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A dragon story · questions · a colouring page · a legend-or-history sort

RETOLD IN OUR OWN WORDS

Vortigern's dragons

From: The History of the Britons by Nennius (J. A. Giles's English translation)

King Vortigern wanted a strong fortress. His wise men searched the mountains and chose a hilltop for it.

Builders gathered wood and stone, but in a single night all of it vanished. It happened three times.

The wise men gave cruel advice: find a boy who had no father and kill him so his blood could be sprinkled on the ground. Messengers found such a boy and brought him to the king.

The boy asked the wise men what lay under the ground. They could not say. He told the king to dig: below was a pool, in the pool two vases, and in the vases a tent.

Inside the tent slept two serpents, one white and one red. They woke and fought. Three times the white one drove the red one back, but at last the red one grew strong and chased the white one out of the tent and across the pool.

The boy explained: 'the two serpents are two dragons; the red serpent is your dragon'. The white dragon stood for the Saxons, who would one day be driven back.

The boy said his name was Ambrose and that his father was a Roman consul. The king gave him the hilltop and went off to build elsewhere.

Picture: Vortigern and Ambrosius watch the red and white dragons fight, from a manuscript of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain (Lambeth Palace Library MS 6), 15th century, by Master of Edward IV (Public domain). This picture comes from a later manuscript of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who told the same story.

