

dragons  
*gallery texts*

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An impressive dragon has graced the top of the belfry in Ghent and fired imaginations since the fourteenth century. Even today dragons have lost none of their fascination and still loom large in books, games and films. Friend or foe, the dragon is timeless and common to all cultures. The theme of the hero fighting evil in the form of a monster has been around for centuries. It is man who has put a meaning on this mythical creature and shaped it, which is why every dragon looks different and has its own characteristics, such as the ability to fly or to breathe fire. Discover the link between dragons and human beings, discover a world peopled by dragons.

*top 10 television  
and film dragons*, 2013  
watchMojo.com

**Saphira**  
Eragon, 2006

**Mushu**  
Mulan, 1998

**Draco**  
Dragonheart, 1996

**Drogon, Rhaegal, Viserion**  
Game of Thrones, 2011–

**Hungarian Horntail**  
Harry Potter and the Goblet  
of Fire, 2005

**Shenlong**  
Dragon Ball

**Vermithrax Pejorative**  
Dragonslayer, 1981

**Maleficent**  
Sleeping Beauty, 1959

**Toothless**  
How to Train Your Dragon, 2010

**Smaug**  
The Hobbit Trilogy, 2012–2014

# 1. the hero

Once upon a time ... there was a distant kingdom that was terrorized by a dragon. When the dragon threatened to devour the king's daughter, Saint George swung into action and slew the beast.

The legend of Saint George and the dragon has come down to us through the *Golden Legend (Legenda aurea)*, a collection of hagiographies or saints' lives compiled in the thirteenth century.

The story lives on to this day in many different forms.

Apart from Saint Michael, it is probably Saint George we think of when it comes to heroes courageous enough to take a stand against a dragon.

## 1.1

*Group sculpture of St George slaying the dragon, circa 1500*

St Petrus Banden Kerk, Venray (NL)

The carving was originally part of an altar configuration.

## 1.2

*Crossbow, 1604*

STAM

The crossbow is decorated with ivory plates featuring depictions of a man, a woman and various animals.

### 1.3

#### *Quiver, c.17*

MAS, Antwerp

Saint George and the dragon are depicted on this quiver, along with the initials DGW.

### 1.4

#### *Armour for upper arm, 2nd half c.16*

MAS (Vleeshuis collection),

Antwerp

A dragon, a knight and portrait busts are engraved on the shoulder plate.

### 1.5

#### *St Michael with the dragon, c.17*

Chapelle Notre-Dame de Sion,

Plouay (FR)

This statue of Saint Michael with the dragon is preserved in the chapel Notre-Dame de Sion in Plouay. It is carried in the annual fire brigade's procession on the Feast of Saint John.

### 1.6

#### *Jan van Cleef, St George with the dragon, 1693*

Limburgs Museum (collection

belonging to Sint-Martinusparochie),

Venlo (NL)

Saint George shows the dead dragon to Mary and the Child. Jan van Cleef was born in Venlo in 1646 and died in Ghent in 1716, where he was interred in St Michael's Church.

## 2. the demonic dragon

The devil or evil manifests itself in different forms and in different animals. In the Middle Ages the dragon was commonly used to represent the devil. According to the Bible, the devil was an angel that rebelled against God. By way of punishment he was banned from heaven with the help of Saint Michael. After that the devil appeared to believers in the form of a dragon or a serpent. The demonic dragon filled people with fear and challenged believers to show courage and steadfastness. It is because believers were tempted to commit the seven cardinal sins that the apocalyptic dragon was depicted with seven heads. A saint is identified by his attributes. Those objects relate to his life story. A dragon is frequently shown lying at the feet of a saint who has been put to the test. It symbolizes his resistance to temptation and the triumph of his faith.

### 2.1

Hubert Goltzius,  
*Last Judgement*, 1557  
Limburgs Museum, Venlo (NL)

Hell is depicted in the centre of the painting and features (among other things) a seven-headed dragon from the Revelation of St John. On Christ's right the chosen ones reach out to Christ, on his left are the damned.

