

DRAGONS!





DRAGON MYTHOLOGY. A mythological animal of Chinese origin, and a member of the **NAGA** (Sanskrit) family of serpentine creatures who protect Buddhism. Japan's dragon lore comes predominantly from China. Images of the reptilian dragon are found throughout Asia, and the pictorial form most widely recognized today was already prevalent in Chinese ink paintings in the Tang period (9th century AD). The mortal enemy of the dragon is the **Phoenix**, as well as the bird-man creature known as **Karura**. In contrast to Western mythology, Asian dragons are rarely depicted as malevolent. Although fearsome and powerful, dragons are equally considered just, benevolent, and the bringers of wealth and good fortune. The dragon is also considered a **shape shifter** who can assume human form and mate with people.

Dragons figure importantly in folk beliefs throughout Asia, and are dressed heavily in Buddhist garb. In India, the birthplace of Buddhism around 500 BC, pre-Buddhist snake or serpentine-like creatures known as the **NAGA** were incorporated early on into Buddhist mythology. Described as "water spirits with human shapes wearing a crown of serpents on their heads" or as "snake-like beings resembling clouds," the **NAGA** are among the **eight classes of deities** who worship and protect the **Historical Buddha**. Even before the **Historical Buddha** (Siddhartha, Guatama) attained enlightenment, the **NAGA** King Mucilinda (Sanskrit) is said to have protected Siddhartha from wind and rain for seven days. This motif is found often in Buddhist art from India, represented by images of the Buddha sitting beneath Mucilinda's hood and coils. (Above paragraph adapted from **book by M.W. De Visser.**)

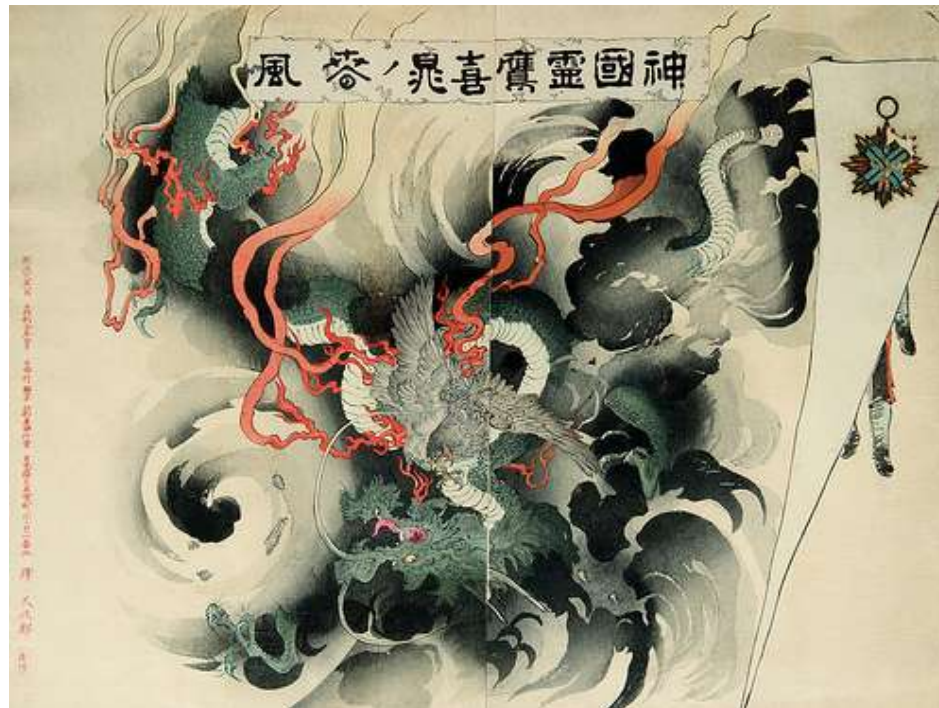


In China, however, dragon lore existed independently for centuries before the introduction of Buddhism. Bronze and jade pieces from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (16th - 9th centuries BC) depict dragon-like creatures. By at least the 2nd century BC, images of the dragon are found painted frequently on tomb walls to dispel evil. Buddhism was introduced to China sometime in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. By the 9th century AD, the Chinese had incorporated the dragon into Buddhist thought and iconography as a protector of the **various Buddha** and the Buddhist law. These traditions were adopted by the Japanese (Buddhism did not **arrive in Japan until the mid-6th century AD**). In both China and Japan, the character for "dragon" (龍) is used often in temple names, and dragon carvings adorn many temple structures. Most Japanese Zen temples, moreover, have a dragon painted on the ceiling of their assembly halls. See below photos.

