

An A to Z of Dragonlore (*third instalment*)

CENTAUR, this appears in the legends of classical antiquity and is generally shown as the upper half of a male human merged with the body and legs of a horse (thus having a total of six limbs). They were said to be very wise but unable to hold their drink. Some believe that their origin lies with the wild horse-riding tribes of the plains to the north of Greece, who were so adept at their equitation skills that they seemed to be one with their mounts. Others think that they may represent a memory of old folk clairvoyance of nature spirits, part-human, part-animal, like the Satyrs. Whatever their origin, when in archer mode, as in Sagittarius in the Zodiac, they became popular in heraldry and remain so to this day.

CERBERUS, in Greek mythology, a three-headed dog guarding the entrance to Hades, one of the monstrous offspring of Typhon and Echidna and thus the brother of Hydra and Chimaera. Some authors give him a hundred heads.

CETUS, any classical sea-monster, but notably the one slain by Perseus when rescuing Andromeda.

CHARYBDIS, a whirlpool by the straits of Messina known to the ancient Greeks who regarded it as the product of an underwater female monster.

CHIMAERA, another Typhonic monster, it was mainly goat-like but with the head of a lion and the tail of a serpent. Some descriptions give it three heads, one for each of the creature in its make-up. One theory suggests that it derives from a composite representation of the passing of the seasons indicated by signs of the Zodiac, but whatever its origin it has passed into the language as a term for any fanciful conception, particularly one with a hybrid character.

CHINTHE, this Burmese creature is sometimes said to be a fabulous beast, but is probably a lion stylized in the Burmese fashion and thus no more fabulous than the western heraldic lion, stylized in the medieval European fashion. Neither looks much like the lion known to zoology though Victorian heraldic artists did try to make their lions more naturalistic without losing their unnatural postures. The Chinthe is best known as the emblem of the Chindits.

CHIRON, a Centaur, tutor to Achilles.

COCKATRICE, although said to be a Basilisk, this is always depicted with a cockerel's head and legs, but with the scaly body and tail of a serpent. The wings may be either those of a cock or those of a bat or dragon. Some artists' licence must be allowed when there is no chance of drawing from the life.

CYCLOPS, a one-eyed monster described in Homer's Odyssey.

To be continued...

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Dragonlore

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The Arms of Downing College, Cambridge

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

Nothing of a dracological nature has been received from any of our members, except for John Davy, who has now joined me at Trinity College, Cambridge, where we are both studying Zoology. I have recruited one new member, Teddy Pelham-Clinton, a fellow zoologist, whose real love is beetles but who believes that the strict application of the principles of taxonomy would benefit the study of dragons and the like. Being a thoroughly straightforward sort of person, he is prepared to lend us his moral support and give private advice, but suspects that his professional career might be in jeopardy if he were seen to be involved in a study that some of his colleagues might regard as frivolous. Quite a dilemma! We cannot show that Dracology is a serious study while the subject is still considered to be based on idle fantasy. A solution was suggested by my tutor, W. Hamilton, a classic and a humanist, who gave his opinion that dragons should not be studied by zoologists because they are all materialists, but by students of literature who deal with the history of ideas and by art historians who are concerned with the development of pictorial imagery. This is evidently a very sensible approach since nearly all the evidence with which we deal is in the areas of art and literature and very little of it in the form of zoological specimens (and those largely suspect). John Davy has undertaken to do a survey of sources and give a critical assessment of their value, but warns that his degree studies have to take priority, and there are so many other distractions in Cambridge which appeal to us both, such as music and country dancing, debating societies and trips up the river, Goethean science and anthroposophy, that Dracology does not always get the amount of attention it deserves.

R. B.

REVIEW

The Lungfish, The Dodo, and The Unicorn: An Excursion into Romantic Zoology

By Willy Ley, New York, Viking Press, 1949

This interesting review of unconventional natural history gives some attention to fabulous beasts, as the title indicates, but very much from the point of view of a materialistic zoologist. Nevertheless his explanations of how such unlikely creatures might have entered into the lore of early naturalists is well worth consideration. His description of an experiment grafting two horn-buds on a bullock together to make a kind of unicorn is a treat.

Cambridge Dragonlore (all heraldic)

Everywhere in the town in churches, colleges, law courts, pubs even, there are versions of the Royal Arms, most of them supported by the Lion and the **Unicorn**. The latter is a fascinating beast of great antiquity and deserves a proper study of its own. It was introduced to England by James I & VI, and has remained a Royal supporter ever since, but before the Stuarts there were no fixed supporters, the Tudors (the first to make them a regular feature of their arms) using a varied selection of lions, antelopes, greyhounds and of course **Welsh Dragons**, of which there are several to be seen in Cambridge.

Another striking pair of supporters is seen over the main gates of both St John's and Christ's College, which were founded by Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of King Henry VII. Her arms adorn both these gateways supported by two huge monsters known as **Yales**. They are a bit like tusked oxen, with cloven hooves and tufted mane and tail, their white bodies scattered with golden discs, but their most striking feature is a pair of enormous curved horns, one arching back over the neck and the other curved over its nose. This creature was mentioned by Pliny, who said that it had the ability to swivel its horns in any direction. The Tudor heralds seem to have combed the ancient authors for mentions of strange beasts, which may well have been based on distorted descriptions of real animals, and then used their imaginative powers to create distinctive images of them, but, not satisfied with what they could find in classic texts, went on to invent a lot of monsters of their own with strange names.

One of the genuine classic monsters is the **Griffin**, well displayed in the arms of Downing College: a shield with eight horizontal stripes alternately white and green, overall a golden griffin segreant (that is to say, rampant) surrounded by a blue border studded with eight white roses, each with golden seeds and green sepals. These arms were granted to the college in 1801, based on those of the founder, Sir George Downing, with the rose-studded border added for a difference. Corpus Christi College has on its arms the symbol of the **Pelican in its Piety**, a real bird but in the mythical act of pecking at its own breast to feed its young with drops of its blood. This may have been based on poor observation of nature but was a powerful image symbolizing the sacrifice of Our Lord. The pelican vulning itself is seen again in the crest of the Perse School, which also has three silver **dragons' heads** on its black shield, with an ermine chevron between, while the Leys School has for its crest a **Wyvern** holding an antique lamp enflamed.

If **Martlets** count as fabulous (they are footless swallows or martins) they could be included as they appear in the arms of Pembroke College, actually the undifferenced arms of the founder, Mary de St Pol, who combined the arms of her husband Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke (with the martlets) with those of her father Guy, Count of St Pol.