

Norwich – The Most Magical Dragon City of the Western World!

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Norwich is a medieval city, with a wonderfully rich history of culture and tradition, of industry and society, of spirituality and magic!

And it’s a Dragon City!

But – WHY a Dragon?

Well . . .

This is a story as long as a Dragon’s tail!

As mysterious as a Dragon’s eye!

As wise and bewildering by turns, as a Dragon’s speech!

As complex as the arrangement of its scales, as marvelous as a Dragon’s wings, and as full of fire as a Dragon’s breath!

Hold on to your hats! And see if you can keep up with the Flight of the Dragon!

The Greek word *drakon* is related to *drakos*, ‘eye’, and in classical legend the idea of watching is retained in the story of the dragon who guards the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides, and the dragon-serpent in the story of the Garden of Eden, who watches over the tree of knowledge. In many stories women are guarded by dragons – in earlier Goddess-myths, they are in the role of kindly and watchful protectors and friends – in later patriarchal-retellings, the story is twisted, and the women are being held captive by the dragons, as prisoners. And this kind of contrasting meaning in myth and legend, gives us a clue as to the many and varied associations of Dragons themselves . . .

But what does a dragon look like?

All over the world, images of dragons can be found.

Babylonian dragons show images of a long cat-like body with scales, lion forelegs, bird hind legs, snakelike head and tail, a crown of horns. Such composite animals were usually symbols of the seasons. In alchemy, the wingless dragon represented earth or ‘fixed’ elements; the winged dragon represented volatile ones.

Chinese Taoist symbolism revered the dragon as a spirit of “the Way”, bringing eternal changes. It was shown coiling among clouds, revealing only parts of itself. Often the dragon was the guardian of the Flaming Pearl, representing spiritual perfection. White dragons represented the moon.

The European dragon was often synonymous with the Ourobouros or Earth Serpent. In Brittany he was “the dragon of the Bretons”. Each May Day, it was said, he uttered a terrible scream that could be heard underneath every hearth fire, demanding burial of a tub of mead (fermented honey drink – highly alcoholic with one powerful kick!) as an offering to him.

And yet the God of Moses (Numbers 21: 9; Kings 18:4) was the healing serpent Nehushtan, derived from the intertwined double Mesopotamian dragon-serpent Ningishzida, or Sachan, one of the lovers of the Goddess Ishtar. The god’s symbol was a double-sexed, two-headed serpent – later the same symbol appears as the Greek medicinal god Asclepius’s healing caduceus – is

found again in ancient India, and in Aztec and North American Indian culture – and still today, is the symbol of the British Medical Association, and many other healing and medical organisations.

Early Hebrews adopted the serpent-god all their contemporaries revered, and the Jewish priestly clan of Levites were 'sons of the Great Serpent' ie of Leviathan, 'the wriggly one'. Gnostic literature praised the serpent of Eden for bringing the 'light' of knowledge to humanity, against the will of a tyrannical god who wanted to keep humans ignorant. This view of the Eden myth dated back to Sumero-Babylonian sources that said man and woman were both made by the Earth Mother out of red mud (Hebrew *adamah* – 'bloody clay') and placed in the garden to look after it and nurture its creatures.

The dragon-serpent as a symbol of truth, of wisdom, of knowledge and of regeneration appears in countless cultures and traditions throughout history. And as it sheds its skin, and is reborn, it is often considered immortal.

Christian stories tell of numerous Saints – supposed to be real people that the Catholic Church has decided have done such miraculous things that they deserve to be canonised – who slaughtered dragons in the name of Christianity, and that dragons are devilish (Revelation 12:9 'the great dragon' and 'that old serpent') – the devil of course only existing in this one religious tradition! – and evil, and representative of sinful doings, deserving only to be crushed (Psalm 91:13 'the dragon shalt thou trample under feet') and destroyed.

And yet Plutarch wrote of its Godliness: 'it feeds upon its own body, even so all things spring from God and will be resolved into deity again', the gospel of Matthew (10:16) declared 'be ye therefore as wise as serpents'.

