

# Image of Dragon in Georgian Mythology

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## Abstract

The dragon is an old and complex mythical image that covers the whole set of symbols and functions. It is an ambivalent mythological image. The dragon has a long mythological biography, experienced stable changes and the attitude was different to him. These layers are collected in folklore-ethnographic materials. As the creator of the sea and the earth, it is related to the first forces of the universe and therefore holds special knowledge.

According to Georgian mythological texts, one of the main signs of the dragon is the connection to the water, which gives him a special significance. Worship of the water patrons preserved mostly by agrarian traditions, where the idea of fertility comes out in the foreground. That's why the weather's governor dragon turned out to be a fertile rewarded naturally. The dragon's cult reflected in the megalithic monuments. It is a large stone-shaped whale figures that have been found in many places in Caucasus. The dragon possesses special wealth (including water) and does not concede to any new generation gods or humans. This antagonism has led to the transformation of the dragon's face. He has gradually acquired a negative character. In Georgian folklore we can find dragon killer heroes. These heroes are swallowed by the dragon and getting power in its belly. So, the dragon can be killed only by the hero grown up in its bosom, who received the power.

There is described the bull and dragon's fight in Georgian narratives, where the bull wins. In these stories the dragon is an unequivocally evil creature that hides water causes drought or vice versa, threatens the earth with a flood.

**Keywords:** Dragon killer hero, Georgian folklore, Mythology, Zoomorphic creatures

## Introduction

The dragon is an old and complex mythical image that covers the whole set of symbols and functions. It is formed as a result of development of serpent's mythological image, so their symbolisms and functions are identical. The dragon is an ambivalent mythological image. It represents the land, more precisely, the underworld, also symbolizes the water (sea, ocean, river), is an element of water and water patron. It can wash away the world with water or destroy - without. In the late period tradition, it was a predominantly negative personage as the owner of the water who does not give water to people without sacrifice. Therefore, heroes fighting the dragons are popular in folk literature, but this is much later stage of the formation of mentioned mythological image. The dragon has a long mythological biography, experienced stable changes and the attitude was different to him. These layers are collected in folklore-ethnographic materials.

## Basic Arguments

In Georgian language the word "dragon" is a composite, consists of two words (serpent and whale) and clearly reflects the contextual and visual syncretism of this mythological essence. The dragon's body is drawn from the combination of snake and whale (large fish) and has wings. The dragon is an underworld essence. As the creator of the sea and the earth, it is related to the first forces of the universe and therefore holds special knowledge. The whale is an embodiment of a large fish, and this characteristic is associated with water element, whose homeland and original habitat is water, namely the sea. By the way, it is also related to a serpent with this sign. In ancient times, the snake was identified with water, so the serpent and the water were expressed by the same ideogram on the different articles – by wiggly lines.

Thus, the dragon was connected to all spheres that these zoomorphic creatures belong to. It was linked to the underground like a serpent, to the water element - like a

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fish, and a heavenly world-like a bird. In addition, it is the bearer of the elements of fire. Therefore, it has a great power not only physically but also by wisdom, because it possesses the knowledge of all those worlds that its body parts embody. The dragon can do many things because he knows a lot.

According to Georgian mythological texts, the dragon's habitat is a high mountain peak (although its origin is the sea). It often lies motionless in the cleft and this position indicates its syncretism. The dragon is on the mountain, which is the symbol connecting the land and sky in the mythology. At the same time, it foresees the depth of the earth by the cleft, which also has the meaning of the channel connecting to the underground. Attributes of the dragon and its presence in the cleft at the mountain peak indicates that it links all of these worlds and embodies their visible boundary (Sikharulidze, 2006, p.182).

Due to omniscience and wisdom, the dragon is related to sorcery and initiation. There are prominent heroes in the mythology of different people, who acquire strength in the dragon's bosom. By the tradition of some people, the young men, to become a member of the men's society, should have gone through the initiation stages. For that purpose, the young men who reached the defined age were taken away from the village to the preliminary chosen place. For some time they lived in special huts, in strict conditions where they were physically and spiritually trained. Those who would endure this test were considered to be a man and were taking the due place in the society. The temporary shelter where the boys were trained, had a form of a dragon (Propp, 1946, p. 206), which was a visible expression of being in the belly of the dragon.

