

ON THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF DRAGONS

by Ben Elliott

The dragons that appear in combat with the Archangel Michael or with St George, or a number of other saints, gained several of their anatomical features from texts in Scripture, though they owe as much to the Ketos [*also known as Cetus in Latin - Ed*], the sea monster from whom Perseus rescued Andromeda, and whose form personifies the Ocean to this day in the iconography of the Orthodox Church. By the 16th century in English heraldry, dragons had developed additional characteristics which deny their biblical origins, so that, sadly, the dragon that today is conquered by St George, as it is represented on the insignia of the Order of the Garter, is not a true opponent and ought to have its hind legs amputated, while frequently nowadays one finds the Archangel dealing with dragons with wings that are too large. Until the late middle ages the dragon is of serpentine or "worm" appearance, so far as its body goes, because it is equated with the serpent of the Fall of Man in Genesis III, 14; it is Satan. "Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life." Prior to this, the serpent was four-footed though depictions of it in this state are rare. Correctly, therefore, the serpent dragon ought to drag its belly upon the ground, and indeed it always used so to do, even when through merging with the Ketos it developed flippers or forelegs. This came about because the Greek word Ketos was used to translate *sea-monster* in the Book of Jonah, and in early Christian art it was a Ketos, which bears no resemblance to a whale at all, which swallowed and regurgitated the prophet. Another feature, seemingly derived by inference rather than from a text, is the smallness of the dragons' wings, when they develop, for by no means all dragons have them. The Archangel Michael defeated Satan, "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and they prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." (Revelation XII, 7-9) The size of dragons' wings, when shown in opposition to St George or Michael, again until late in the middle ages, made them incapable of re-attaining heaven. **Other texts** have also had influence, and again it has been the use of the word "dragon" in translation of the original Hebrew word meaning "sea monster" as well as its use to translate the word "jackal" that has led to some of the iconography in both the Eastern and Western Churches. In the East, the Greek translation (The Septuagint) is used; in the West, the Latin translation by St Jerome (The Vulgate) derived from both the Septuagint and the Hebrew was in use throughout the period. For example, Psalm 91, verse 13: - "You shall tread on the lion and the asp, the lion and the sea serpent you shall tread under foot" became "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder, the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet." This has influenced the creatures at the feet both of Christ and of the Archangel, as well as those at the feet of effigies of mediaeval bishops. And that these creatures personified Satan is reinforced by such texts as, "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet." (Romans XVI, 20) or, "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet." (1 Corinthians XV, 25), and by the iconography of the Conquest of Hell where hell's mouth is depicted as that of a gigantic sea monster. Most dragons, biblical and later, are to be found in association with water. It is an association of great antiquity. In the Bible, the ancient evil that lurked "in the water under the earth" (Exodus XX, 4, and see Philippians 11, 10 for a further correlation with Psalm 91) would seem to have its roots in Babylonian myth- "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon?" (Isaiah LI, 9) - a passage that refers to the primeval monster overthrown in Babylonian creation myth. Stories of heroic defeats of dragons are not uncommon in the later middle ages, and it may well be that these also derive from the Greek translation of animals such as jackals by the word "dragon" - an error continued in the Authorized Version. Since in the Bible wild animals were referred to as dragons when fierce, why not a wild boar such as that dealt with by Sir Maurice Berkeley who slew a dragon on the borders of the New Forest?