Among the many saints usually pictured as dragon-slayers are St Michael, St George, St Margaret, St Samson (archbishop of Dol), St Clement of Metz, St Romain of Rouen (who according to the Church's story destroyed the huge dragon La Gargouille ('gargoyle'? A nature spirit? – which ravaged the River Seine), St Philip the Apostle, St Martha (who is said to be the slayer of the dragon Tarasque, at Aix-la-Chapelle), St Florent (who killed a dragon which lived in the River Loire), St Cado, St Maudet, and St Pol (who performed similar feats in Brittany), and St Keyne of Cornwall. What stories of derring-do! How they must have impressed the illiterate, impoverished un-travelled inhabitants of medieval Europe!

However the myths are even more complex than at first they appear.

St Michael was a Judeo-Christian archangel who had inherited the myths and attributes of Hermes (Mercury) and Heimdall – from his Last Trump trumpet, to the sacred Mercurial Mounts where the Sun can be seen being renamed for him – St Michael's Mounts. Often pictured in golden armour, with a flaming sword, he was an ancient representation of the sun! As cosmic messenger, who like Mercury wore or carried dragon-serpents, he may have partnered the Earth Dragon as Michael was also connected with the healing qualities of a dragon-serpent deity. Later, this aspect of him was played down by the church, and his more combative role against the dragon was emphasised.

St Margaret, has become the patron saint of King's Lynn, but this is a long way from her origins. Margaret, whose name means 'pearl', hence the white flower of marguerite being hers (and also her name is a country name for the black and white magpie) was really the ancient goddess known as 'Pearl of the Sea'. 'Marga' means 'the Way' or 'the Gate' and relates to the birth-gate of the female body that we pass through as we are born. One bloodcurdlingly-inventive story of Christian teaching made Margaret the daughter of a pagan priest, who happened to spurn a rich suitor, and who then also suddenly became a Christian, and was then tortured to make her change her mind. If this wasn't bad enough, then she has to find the strength to conquer the devil in dragon form, who according to the church's story, suddenly appears before her, and swallows her. She then 'bursts' forth from the dragon, apparently 'unharm'd' – except presumably for the tortures she had already suffered!

After this she was burned, drowned, and beheaded – it seems Margaret was very hard to kill. Perhaps, due to the time she spent within the body/womb of the dragon, she retained the regenerative powers of the dragon-serpent! Primarily it seems she was an incarnation of Aphrodite, the Pearl of the Sea, who was a Goddess of sexual independence and power, and who was also the primary patron of childbearing women. She also had associations as a weather-goddess. At Upton in Norfolk, the weather-vane on the church is a dragon. The town of King's Lynn in Norfolk, whose patron saint is Margaret, has as its coat of arms three dragons' heads. Perhaps this is a reference to the triple-phase lunar moon cycle, which rules the tides? On the medieval church of St Margaret at King's Lynn is a tidal Moon Dial – completely in keeping with the Goddess Margaret of the Pearl's association with the sea. And what is the pointer on the dial? A green dragon.

Martha is another female saint with dragon connections. This time, however, unlike the Christian Margaret and Michael, Martha has Jewish associations. In the bible she is mentioned in the gospel of Matthew as being a woman who bleeds. Intriguingly, many myths of dragon-lore involve the powerful fertilising aspect of dragon-blood – that it can cause many things to germinate and sprout, and that it has many miraculous powers of healing and regeneration. The sanctity and holiness of women's menstrual blood and its lunar connection forms part of all Goddess-honouring traditions, and it may be that lunar dragon myths and blood-rites are connected in this way. At Tarascon in France, a girl or woman acts as Martha, leading the dragon Tarasque through the town. Surely for the dragon and Martha to walk together there must be a certain mutual respect and honouring of each other in the spirit of co-operation, and perhaps also an acknowledgement of the importance of lunar-regulated menstruation in a healthy woman's body?