QUESTIONS

Vortigern's dragons

Read the story again, then answer in full sentences

WORD BANK

fortress: a strong building that is hard to attack

serpent: a large snake; in old books, often another word for a dragon

vanished: disappeared

consul: an important Roman official

1. What happened to the builders' wood and stone?

2. What cruel advice did the wise men give?

3. What was under the ground when the king dug?

4. What happened when the two serpents fought?

5. What did the boy say the two dragons stood for?

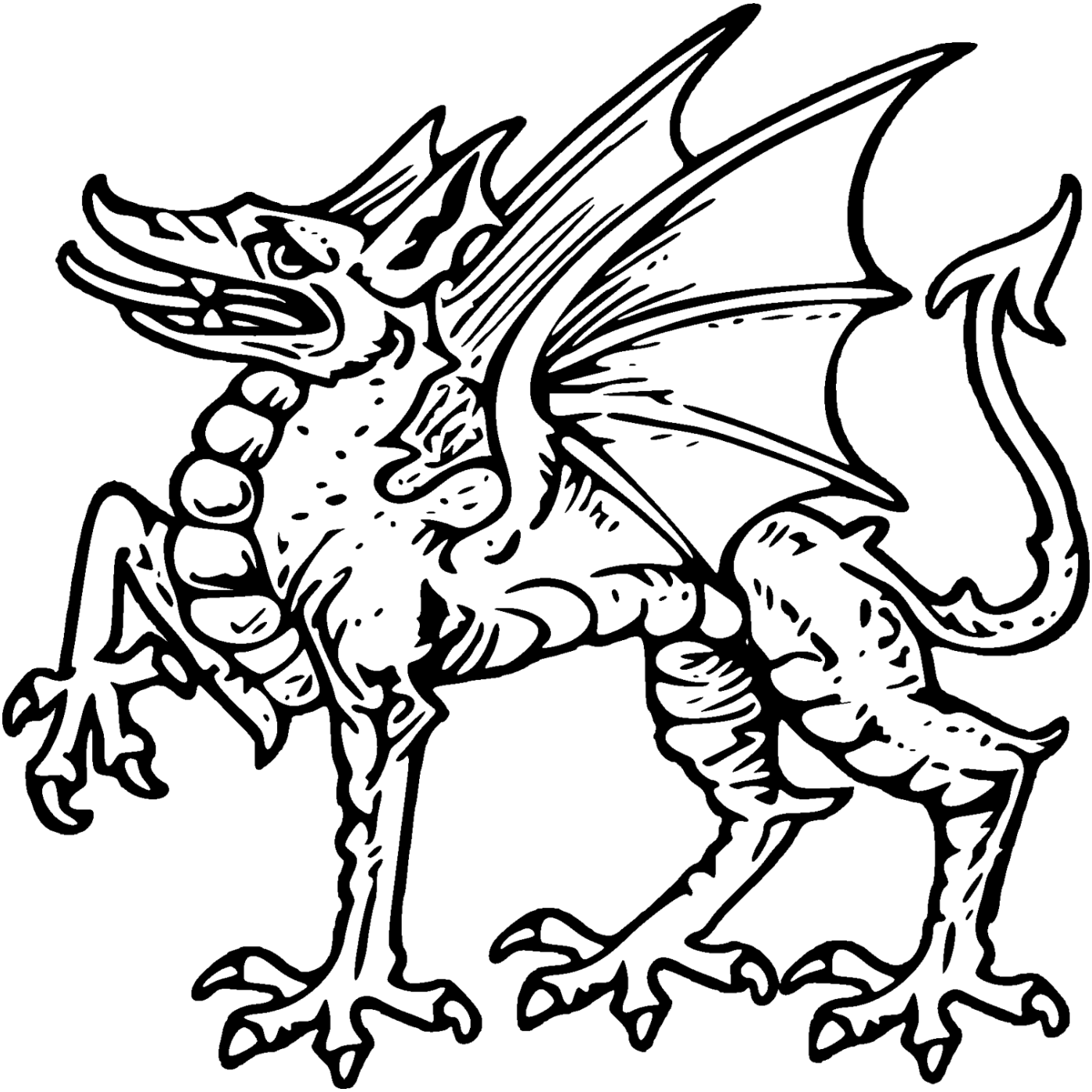
LABEL IT

Is this story **History**, **Literature** or **Tradition**? How do you know?

COLOUR ME

A heraldic dragon

Colour this old drawing



HISTORY Modern heraldic dragons usually have a barbed tail, but Fox-Davies says this is ‘a comparatively recent addition’: Tudor dragons had long, smooth tails ending in a blunt point.

Drawing: Dragon passant, a vector version of a drawing in A. C. Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry, 1909, by Arthur Charles Fox-Davies (drawing by Graham Johnston) (Public domain), turned to black and white.

SORT IT

Legend, literature or history?

Read each statement. Tick the right label.

History: what records and historians show. **Literature**: what a named old text, poem, saga or book says. **Tradition**: a later belief, custom or local story.

1. English Heritage says the real George was most likely a Greek-speaker who lived in the Roman Near East and died a martyr in about AD 303.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition
2. The Golden Legend was compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa. William Caxton's English version was first printed in 1483.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition
3. At Uffington the bare white patch on top of Dragon Hill is said to be where the dragon fell dead, its blood so poisonous that grass has never grown there.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition
4. Museum Wales says the dragon emblem was probably brought into Britain by the Roman legions.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition
5. The Project Gutenberg Beowulf is the translation by Francis Barton Gummere.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition
6. The Chinese dragon is not a power for evil but a kindly being that brings rain.	☐ History ☐ Literature ☐ Tradition

ANSWER KEY · FOR ADULTS

Vortigern's dragons

1. It vanished in a single night, and this happened three times.
2. To find a boy who had no father and kill him, so that his blood could be sprinkled on the ground.
3. A pool; in the pool two vases, and in the vases a tent.
4. Three times the white one drove the red one back, but at last the red one chased the white one out of the tent and across the pool.
5. The red dragon was the king's own dragon; the white dragon stood for the Saxons.

Label it: Literature. It comes from a named old book, the History of the Britons, whose author Nennius is listed as active in 796.

Sort it

1. History
2. Literature
3. Tradition
4. History
5. Literature
6. Tradition

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The small print, kept short

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PICTURES

PICTURE	ARTIST	LICENCE	SOURCE PAGE (WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)
Vortigern and Ambrosius watch the red and white dragons fight, from a manuscript of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain (Lambeth Palace Library MS 6), 15th century	Master of Edward IV	Public domain	commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vortigern-Dragons.jpg
Dragon passant, a vector version of a drawing in A. C. Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry, 1909	Arthur Charles Fox-Davies (drawing by Graham Johnston)	Public domain	commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coa_Illustration_Elements_Animal_Dragon_Passant.svg

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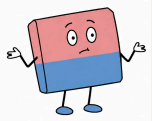
WHERE THE FACTS COME FROM

Every labelled fact in this pack was checked against the sources below on 31 Oct 2026. **History** means what historians, archaeologists or heritage bodies say. **Literature** means what a named old text, poem, saga or book says. **Tradition** means a later belief, custom or local story, recorded by a named source. Retellings are in our own words and follow the events in the named text.

Nennius, History of the Britons, trans. J. A. Giles, Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1972
Visit Wales: The legend of the Welsh dragon: www.wales.com/about/history-and-heritage/why-there-dragon-welsh-flag
A. C. Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry, Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/41617
English Heritage: 9 things you didn't know about St George: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/whats-on/st-georges-day/9-things-you-didnt-know-about-St-George/
Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, vol. 3, in William Caxton's English (first printed 1483), Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook: sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume3.asp
National Trust: History at White Horse Hill: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/oxfordshire-buckinghamshire-berkshire/white-horse-hill/history-at-white-horse-hill
Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales: National emblems (FAQ): museum.wales/blog/1182/National-emblems-FAQ/
Beowulf, trans. Francis B. Gummere, Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/981
E. T. C. Werner, Myths and Legends of China, Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15250



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