## Water and Dragon

According to Georgians, one of the main signs of the dragon is the connection to the water, which is due to its origin. In this fictional being, the leading role is played by the fact that it is a whale (the essence of the fish), to which the attributes of snake and bird are attached. Connection with water gives the dragon a special significance. Water is vital. In many people's cosmogony the water gives birth to life and beginning - to the world. Without water the nature becomes a lifeless space.

Worship of the water patrons preserved mostly by agrarian traditions, where the idea of fertility comes out in the foreground. Worshipping the water and demanding desired weather is related to agricultural activities. That is why the weather's governor dragon turned out to be a fertile rewarded naturally, especially if there is a serpent's origin in the nature of this character, and the serpent had water-related and fertility-related nature from time immemorial. According to people's perceptions, the dragon appears in the guise of black rain cloud or strong storm, and resembles the flooded river on the earth.

When the river was flooded, it seemed that the dragon was coming in the guise of river. They were saying that dragon moved and comes to the sea.

There is an interesting story about St. George's Church in Atotsi village about a dragon ostensibly coming here once in seven years and wrapping around the church. It held its tail in the mouth at the door. When people were coming, the snake was taking the tail out of the mouth, so they could go in and out. Old people were saying that the snake was praying too. Such stories are reported about other churches as well, and these legends have a Christian content.

As we can see, the dragon has preserved the viability for a long time and the main reason for this is its proximity to water element. In Western Georgia, the big and heavy rain was called "Zghvrela" (Abashia, 1999, p. 36).

The dragon's cult reflected in the megalithic monuments. It is a large stone-shaped whale figures that have been found in many places in Caucasus (in Georgia, North Caucasus, Armenia) (Marr & Smirnov, 1931). The scientists called them whales. Most of these monuments are found in highlands, peaks, which reflect the folk imagination about the location of the dragon. Stone whales were cult monuments, at which the people were carrying ritual and asking for the desired weather.

As noted above, the dragon was related to fertility, which, on the one hand, was caused by its closeness to the water element, on the other hand, by two main parts of its essence - snake and fish - from ancient times they personified the power of fertility and childbearing. There is ethnographic material in Georgia that confirms the existence of a fish cult. It was addressed to treat childless women and for lactation.

## Heroes Fighting with the Dragon

Just like the other first inhabitants of the universe (giants, monsters...), the dragon also possesses special wealth (including water) and does not concede to any new generation gods or humans. This antagonism has led to the transformation of the dragon's face. He has gradually acquired a negative character. This transition phase represents the conception of good and evil dragons that is reflected in Georgian stories where the good dragon helps the hero to fight the evil dragon (Andrezi, 2009, p. 335).

Later the dragon got a guise of evil essence. It leads to drought, steals livestock, hiding water and causing infertility, which is the key to chaos. He will be defeated by a thunder god. In the mythology of Indo-Europeans, this god acquires this function in the period of development and not from its origin. In order to get full power and the status of a superior god, thunder god must defeat the dragon. This means that he misappropriates the main function of the dragon - water and weather governance. Thus, the classical model of fighting with snakes was created, where the dragon murderer, as an evil defeater, is recognized as a hero. There are such characters in Georgian folklore too. Some legends keep the details of the archetypal story. According to this story, the boy fell into the cleft of the rock where the dragon was laying. The dragon fed him and passed magical power and knowledge. Then the hero used this power against the dragon and killed it. The passing the power from dragon to hero is an universal motivation, which occurs in the mythology of

many people. These heroes are swallowed by the dragon and getting power in its belly. The existence of Georgian mythological heroes in the dragon's dominion is functionally similar to being in the belly. Thus, the dragon was sharing to the hero certain knowledge, wisdom together with physical strength, and this was spoken of in the legends about snake-eaters (according to which after eating snake's meat, the hero begins to understand the language of whole nature). In order to gain this power and knowledge, the hero should necessarily enter dragon's belly. This moment was reflected in the rituals of the initiation, during which the young boys lived in the dragon-shaped huts, and in the sense of the new birth, were coming out from its bosom as already transformed men. Such rituals have not been observed in Georgia, but there are legends about a young man who, having been in snake's cleft (resp. in his belly), gains magic power and then kills his teacher. Let us remind the legendary history of Greek historians: "The dragon's teeth are sowed in Kolkhida and armored braves that grew from these teeth are invincible".