But for centuries previously, long before Christianity came to these shores, among the ancient Britons and the Welsh the dragon was the national symbol on the war standard. Hence the term 'Pendragon' for the *dux bellorum*, or leader in war. The official emblem for Wales is still the red dragon, derived from the Great Red Serpent that once represented the old Welsh god Dewi, who later metamorphosed into Wales's mythical patron saint David. The Christian myth of this fictional saint was composed in AD 1090, five centuries after his alleged lifetime. His earlier incarnation, the red dragon, was placed on the royal arms of England by Henry VII, who was of Welsh descent. This dragon, which served as a dexter supporter, was later removed by James 1.

There are so many references to dragons in the place names of Britain that one begins to wonder if dragons were not resident there for centuries, and relatively recently too! Dragon Hill in Oxfordshire (where local legend claims St George killed the dragon), The Dragon of Wantley in South Yorkshire (where a dragon is said to have been vanquished by being kicked in the backside by spiked armour worn on the foot of a local nobleman, but then the legend goes on to say that the dragon was actually a local greedy landlord – yet, the coat-of-arms of the family had been a green dragon long before the tale...) tales of wyverns in heraldic symbolism (from Latin *vipera*, 'viper'), great Wyrms, or Orms, meaning dragon-serpent, lending their names to places like Ormesby – with their accompanying Saint's names now, of course! – and all the biblical loathing and respecting by turns, of snakes and serpents from Genesis to Revelations.

Christians usually equated the subterranean dragon with the devil. In fact the devil's nickname 'Old Harry' was taken from the Persian dragon-god Ahriman (Arimanius), the dark twin brother of the supreme god of light. Like angelic Lucifer, Ahriman had fought his brother god and had been sent down to the underworld to rule over the demons. Thus dragons became traditional guardians of buried treasure.

And what of St George, probably the most famous Dragon-Saint of all?

Well – you may not know that St George's Day was already celebrated in the spring as a Roman festival – the Feast of Pales – a fertility festival dedicated to the Goddess Pales, who was a divinity of cattle. All Italy and southern Europe knew and honoured Pales – and her name still lives on in Palestine. At her festival, the Parilia, in April 21st, the stock-keeping farmers purified their animals by driving them between blazes of fragrant woods, and then they offered a long prayer to Pales begging forgiveness for any unintended slight against nature that they had committed in the

previous year. Roman tradition believed that this would ensure the animals bore healthy offspring, and that they would not be punished for infringements against nature, such as burning the wrong dead tree. And of course, the smoke would not only cleanse and purify spiritually, but it would kill parasites on the bodies of the cattle, too.

So the Pales festival came to Britain, where the nature saviour was given the title 'Green George' – an existing name for a spirit of spring. The Green Man has many names – Green George, Green King, Jack-in-the-Green, John Barleycorn – and many customs, including the 'Wearing of the Green' through April and May. The church, once it had reached these Britain, opposed these pagan traditions, associating green with the dead, and with witches, developing the familiar superstition that "green is unlucky". Green was linked with the sexual freedom of the old rituals and the wearing of green leaves as adornment was supposed to encourage Mother Earth to clothe herself in the green of abundant crops. Fairies were said to wear green, as nature spirits, and verdant nature goddesses also. The argument that St George is an aspect of this 'greening' of the spring, is a plausible one.

Numerous stories exist of many differing 'St Georges', according to church stories, but only one is called a dragon-slayer – and even that story has many forms. Sometimes he is shown killing pestilence and disease, in the form of a dragon – which contradicts the older Goddess-iconography where the healing agent is the female dragon-serpent, or its blood or breath returning things to health and life. His emblem was a vesica piscis, a prime fertility symbol representing the genitalia of the goddess in an almond shape, but Christian authorities preferred to interpret it as a 'shield'. Still, George was so shamelessly involved in fertility rites that the church discredited him and began calling him 'the imaginary saint'.

