to write a song called "Puff the Magic Dragon" in the early 1960's. Dragons have also been a main feature of the role-playing-game Dungeons & Dragons (also known as D&D).

Dragons have been called the emblem of fantasy. The male hero's fight against the dragon emphasizes and celebrates his masculinity. In children's literature, the friendly dragon becomes a powerful ally in battling the child's fears. As a fantastic character, a dragon could have a huge variety of features and could be the color of any choice from our imaginations. They may be scary, friendly, or simply a misunderstood animal acting on instinct. Real or not, they definitely are a huge part of our world.