As we can see, the dragon can be killed only by a hero grown up in its bosom, who received the power. This model works in old cosmogony where a new generation of gods' struggles with parents who rewarded them with life and divine power, but this action is justified by the cosmogonic act as it gives rise to the creation of the universe. The change of mythological and religious conceptions literally led to the invasion of roles and the classical model of the fighting with snakes, but still retained the archaic mythos rudiments. In the archive stories, dragon, as a demiurge, played an important role, and perhaps the fighter with it was punished. It can be assumed that the motive of God's fighting is the inverted option of the fighting with snakes.

According to the ancient universal conceptions, the man was getting hero's status and strength in the belly of the dragon. On the image of one vase in the Vatican, the dragon swallows Jason (who killed the fleece guard dragon). This episode is unknown in the versions of the Argonaut Cycle, which reached us. Perhaps here is the detail of the earlier version of the story, which then disappeared.

The rudiments of the genetic link between hero and dragon appear in the artifacts and appearance of the heroes that fight the dragon. In German epos *Zigfrid's* body is covered with the horn layer of the reptiles. In the Christian iconography, St. George wears armor covered by fish scale.

The example of these parallels shows that the Georgian narratives are part of the universal mythos on heroes fighting with the dragon and have preserved the details of the archetypal story better than others.

## Bull and Dragon Fight

There is described the bull and dragon's fight in Georgian narratives, where the bull wins. In these stories the dragon is an unequivocally evil creature that hides water causes drought or vice versa, threatens the earth with a flood.

The bull is a very common mythical creature-symbol and it is worth mentioning that in the mythology of world

people the bull is one of the hypostases of thunder god – the god fighting dragons. It seems that the bull cult became especially strong and popular after weakening of dragon's mythical image. It has an important place in the mythical ritual practice of Georgians. According to archeological data, bull symbolic images appear in the late bronze and early Iron Age. The bull, as the animal related to the farm, has come to the center of people's sympathy. This time we will discuss the bull dragon fight. It should be noted that bulls often appear beside the name of St. George, his chapels. St. George is fighting with the dragon.

In western Georgia there was a concept about deity that was taking a guise of white bull on the spring celebration. It was more like a severe deity. There was a weather governing among his functions. His residence was a mountain that is the habitat of the weather governor (resp. dragon). On the Caucasian whales, we have a picture of bull leather, which is probably the indicator of this connection. Over time, more likely under the influence of Christianity, his name disappeared, and only bull's zoomorphic guise remained. The bull fighting with dragon is sometimes a water habitant.

The story related to one of the lakes tells us about the bull and dragon fight and the appearance of a river. It turns out that this lake was created by one dragon. He was going to the sea every day, filling his mouth with water and bringing it to the lake. The lake was gradually going up and threatening the population there.

One man had an amazing bull-calf, horns were sharpened like a knife (alternatively, people sharpen the horns and thus help in the fight). This bull slipped away, fought the dragon and smashed it completely. Only the tail was left, which is now the river (Kiknadze, 2016, p. 228).

There are many similar legends in Georgia. As we can see, in Georgian mythology the bull, as a dragon defeater, took upon himself the functions of thunder god.

## Conclusion

According to Georgian folklore, we can come to the conclusion that dragon was an important character of the Georgian Mythology, which personified wisdom and fertility. It was considered with rituals of initiations. Dragon's Megalith monuments, which were discovered in Caucasian territory, are the agreement of this cult in deep past.

Later the dragon got a guise of evil essence. It leads to drought, steals livestock, hiding water and causing infertility. He will be defeated by a hero, who was swallowed by the dragon and was empowered by him. So, the dragon can be killed only by the hero grown up in its bosom, who received the power. Later this plot became a basic for the story about dragon / snake fighters. Among the fighters is the bull which is one of the hypostases of thunder god. These elements we can find in Georgian narratives. They are the rudiments of old mythological system, where sacral face of dragon took a central place.

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