



**Thomas Honegger**, *Introducing the Medieval Dragon*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press 2019. 169 S. 15 Abb.

**Besprochen von Paul Wackers:**  
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This book is the first one in a new series ('Medieval Animals') that is dedicated to the cultural impact of animals in the medieval period and their afterlife in later periods. The dragon is an important part of the medieval legacy in modern times, so this is a fitting start. The book contains an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction presents general ideas about dragons in human cultures and their specific realisations in the western Middle Ages. The first chapter discusses the way the dragon is seen in the scholarly tradition as an important part of the fauna of the east, the miraculous part of the world. As all things in creation, however, the dragon can also be interpreted allegorically. In this case he represents the devil. This element plays a central part in the next chapter about the role of the dragon in medieval religion: based on biblical references the dragon is seen as an incarnation of the devil. He is the adversary of fighting saints like Michael or George or suffering saints like Margaret of Antioch. His roles in the visual arts are also discussed. Especially images based on the 'Apocalypse' are frequent. This second chapter is the only one in which images play an important role. In the other chapters stories dominate. In the fourth and last chapter it is shown that in medieval literature a fight with a dragon is the ultimate test for a hero. This chapter pays much attention to the fight with the dragon in 'Beowulf' and in 'Bevis of Hampton'. All three chapters 1, 2 and 4 often refer to elements from the other ones. It becomes clear that there is an underlying pattern in medieval dragon lore that is realised differently in these three parts of medieval scholarly tradition, religion, and literature. The third chapter breaks the chronological order because it shows how aspects of medieval dragon lore functioned in the folklore of post-medieval times. This is mainly made clear by

way of an analysis of the versions of the story of the Mordiford (a small village in Herefordshire) dragon. There is not really a rupture between chapters 2 and 3 in the reading process, but I think the composition of the book would have been more elegant if the chronological order had been respected, i.e. if chapters 3 and 4 had been presented in the reverse order. In the conclusion a comparison is made between medieval and modern ideas about dragons.

The book is short, but well written and informative. The author explains the differences between medieval and modern thinking very well. He does not try to be complete but writes often extensively about one specific example to illustrate a general tendency. I admire the way in which he highlights the representation of general tendencies, but also the peculiarities in the examples he chooses.

The book concentrates on the medieval ideas about dragons but at times these are compared to other ideas, for instance in the introduction which speculates about the reasons why we find dragons in almost all human cultures and where the different types of the western dragon are contrasted with the far more stable representation of the eastern dragon (8–13). This last theme also has a bearing on the discussion about the Lucerne chasuble (56–60). The back section of this chasuble consists of two pieces of silk, showing Chinese dragons. HONEGGER shows how they had to be reinterpreted to be able to function in their new context. Another important contrast is shown when the first chapter describes how Linnaeus ultimately rejects the existence of dragons on the basis of scientific reasoning as an introduction to the (in our eyes) unquestioned acceptance of older information by medieval scholars (17–20). These passages give the book a greater depth.

The subject of the book are the general, so European, medieval ideas about dragons. The examples, however, are mostly British (not ‘*De proprietatibus rerum*’ but Trevisa’s translation of that encyclopedia; not the French ‘*Bueve de Hantone*’ but the English adaptation ‘*Bevis of Hampton*’). The ‘representational character’ of these British examples should perhaps have been highlighted a bit more.

The book is primarily aimed at people with little knowledge about medieval dragons, but it is also interesting for those who are already well versed in dragon lore because it offers interesting new ideas and inspiring perspectives.