Most scholars of Goddess tradition are aware of the argument that the Goddess as dragon represents the power within the land, and its essential strength, solidness, material presence, and cosmic place. The symbolic set-up of St George destroying the dragon could well be a twisting of the ancient balance between the seasonality of the greenness of nature, as Green Man, and the permanent presence of the earth as Goddess. The connecting of someone called St George with dragons appears to be from an 11thC story from the Eastern Roman Empire, but this was of course based on far earlier pagan legends. Earlier Greek writing talks of other Christian heroes famed for killing dragons, and the name George was included only when the story came to central Europe. Through Germany, France, and England, numerous places claim to be "where St George killed the dragon" – even as far as Libya, to Berkshire, the spot-where-it-happened is pointed out. And all over Europe, the ancient Goddess tradition, which had been there for many thousands of years, began to diminish and disappear, in the face of the single new male deity of Christian teaching. Destroying dragons in rivers, in mountains, in caves, in underground caverns – all these were places where the Goddess was honoured. Eliminating snakes similarly may reference the destruction of the Divine Feminine, and its connection with moon cycle, with healing, with regeneration and with immortality. Apart from Martha and Margaret, all the dragon-slayers seem to be male.

Churches and cathedrals are filled with images of pre-Christian ancient deities, let alone the re-named and re-worked Goddesses and Gods of old. Green Men and Women, Mermaids, Gargoyles and Dragons proliferate! The abbey tower at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk has stone dragon heads, seemingly to ward off any harm that might come to the building. And Norwich's Dragon Hall and Great Hospital both have carved dragons of a very particular kind – leafy dragons, with a multitude of green leaves sprouting prolifically from head to tail – surely some symbol of healthy, abundant leafy growth in nature.

Dragon pageantry is not limited to association with St George, and features in summer Lord Mayoral procession in Norwich, and other places – in May Day celebrations, and indeed any time that celebrating the land, what it can grow, and dancing and merriment are to feature, the dragon costumes may be part of the festivities.

SO why Norwich? Well others have written of the Guild of St George, and its charitable and social purposes, although it seems the Guild was limited to only the most wealthy as the high membership fees would have excluded all but the richest knights, ladies, merchants and clerics! From the earliest records of the Guild Assembly in 1408 right up to 2008 the dragon has been part of Norwich's festivals and hi-jinks.

It intrigues me though, why if the Church was promoting the story of male St George, on the side of Christianity and the force of good, endlessly depicted slaughtering the female Dragon for being non-Christian and therefore a power of evil, why the Guilds chose to wear and honour the dragon, creating such elaborate and finely-worked costumes! Why the dragon is in the Ethelbert Gate of the cathedral, and not some other more toeing-the-line image of Christian symbolism? Why did the merchant Robert Toppes choose to put an exquisitely carved green and red dragon in the roof spandrels of his lavish home and showroom on King Street, now Dragon Hall – as a symbol of life, of abundance, of prosperity? Seems surprising to go back to such a visibly non- indeed *pre*-Christian symbolic element in such a Christian-run society as medieval England was . . .

In 1532, the St George parade added to the entourage of the Dragon, St George, the whifflers (the sword-bearers who cleared the way for the dragon in the parades) the character of 'Saint' Margaret – also known as 'The Maid', or 'The Lady' – both titles of the ancient Great Goddess. Having been shut down in 1547, by Protestants the Guild was reinstated in 1548 devoid of its Catholic associations, and for many years depending on which monarch ruled and what their religious perspective was, the ceremonials came and went. By 1835, when the Municipal Corporations Act abolished many traditions of the country, The Pockthorpe Guild of Norwich, founded in 1772, took over dragon-parades, taking their dragon from pub to pub, snapping its jaws around hats which it would return if you paid a penny. The Costessey Guild had its own dragon too, taking it on a pub crawl every Whit Tuesday. Through war-time to the 1950s, dragons in Norwich seemed to disappear, but rose again, as if from the dead! Now new dragon costumes have been made, and Snap and Klang are brought out to meet new admiring faces and dance, sing and make merry!

How good it is, that the Ancient Dragon Goddess of old continues to this day to be part of Norwich's life and pageantry!

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