TYPES OF DRAGONS

In both Chinese and Japanese mythology, the dragon is closely associated with the watery realm, and in artwork is often surrounded by water or clouds. In myth, there are four dragon kings who rule over the four seas (which in the old Chinese conception limited the habitable earth). In China, a fifth category of dragon was added to these four, for a total of five dragon types:

1. Celestial Dragons who guard the mansions of the gods
2. Spiritual Dragons who rule wind & rain but can also cause flooding
3. Earth Dragons who cleanse the rivers & deepen the oceans
4. Treasure-Guarding Dragons who protect precious metals & stones
5. Imperial Dragons; dragons with five claws instead of the usual four





SHANGHAI



















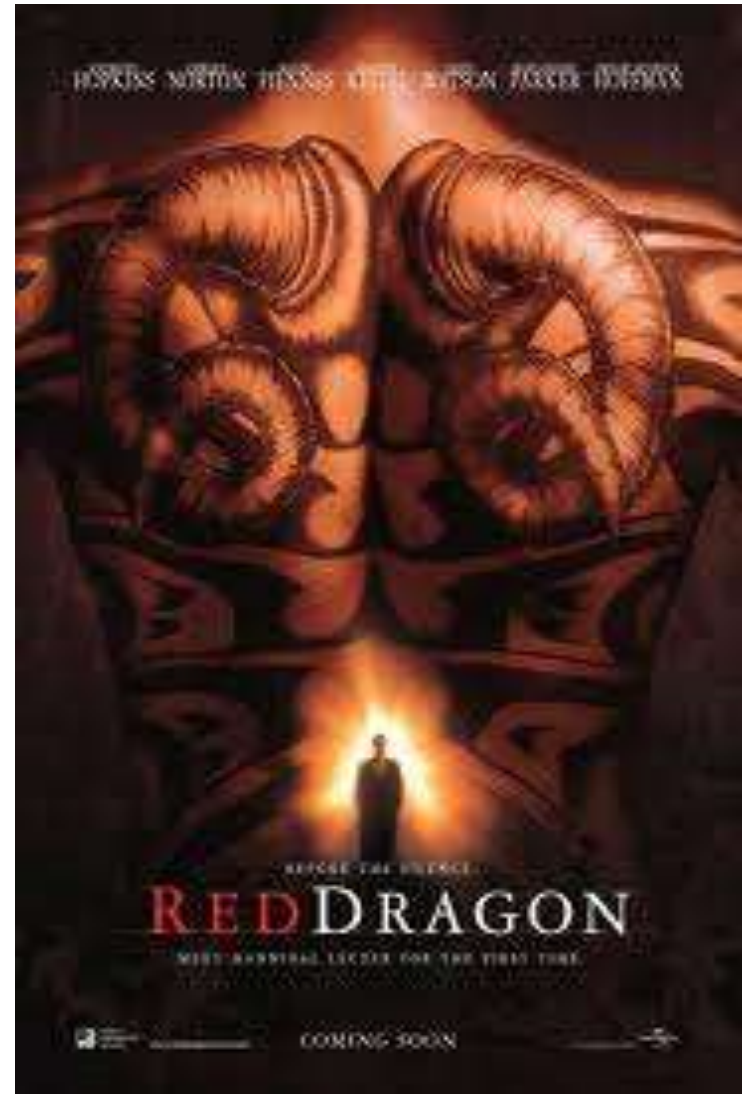


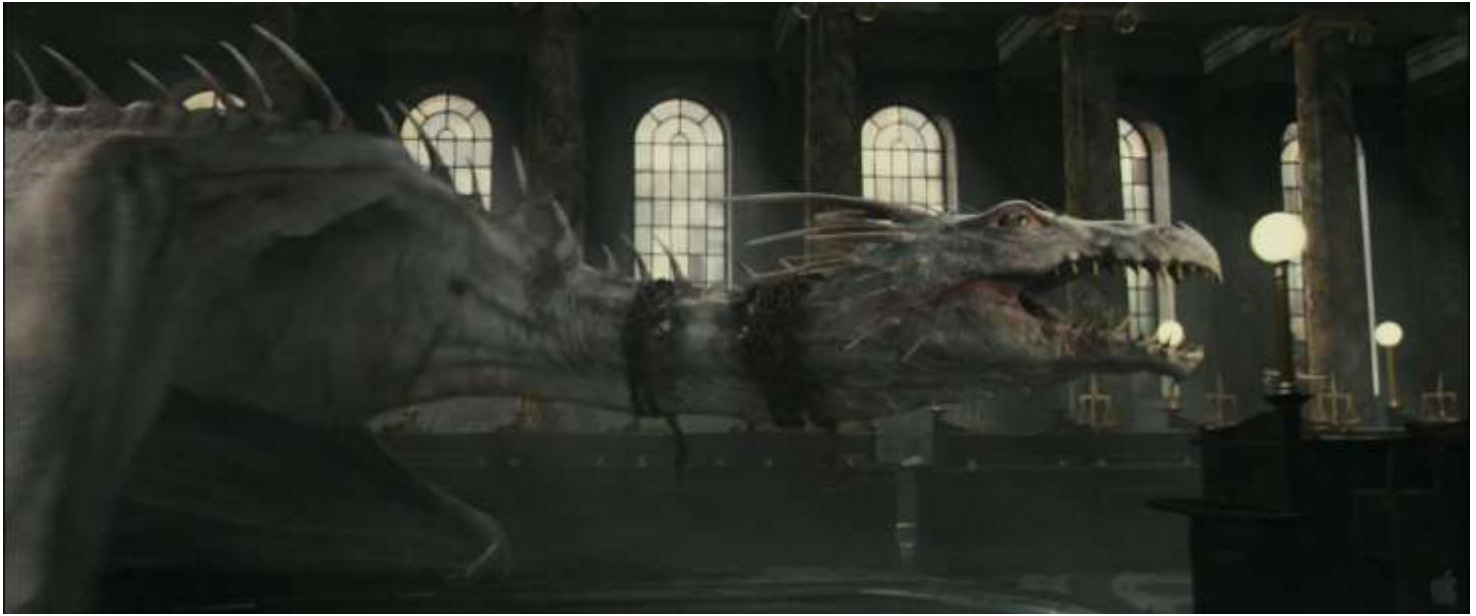


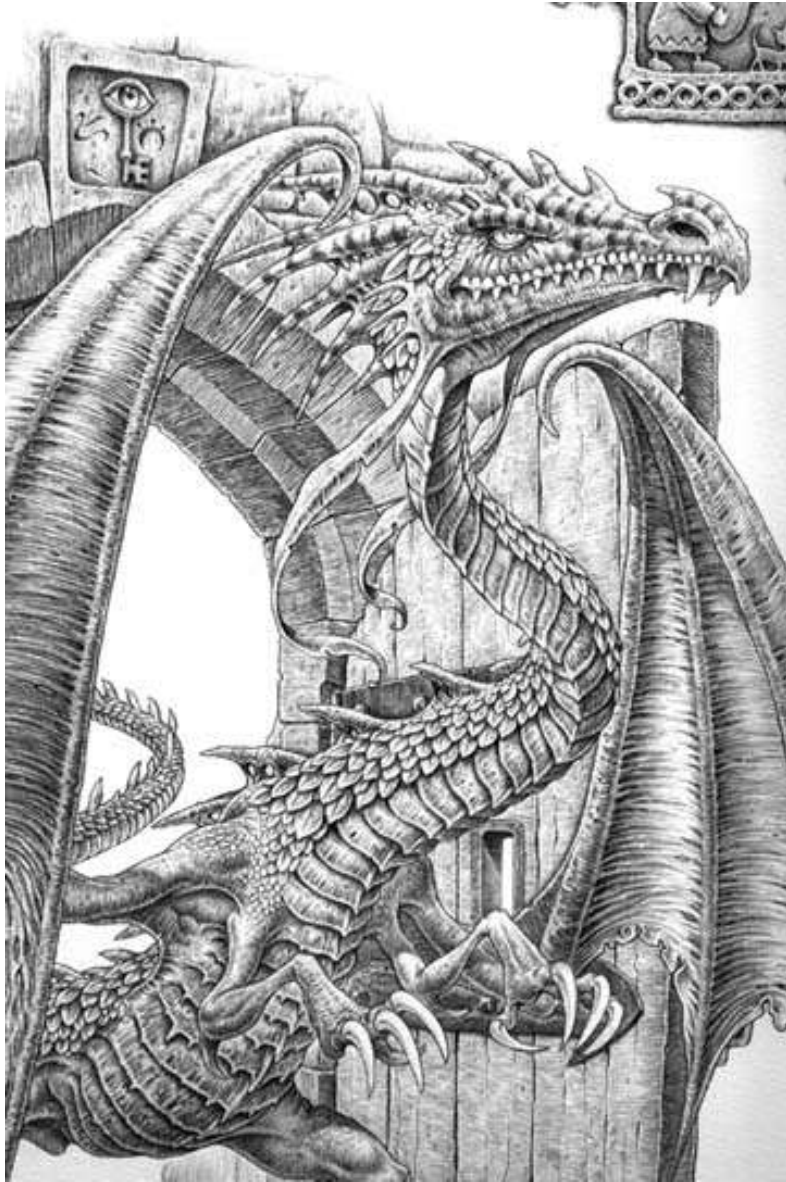
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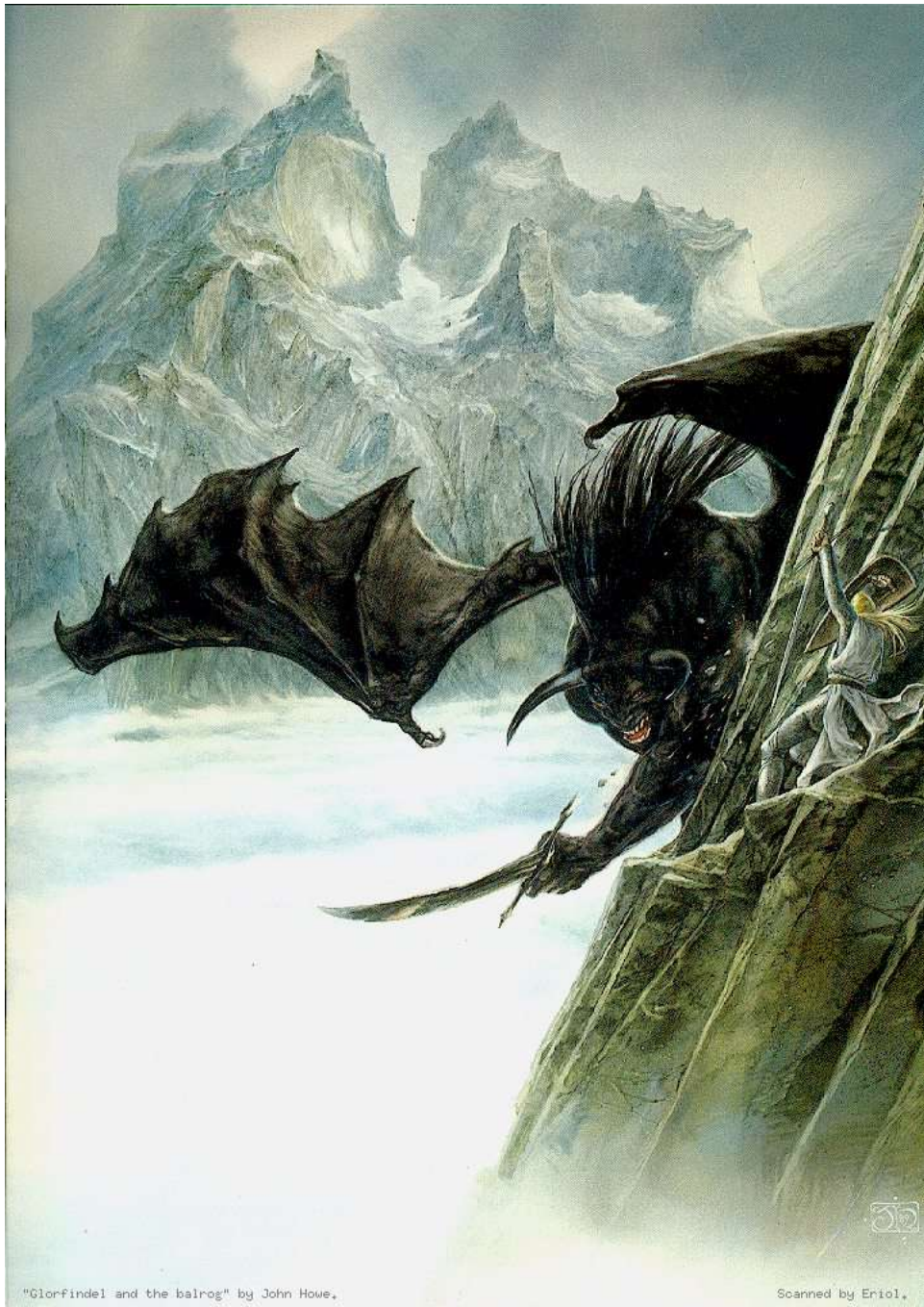




