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Abstract

A review of Daniel Ogden’s *The Dragon in the West: From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend*.

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The Dragon in the West

From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend

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THE DRAGON IS PERHAPS one of the most iconic monsters in contemporary fantasy fiction, but it is a creature that has deep roots in our cultural history. In *The Dragon in the West: From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend*, Daniel Ogden presents a well-written, extensively researched, and expertly pieced-together examination of representations of dragons in the cultural history of the western world. The book includes an in-depth provenance of the dragon, its origins and development, and the way it has grown from worms and snakes into the beast that is more familiar in its current incarnations. This might not be a study aimed at a casual reader, or even most fantasy scholars, but for someone with an interest in the dragons of ancient history, Ogden offers a wealth of detail.

Ogden sets out to answer the question: where do dragons as we now know them come from? His approach to the subject is largely chronological, and the book is divided into three main parts, tracing the evolution of the dragon (or dragon-like form) from ancient Greek and Roman traditions in the section “Heroes,” through early Christianity in “Saints,” and onto the Germanic traditions in “Vikings.” The first of these sections, “Heroes,” is the longest but each part of the book contains thematic chapters that treat the subject in great depth. There is also a brief introduction and a conclusion, in which Ogden returns to his initial questions and summarizes his deductions, namely, that there are six core motifs in dragon narratives, that emerge, sometimes with additions, throughout the history of the dragon in the Graeco-Latin, Christian, and Germanic traditions. In the book he goes into great detail in his attempt to explain where the dragons of today come from, and Ogden lets his many examples make the argument for the evolution of the dragon as we know it in pop-culture today.

The chapters in the “Heroes” section focus on the various dragon types that appeared in classical antiquity. Starting from Ogden’s basic assertion that the ancient *drakōn* can be “conceptualized as ‘a snake and something more,’” (40) the text analyses the origin, mythos, story, and archeological evidence of various dragon forms. It also includes a chapter that provides an explanation of how the dragon developed into something we can recognize today. The second section, “Saints,” examines the dragon in early Christian lore, following on from the last example in the “Heroes” section and showing how the dragon continued to evolve. This is generally a compendium of all the battles between various dragons and saints found in hagiographies, with a glimpse of relevant sections of the Bible. One of the main differences emerging from this section is that unlike the classical era, dragons changed very little across time within the Christian tradition. Finally, the third part, “Vikings,” deals more briefly with Germanic dragons, particularly those of the Norse traditions. All three sections follow on from one another in terms of overall argument about the evolution of the dragon, and the sections themselves are in chronological order so that the reader may view the effect across time of this evolution.

This is a book that delves deeply into its subject matter, and it is a study primarily targeting an audience of historians or classics scholars – as such it very much reflects Ogden’s main field of study as a Professor of Ancient History at the University of Essex. The multitude of details makes the text almost more of an encyclopedia as it lists the many forms in which dragons have been found in western antiquity. Nevertheless, Ogden does have an argument, or multiple strands of arguments, that extend throughout the text as he discusses which features found in antiquity and myth came to be part of the representation of dragons as we now know them. The six common motifs that he identifies are parsed at length throughout the various sections, with dozens of examples for each. However, because of the clearly marked sub-sections, a reader can easily skip to “entries” of interest, rather than reading straight through. There is also a comprehensive index that allows readers to identify subjects, such as particular stories or dragons, that are addressed in various locations in the text. This ameliorates the challenge for scholars who, for instance, come to the book with a particular dragon or text in mind. Pieces of interest to a scholar of *Beowulf* in particular, for example, can be found scattered throughout pages 322, 334, 337, and 341–342,

allowing the reader to select origins of the story, story versions, or configurations of the dragon. This makes it sound piecemeal but the organization of the chapters makes sense if one reads straight through – each section links in some way to the next (though how each piece links is dependent on content rather than chronology or theme).

The part that I found among the most interesting and useful for a fantasy scholar was chapter 4, “From Worm to Wyvern.” The chapter traces how the two-legged “wyvern” eventually became the four-legged dragon of modern times and discusses its links to Christianity. Ogden also examines the appearance of wings in dragons, something that had been missing until this point in history. He hypothesizes that the *drakōn* of antiquity merged in various ways and at various times with the sea serpent, and then with winged demons. These combinations of an animalian head with a snake-like body and wings thus began to shape into what we usually think of as a modern dragon. He also touches on other elements of how the dragons look and where various incarnations come from, in addition to attributes and other details that allow dragons to be differentiated from other forms of monsters.

The book is sprinkled with numerous tidbits that would probably interest any dragon aficionado. One such detail is Ogden’s discussion of the (dragon’s) cave, and its particular significance in relation to snakes. He notes that caves are both a bigger version of where the dragon’s cousin, the snake, lives, and that caves are traditionally associated with the underworld, and thus hell, and occasionally evil as well (135). In this way, Ogden links his overall argument to exploring how we got from classical myths and natural forms, like snakes, to what we think of as dragon lore today. Another intriguing example is the entry on Cerberus, the hound(s) that guard the gates to the Greek underworld. Ogden makes a compelling argument that Cerberus is a dragon (*drakōn*), based on its nature rather than its looks (29). This is one of the many small details contributing to and supporting his overall thesis about how the contemporary dragon came into existence. Other interesting observations include how the dragons of much Norse and Germanic mythology were generally snake-like, but the introduction of flying to the Christian narrative meant that wings were sometimes superficially added to otherwise land-bound dragons in Norse tales (331). Ogden also explores what he considers a unique aspect to the Germanic dragon tradition, the interest in how dragons

came to be, something he contends the classical and hagiographical traditions rarely seem to focus on (332).

My main concern in the context of this review has nothing to do with the actual qualities of the book itself. It is a fine study that takes on its subject with great attention and care, targeting a particular audience. However, it might not be a book entirely suited to scholars who study dragons from a fantasy literature or popular culture perspective. The myriad examples are somewhat overwhelming for a reader looking to gain more general insight into the significance and development of dragon imagery throughout history. For someone interested first and foremost in the dragon's more modern preoccupations, it is perhaps best to read the introduction and skim most of the chapters for tidbits of interest, or treat it as a reference text and approach it via the index. This is not to denigrate the text, but this book is simply packed with too much detail for the non-specialist. Scholars of fantasy may use it to learn where many of the fantastic dragon traits may have come from, such as its malevolence, greed, and appearance, but if they need any lengthier discussions about the fantasy dragons of "J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, or George R. R. Martin," (1) for example, they must look elsewhere. That is not to say that Ogden's work is without value for fantasy scholarship: scholars who are looking for specific historical antecedence, or people who have a deep interest in (or love for) dragons, will appreciate the level of detail involved in this book.

Overall, *The Dragon in the West* is a very dense but readable examination of classical, Christian, and Germanic antecedents of the dragons we now find in speculative fiction. Ogden provides serious scholars of antiquity with much to consider. Though fantasy is not even remotely the focus of his study, those with more casual interest in dragons can also find something of interest, as might creative writers looking for new inspiration from the dragons of old. As this is a book packed with details and tales, at a reasonable price, it belongs on the shelf of any serious scholar of dragonlore and in all research library collections, but is likely too specialized to be used for undergraduate classrooms. Personally, I look forward to a book that would bridge Ogden's research with work already done on dragons in speculative fiction: such a work could complete the cultural history of the western dragon.