Serpents and Dragons: Crash Course World Mythology #38

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=SWXNSkE3YEk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/SWXNSkE3YEk

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and today we continue our look at mythical creatures with one of the most popular beasts of all time: dragons. And also serpents, but mostly dragons.

Hide your thatched roof cottages and get ready for some burninating.

===== Intro (0:17) - (0:26) =====

To talk about dragons, we gotta start with snakes. In myth, snakes often serve a function similar to more terrifying creatures. They're etymologically similar too. In fact, the Latin word "draco" is used for both dragons and snakes.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the most important serpent is that apple-shilling, well... snake from the Garden of Eden. Fun fact: he didn't really start out as a snake. He had legs until the Lord punished him by making him slither on his belly. No more scampering for that guy.

In the Babylonian stories of creation we learn about the enormous snake, Tiamat, which we've mentioned before. Across the ancient Near East we find a number of snakes associated with goddesses, Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Wadjet in Egypt, and even Athena in Greece when she wasn't hanging out with owls.

Somewhere along the way though, snakes start sort of morphing into dragons. Not literally, that would be dope though, I mean in their stories.

Babylon had guardian dragons called mušá¸«uššu with a serpent's head and body, the front feet of a lion, and a poisonous scorpion's tail. In Biblical Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar kept a dragon in the temple of the god Bel and suggested that Daniel, a noble youth of Jerusalem, worship it.

Daniel said that he preferred to worship the Lord and that he could kill that dragon even without a weapon. Daniel killed it by feeding it cakes of boiled pitch, fat, and hair, which made it explode. For this mess, the king threw Daniel into the lion's den.

In the Persian Book of Kings, the hero Rostam kills a dragon that can make itself invisible. He does this with the help of his trusty horse Rakhsh.

According to the long epic poem, "When Rakhsh saw the strength of its massive body bearing down on Rostam, he laid back his ears and sank his teeth into the dragon's shoulders. He tore at the dragon's flesh, and the lion-like Rostam was astonished at his ferocity."

Dragons play a significant role in Welsh mythology as well. Wales even has a red dragon on its flag. And this isn't just any dragon, it appears in the nation's cultural epic, the Mabinogion.

Ages ago, the red dragon was living peacefully on the British Isles. And then, one day, an all-white dragon invades and attempts to seize control of Britain.

The red dragon defends its territory and the two become locked in a fierce battle. The noise of their fighting is terrible! It causes crops to fail and women to miscarry, so the British king Lludd digs a huge pit and fills it with mead.

Turns out that dragons, at least British ones, can't resist mead and so they drink the pit dry and fall into a deep sleep. With the two beasts unconscious, Lludd and his men rush to imprison them.

Over in England, Saint George is famous for slaying a dragon, though the story takes place in Silene, likely modern-day Libya. There, the country is being tormented by a dragon and the only way to appease it is to sacrifice a sheep and a virgin every day.

And this goes on for quite some time, but when the king's daughter is the chosen virgin, Saint George appears. Seems like maybe he could have shown up a little bit earlier, but in any case, he's here now. He charges the dragon and he wounds it with a lance.

Then he asks the princess for her garter and throws it around the dragon's neck. After this, the dragon is so docile that it follows the princess back to the capital, where Saint George kills it in the town square after making all of the people promise to convert to Christianity.

Man, sometimes mythological stories feel a lot like Mad Libs.

GEORGE defeated a DRAGON with a GARTER and got the PEASANTS to respect MY BUTT -- hey Stan, come on.

Nearby in Germany, we meet another famous dragon, Fafnir, who actually started out life as a dwarf prince. In German mythology, Fafnir and his brother Regin kill their father, the dwarf king, to steal his gold.

Then Fafnir takes the gold from his brother and turns into a dragon to guard it. Fafnir is killed and his crimes avenged by the great hero Sigurd, aka Siegfried.

No word on whether he used a giant ice spear or brought Fafnir back to life as Ice Fafnir.

Also, quick aside: if you've pulled a caper that requires you to transform into a dragon, things probably aren't going to turn out well for you.

We can find even more tales of dragons and some of a slightly different variety by moving to Asia. According to Lihui Yang and Daming An, authors of the Handbook of Chinesee Mythology, "The dragon "is the controller of the rain, the river, the sea and all other kinds of water; symbol of divine power and energy, great helper of heroes; and bearer of gods and demigods.""

