



# Dragons and Dragon Lore: A Worldwide Study of Dragons in History, Art and Legend

*Ernest Ingersoll*

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The dragon is a mythical creature typically depicted as a gigantic and powerful serpent or other reptile with magical or spiritual qualities. As with every mythological creature, dragons are perceived in different ways by different cultures. Dragons are sometimes said to breathe and spit fire or even acid or ice (depending on the type). They are commonly portrayed as serpentine or reptilian, hatching from eggs and possessing extremely large, typically feathered or scaly bodies; they are sometimes portrayed as having large yellow or red eyes, a feature that is the origin for the word for dragon in many cultures, and are often (but not always) portrayed with a row of dorsal spines, keeled scales, long crested ears, slitted eye pupils, leathery bat-like wings and fiery breath. Some dragons do not have wings at all, but look more like long snakes, such as Asian versions of the dragon, sometimes called the Lung. Dragons can have a variable number of legs: none, two, four, or more when it comes to early European literature. Modern depictions of dragons are very large in size, up to 50 miles in length, but some early European depictions of dragons were only the size of bears, or, in some cases, even smaller, around the size of a butterfly or even a flea. Although dragons (or dragon-like creatures) occur in many legends around the world, different cultures have varying stories about monsters that have been grouped together under the dragon label. Chinese dragons, and Eastern dragons generally, are usually seen as benevolent, whereas European dragons are usually malevolent (there are of course exceptions to these rules). Malevolent dragons also occur in Persian mythology (see Azhi Dahaka) and other cultures. Dragons are particularly popular in China, and along with the phoenix, the 5-clawed dragon was a symbol of the Chinese emperors. Dragon costumes manipulated by several people are a common sight at Chinese festivals. Dragons are often held to have major spiritual significance in various religions and cultures around the world. In many Eastern and Native American cultures dragons were, and in some cultures still are, revered as representative of the primal forces of nature, religion and the universe. Many pre-Columbian cultures were fascinated by the power of dragons. The Moche people depicted dragons frequently in their ceramics. They are associated with wisdom - often said to be wiser than humans - and longevity. They are commonly said to possess some form of magic or other supernatural power, and are often associated with wells, rain, and rivers. In some cultures, they are also said to be capable of human speech. The term dragoon, for infantry that move around by horse yet still fight as foot soldiers, is derived from their early firearm, the "dragon", a wide-bore musket that spat flame when it fired, and was thus named for the mythical creature.

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