



The Origin of Dragons

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Abstract. – This paper addresses a question that has puzzled scholars for more than a century: “Why is a belief in dragons found over much of the earth?” It argues that dragons evolved from rainbows through the concept of the rainbow serpent, a concept that itself extends far back into the Pleistocene. In this perspective many seemingly arbitrary traits which are widely associated with dragons are seen to have a physical explanation. [Dragon, rainbow serpent, rainbow]

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1 Introduction

It is a striking fact that a belief in dragons is part of many cultural traditions. At least since the publication of Charles Gould’s “Mythical Monsters” in 1886, and Grafton Elliott Smith’s “The Evolution of the Dragon” in 1919, there has been a general recognition that the idea of the dragon is a worldwide phenomenon. But if dragons do not exist, how could such a convergence of beliefs arise?

Smith was so impressed with the similarities in the form of dragon beliefs that he concluded they must have a common origin. Others, following the psychologist C. G. Jung, have suggested that dragons are “archetypes” – symbols acquired in the remote past and genetically transmitted for millennia as an innate property of the human mind. Still others have proposed that dragons were inspired by the fossilized bones or eggs of Archosauria, or by sightings of living organisms unknown to science, or that they may be symbols of clouds,

mist, rain, or thunder. None of these explanations has ever been satisfactory, failing to answer even the most basic questions: Why are dragons so often associated with waterfalls, pools, and caves? Why are they widely regarded as controllers of rain? Why are they typically portrayed as chimerical serpents, sporting horns, hair, feathers, or other bodily attributes characteristic of warm-blooded animals in conjunction with the body of a snake? Why are they sexed at all, but more particularly why, in widely separated parts of the world, are they regarded as androgynous? Why do they live in terrestrial water sources and yet take flight at the time of the rains? Why are they attacked by thunder or lightning? Why do they breathe fire? Why do they often guard a treasure, in particular a hoard of gold?

Put somewhat simplistically, the thesis of this paper is that dragons are the end point of a conceptual development which began with rainbows, hence:

rainbow → dragon

The claim that dragons evolved from rainbows rests upon a more general and ultimately more significant thesis, namely that the idea of the dragon arose through processes of reasoning which do not differ essentially from those underlying modern scientific explanations. Far from being the product of a capricious imagination, the dragon was mentally constructed in many parts of the world as a by-product of 1. meticulously accurate observations of weather phenomena, and 2. an earnest but unsuccessful attempt to grasp the causality of natural events, particularly those relating