

## An A to Z of Dragonlore (*ninth instalment*)

QUEEGLE, silent and invisible, the nature of this beast is problematic. Can it be smelt? Or feeled? Or does it leave a strange taste in the mouth? We shall never know.

QUESTING BEAST, in Arthurian legend, with a serpent's head, leopard's body with lion's rear part and hart's feet, it bayed like sixty hounds.

QUETZALCOATL, the feathered serpent-god of the Aztecs, that came out of the sea.

RATH, a mome creature mentioned by Lewis Carroll in *Jabberwocky*.

ROC, an enormous bird from Middle Eastern mythology, best known from Sinbad's adventures.

SAGITTARY, an archer, but the constellation in the zodiac is shown as a Centaur. For some reason this beast was posthumously attributed to King Stephen as his heraldic emblem.

SALAMANDER, an elemental spirit of fire, according to Paracelsus, but depicted in heraldry in the form of a lizard surrounded by flames and popularised when adopted as a badge by King Francis I of France and now seen on many a Loire Chateau; the name is now given by zoologists to a harmless newt-like amphibian.

SASQUATCH, or Bigfoot, a legendary Old Man of the Mountain from western North America and depicted as a seven-foot shaggy and shambling biped who leaves footprints but is never actually seen, just like the Yeti.

SATYR, a Greek woodland spirit part human, part animal, equated with the Faun by the Romans who gave them their goat's horns, legs and hooves; they were notoriously randy.

SCYLLA, a fierce female monster described by Homer in the *Odyssey*, she lived at the side of the Straits of Messina and caught and devoured sailors who were trying to avoid the whirlpool of Charybdis opposite.

SEA MONSTERS, not only serpents and such as Cetus, Leviathan, Kraken and Orc, but a whole range of hybrid creatures — sea-lion, sea-dog, sea-horse, sea-wolf and so on, all shown in heraldry with fishes' tails, webbed feet and finned spines added to the basic eponymous creature's features. Dragons almost certainly originated as sea-monsters.

SENMURV, an early Persian cosmic creature, half bird and half mammal like the front part of a dog with feathered wings and tail.

SIMURG, a giant Persian bird, may have been a sun symbol like the Phoenix.

*To be continued...*

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# Dragonlore

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Chinese Dragon from a carved table of the Ming Dynasty  
(from Huber's *Treasury*, 1981)

## The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

A new book of great significance for our studies has appeared following a landmark exhibition in the Chinese capital: **Art of the Dragon** by Yang Xin, Li Yihua and Xu Naixiang (Studio Vista, London 1989) with nearly 200 pictures all in colour of items from the Palace Museum in Peking. This stupendous book follows the development of the Dragon and Dragon Design in Chinese Art, and, to quote the fly-leaf, it has all the strength and beauty of the dragons it celebrates. The varieties of creature described include the Ao, a dragon with horns, Kui and Li, legendary beasts (possibly the same as the Ky-Lin), Chi, a hornless dragon, and Ying, an incredibly rare winged dragon — in fact, among the two hundred or so dragons depicted in this book, I found only two with wings.

The Introduction traces the development of the dragon from its earliest appearance in carvings dating from around 8000 BC, down to its use on silver coins in the 20th century AD. It is thought to have originated in triple totems, in which a snake totem would acquire features from other animal totems such as a pig's snout, a horse's mane, a bird's claws and so on, until a characteristic dragon pattern evolved. In an agricultural society, its benevolence became associated with rain-making, and water in general. Clouds were its nests and a tornado was an angry dragon. A writer of the time of Confucius said:

“Dragon comes from water, is covered in five colours and wanders from place to place. It is therefore a deity. It can become as small as a silkworm or as large as the world. It floats over the air or dives into a deep pool. It changes without fixed date and moves up or down without fixed time. It is therefore a deity.”

Seven historical periods are covered, the first from 1600 BC to 221 BC, the next from 220 BC to AD 589, then from AD 581 to AD 960, followed by the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties in turn. Dragon images became increasingly elaborate and stylised, for instance, its horns were once simple like those of a cow but became branched like the antlers of a deer, while its whiskers turned into long tendrils, but although largely standardised, the ability of a good artist to imbue the conventional figure with liveliness and vigour was greatly prized.

During the Song period the rules for depicting dragons were formalised and were followed by painters, carvers and embroiderers of later generations. The traditional image of the dragon is summed up in the so-called “nine likenesses” —

Its horns should be like those of a deer, its head like that of a camel, its eyes like those of a devil, its neck like that of a snake, its belly like that of a giant clam, its scales like those of a fish, its claws like those of an eagle, its feet like those of a tiger, and its ears like those of a cow (although others say its head should be like that of a horse, and its eyes like those of a prawn).

The Yuan emperors tried to confine the use of dragon decorations to imperial dress alone, but without much success. They decreed that only imperial dragons could have five claws per foot, lesser degrees of officials having only four or three, according to their status but even this was to enforce. However, with the demise of the last emperor their association with imperialism was too strong, and dragons went out of fashion. Now they are simply seen as part of the Chinese cultural heritage from the past, of interest mainly to scholars and art historians, though their aesthetic appeal remains undiminished.

## Fabulous Beasts in RAF Squadron Badges

Having looked at Army and Navy badges (No 2 and No 8) it is now the turn of the Royal Air Force. Although the RAF was formed in 1918, it was not until 1935 that an Officer of Arms was appointed HM Inspector of RAF Badges, and a standard pattern was designed, with each squadron or other unit having its own distinct emblem in the middle of a regular crowned frame. Evidently inspired by RN ships' badges, though of the RAF have to be acquired by the unit's staff, but once agreed, is available for use by all subsequent units with the same designation. It is not surprising that among the emblems chosen, some fabulous beasts should appear. Turning again to Peter C. Smith, his book **Royal Air Force Squadron Badges** (Balfour, Huntingdon 1974) gives a selection of 40 fully coloured badges which include a Salamander (No 79 Squadron), a Winged Lion (No 207) and a Sphinx (No 208), whilst a set of John Player's Cigarette Cards shows a Pegasus (No 18 and also No 28), a Dolphin (No 29), a Winged Camel (No 45), a Phoenix (Nos 56, 57), a Winged Demi-Lion (No 70), and a Winged Seahorse — the natural variety (No 205). Other sources reveal a blue Dragon (No 234), a three-headed red Dragon (No 238), and another Winged Lion, blue this time instead of red and standing up instead of on all fours (No 607).

A series of books entitled **Knights of the Sky**, by Hollis and Symons, which will eventually include line drawings of all RAF unit badges and emblems is being prepared and it is hoped to feature some of the relevant figures in a future issue.