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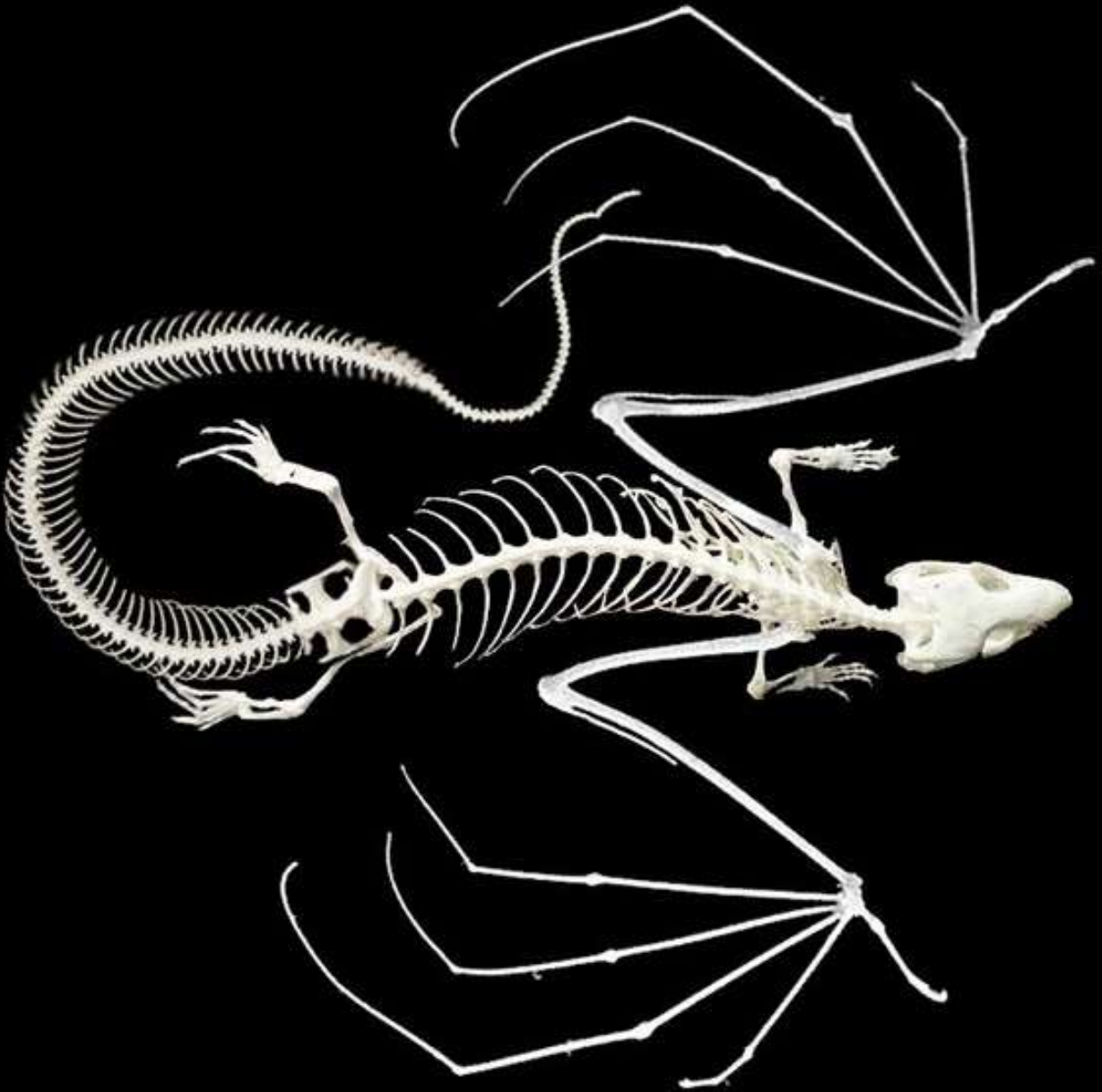
"Glorfindel and the balrog" by John Howe.

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Extract taken from Chapter 12 (Inside Information) of *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien:

“Before him lies the great bottom-most cellar or dungeon-hall of the ancient dwarves right at the mountain’s root. It was almost dark so that its vastness can only be dimly guessed, but rising from the near side of the rocky floor there is a great glow. The glow of Smaug!

There he lay, a vast red-golden dragon, fast asleep; thrumming came from his jaws and nostrils, and wisps of smoke, but his fires were low in slumber. Beneath him, under all his limbs and his huge coiled tail, and about him on all sides stretching away across the unseen floors, lay countless piles of precious things, gold wrought and unwrought, gems and jewels, and silver red-stained in the ruddy light. Smaug lay, with wings folded like an immeasurable bat, turned partly on one side, so that the hobbit could see his underparts and his long pale belly crusted with gems and fragments of gold from his long lying on his costly bed. Behind him where the walls were nearest could dimly be seen coats of mail, helms and axes, swords and spears hanging; and there in rows stood great jars and vessels filled with a wealth that could not be guessed.”