## 2.2

*Allegorical painting,*  
1600–1606

Limburgs Museum (Royal LGOG  
collection), Venlo (NL)

Pictured on the right  
is Christ with a bride.  
Hanging in the tree  
are a snake and a dragon,  
symbolizing lust, one  
of the seven cardinal sins.

## 2.3

*St Amandus, 1500–1525*

Limburgs Museum, Venlo (NL)

Amandus was a missionary  
in Ghent and the sur-  
rounding area and later  
Bishop of Maastricht.  
Here we see him seated,  
a dragon at his feet.  
The dragon references  
the fact that Amandus  
converted numerous  
heathens to Christianity.

In his left hand he is  
holding a model of a church,  
acknowledging the fact  
that he founded a number  
of churches and other  
religious institutions  
including St Bavo's Abbey  
and St Peter's Abbey  
in Ghent.

## 2.4

Master of Elsloo,  
*St Dymphna, 1525*

Limburgs Museum

(Collection belonging to O.L.V.  
Geboorteparochie Bliitterswijk  
en Wanssum), Venlo (NL)

Saint Dymphna is holding  
a dragon on a leash.  
The dragon symbolizes  
her father, who was pos-  
sessed by desire for her  
and determined to marry  
her. In a fit of insanity,  
he decapitated his daughter.  
Saint Dymphna is patron  
saint of the mentally ill.

## 2.5

*St Margaret,*

1st quarter c.16

St Petrus Banden Kerk, Venray (NL)

Saint Margaret of Antioch was tortured after spurning a marriage proposal, which came with the condition that she renounce Christianity. Various miraculous incidents followed. For instance, because of her ardent prayer, she survived being swallowed up by a dragon. Margaret is patron saint of women.

## 2.6

*St Margaret, c.16*

Museum Helmantel,

Westeremden (NL)

## 2.7

*Mary with the Child Jesus, c.19*

MAS (Folklore collection), Antwerp

The Bible tells us how the pregnant Mary appears in heaven together with an enormous dragon. The dragon stands in front of Mary so that it might devour her child the moment he is born, but the child crushes the dragon and thus triumphs over evil. This representation refers to the birth of Jesus.

## 2.8

*Banner, 1932*

Limburgs Museum (Dutch Jesuits' collection), Venlo (NL)

This banner was made for the 75<sup>th</sup> jubilee year of the 'Jongheeren-congregatie' (Congregation of Young Gentlemen) in 1932. In the centre we see Mary trampling a dragon underfoot. Kneeling on the left is Saint Aloysius and on the right is an angel.

# 3. dragon stabbing

The myth of the defeat of the dragon lives on in a number of folk traditions in Europe. In most cases the classic Christian story of Saint George and the dragon is brought back to life in a performance or procession. In the Dutch village of Beesel a large-scale open-air spectacle is performed every seven years. In Belgium every year a dragon poses a threat to the city of Mons.

### 3.1

*Dragon from the procession of the burgomaster and the Brotherhood of St George*, undated

Musée du Doudou, Mons

This dragon plays a role in one of the processions that take place during Mons' folkloric festival known as the Ducasse. It is held every year on Trinity Sunday and culminates in the Lumeçon, a re-enactment of the battle between Saint George and the dragon.

### 3.2

Jan de Jong,  
*Photographs of dragon stabbing in Beesel*, 1935

Limburgs Museum (Spaarnestad collection), Venlo (NL)

This series of photographs shows aspects of dragon stabbing in Beesel in 1935.

### 3.3

*Film compilation of the new dragon stabbing in Beesel*, 2009

Trac'88

### 3.4

*Film compilation of the Lumeçon in Mons*, 2014

City of Mons and TéléMB

### 3.5

*Collectible Côte d'Or and Liebig cards depicting dragon stabbing in Mons*, c. 20

The House of Alijn, Ghent

### 3.6

Hein Froonen,  
*Carnival in Maastricht*,  
1st half c. 20

Limburgs Museum, Venlo (NL)

On the right of the painting we see Saint George and the dragon on a carnival float.