To see these Chinese dragons in action, we're going to look at a story of creation for dragons and humanity alike in the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (5:25) =====

Long ago, the Earth was divided into five parts: birds lived in the East, ruled by the phoenix; beasts lived in the South under their king the tiger; the West was home to insects, ruled by the bee; and the North was occupied by fishes and shrimp under the benign rule of the giant turtle. A monkey with six arms and three heads lived in the center.

And one by one, the kings of the other four regions would visit this monkey and have sex with her. Eventually, the monkey became pregnant and she gave birth to 99 eggs. All of the eggs except the biggest one were stolen by the king of the other four realms.

The monkey guarded that last egg until it hatched. And out of this egg came the python. His mother ordered him to retrieve the other 98 eggs and so off he went on his quest, defeating and devouring all of the birds, beasts, insects, fishes, and shrimp that got in his way.

But as he ate all that protein, the python changed appearance. He grew wings, his head turned into a bull's head with deer horns, and a pig's mouth. He grew hawk's legs attached to his serpent's torso. He became, not a python, but a dragon.

The tiger, the bee, the phoenix, and the turtle were so frightened that they returned the other eggs to him without question. The dragon then broke every egg in turn, each one giving birth to a new creature, all of them spread out across the earth except the last two.

Out of those emerged man and woman, and from these two people, all of the other humans were born.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (7:16) =====

So it's been a while since we've had a nice creation story. Maybe you can see just how different this dragon is from the ones in the Western tradition. The deer horns and the pig mouth are notable, for instance.

Chinese dragons have lots of variation. In some stories, the dragon has a horse's head. Its eyes are sometimes those of a rabbit. Sometimes it has the scales of a fish and the abdomen of a clam. Sometimes tiger paws and sometimes eagle claws.

The Chinese dragon also has a special relationship to water, which we're going to see in this next story.

Once, a black dragon is born to a poor human family in Shandong province, which is a pretty serious shock to his human mother. It is such a shock that when he starts to breastfeed, she faints. And I mean, can you really blame her?

When his father comes home and finds his wife unconscious with a strange dragon baby, he grows angry and hits the baby dragon with a spade, cutting off part of its tail.

The injured dragon is so upset that he bursts through the roof and flies away. Many stories say that he goes to northeast China and settles in the Black Dragon River where he becomes the river's god. He takes his mother's name, Li and becomes Short-Tailed Old Li.

Years later, back in Shandong province, Short-Tailed Old Li's mother dies. The dragon flies back to visit her grave, which he does every year on the same date, May 13, to pay his respects.

Each time he returns he brings rain, and so from then on, he's worshipped as a rain god.

Throughout Chinese myths, dragons are associated with rain and storms. Wherever a dragon appears, there are clouds. And because of this, the Chinese developed a number of rituals to get dragons to show up and make it rain during droughts.

One of these is to throw a tiger's bone into a pool where the dragon lives. Tigers are the enemies of dragons and so their bones should irritate them, causing them to fly up wildly out of the pool, thus triggering a storm.

If you don't have any tiger bones around, you can also try throwing your garbage into the dragon pool. Dragons are notoriously fastidious and their inability to deal with the mess could force them to bring rain and wash the pool clean.

Dragons are also used as symbols of royal power, from Chinese Imperial Palaces to British heraldry. Kings love to see themselves as harnessing the power of dragons. The Japanese royal family even claimed descent from dragons.

Daenerys Targaryen's claim to the Iron Throne stems from her status as the Mother of Dragons. And yet, there are important differences between dragons in the East and the West.

In the West, dragons are almost always monsters with fiery breath, waiting to be offed by heroes or gods. Killing a dragon is an important rite of passage for many Western heroes. Sort of like a violent, scaly bar mitzvah with swords and fire breath.

But in Asian myths, dragons are often benign. Yes, they are powerful and fearsome, but they bring rain instead of fire, which is usually great news for agrarian people. At least in moderation.

And most uniquely, in Chinese mythology, sometimes it's the dragon that gets to be the hero.

Next time, we're going to round out our monster mash with an episode on those witches of Eastwick, those maidens of malevolence: hags!

Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time.

===== Credits (10:44) =====

Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholtz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people.

Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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Thanks for watching and maybe don't go throwing garbage in random pools looking for dragons, okay?