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## DRAGONS AND THEIR DIET

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a hero's ovation for his successful campaign against this dragon. Its skin and jaws were preserved as trophies in the Capitol, where Pliny examined them.

### Desirable Blood Sport

Great Britain, too, can contribute its quota of dragon lore — the Lambton "worm" and Beowulf's dragon that "buckled like a bow" and King Arthur's scaly monster (an albino in fact) that "swoughed" on him from the sky. Less well known perhaps is the dragon of Wantley, which Mr. More Hall killed

(near Wharnccliffe in Yorkshire) in a regrettably unsporting manner. Clad in spiked armour, he descended into the well where the dragon nested, and kicked the monster in the mouth.

Berkshire disputes with Syria the claim to be the site of St. George's triumph. It seems that among saints dragon-slaying was once considered socially desirable as a blood-sport, rather like fox-hunting in other ages to the now landless gentry. St. George was just one of many in the hagiological hue and cry after dragons. Others who did them to death were St. Philip in Phrygia, St. Keyne in Cornwall, St. Romain at Rouen, St. Martha at Aix, St. Cada in Brittany, St. Clement at Metz; St. Michael, St. Margaret, St. Maudet and one solitary Pope, Sylvester. Canonised Christians would certainly have subscribed little to a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dragons.

In the pagan world, too, the poor dragon was equally the prey of knights and heroes, from Hercules, Perseus and Cadmus to Lancelot, Tristram, Sigurd and Siegfried.

### Domesticated Dragons

Of course, there are good as well as bad dragons, and domesticated dragons, too, like those harnessed to the aerial chariot that served Medea in her flight from Jason. Athanasius Kircher tells us in his *Mundus Subterraneus* the story of a dragon domesticated in spite of itself. It seems that a man of Lucerne was climbing Mount Pilatus. Suddenly he tumbled through a hole into a cavern that contained a mountain dragon and its mate. They were hibernating, like tortoises, and during the six months that he shared their home, their unwilling guest came to no harm. But abstinence was the order of the darkling day. Not a single stalk of wild chicory, not the core of an apple, not even a maiden's thigh-bone was to be seen in the cave. The monsters merely licked moisture off the rocky walls of their home—and the fallen mountaineer kept himself fighting fit by following their example.

At last the early spring sunshine began to filter through the cracks in the roof of the cave. The dragons ran to and fro, flapping their wings and testing their pectoral muscles. The man from Lucerne detached his belt. With it he secured himself to the tail of the female dragon. Sure enough, one bright morning in May the dragons took flight—and the adventurous alpinist was safely brought back to the upper world without sacrificing a single bone. But the sudden change-over to a solid Swiss cuisine, after his dewy diet in the recesses of Mount Pilatus, was too much for his digestion—and he died within three weeks of his escape. He left all his possessions to the Church and a tablet recalling his gratitude to the dragons was erected at the Ecclesiastical College of Saint Leodegaris at Lucerne.



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