# 4. guilds

The veneration of Saint George and Saint Michael spread right across the Christian world and they became titular saints of merchant and trade guilds.

Guilds originated in the Middle Ages. They served to protect the city from attack and to maintain order at times of unrest, in the event of a fire or an important visit.

These days guilds take part in processions and parades and generally enjoy a busy round of social events.

Guilds' treasures usually comprise decorative chains hung with small silver shields and other silver objects.

The guild's patron saint is often depicted on the guild's silver. Saint George is the titular saint of the crossbow and arbalest guilds, while Saint Michael is the titular saint of fencers' guilds. Several trade guilds also have Saint George or Saint Michael as their patron saint.

## 4.1

*Silver belonging to the Crossbowmen's Guild of St George and St Sebastian in Beesel,*

c.15 and c.16, from 1721

Crossbowmen's Guild of St George and St Sebastian, Beesel (NL)

The crossbowmen's silver consists of commemorative shields bearing the name of "the king" (the winner of the crossbowmen's competition) and the year in which he became king. Hanging between the king's silver are the titular plates of Saint George (Georgius) from the fifteenth century and of Saint Sebastian from the sixteenth century.

## 4.2

### *King's chain belonging to St Michael's Guild Ghent, 1620*

Royal and Knightly Chief Guild of St Michael, Ghent

A guild's most striking and also most important insignia of office was the chain.

The "king" donned the chain at all the ceremonies as a sign of his rank.

The crowned monogram AE refers to the archdukes Albrecht and Isabella (Elisabeth), under whose rule Saint Michael's Guild was established. The chain does up at the front by means of a medallion with a miniature portrait of the archdukes. Hanging from it is a representation of the archangel Michael, who slew the devil.

## 4.3

### *King's silver, 1951 and 1954* Limburg Crossbowmen Museum, Steyl (NL)

Saint George on horseback and the dragon decorate the top of two silver plates. One shield bears the text "*as Flujas mit zien vrouw neet mier zoewe bestaon kos waat mich betrof de waereld waal vergaon. A. Feijen Koning 1954*", which translates as "If Valuas and his wife no longer existed, then as far as I'm concerned the world could perish." According to the legend, Valuas and his wife Guntrud founded the city of Venlo. The words "*Koning 1951 G. Hendrikx v/d Weem*" appear on the other shield.

#### 4.4

*Insignia and commemorative medals from the Ghent Guild of St George, c.17 and c. 20*

The House of Alijn, Ghent / STAM

Guildsmen wore insignia of office, usually made of silver, pinned to their sleeve.

#### 4.5

*Fragment of a chasuble from the Guild of St George in Diest, c.17*

De Hofstadt municipal museum, Diest

Guilds played an important role at celebrations of mass and religious ceremonies, such as the feast day of their titular saint. Sometimes the guilds employed their own chaplain, who wore a chasuble when leading services.

#### 4.6

*St Michael's challenge cup, pre-1905*

Royal and Knightly Chief Guild of St Michael, Ghent

From the beginning of the twentieth century the traditional prize of plates, candlesticks and the like awarded at tournaments was replaced by trophy cups, and increasingly challenge cups.

This challenge cup is from an annual tournament between the Ghent and the Brussels fencing clubs. The last tournament was held in 1961. Saint Michael's Guild won and the challenge cup passed into the permanent possession of Ghent.

#### 4.7

*Banner of the Guild  
of Crossbowmen of  
St George and St Sebastian  
in Beesel, circa 1995*

Guild of Crossbowmen of St George  
and St Sebastian, Beesel (NL)

#### 4.8

*Finial of a bailiff's staff, 1718*

STAM

This bailiff's staff from  
the thread-twisters' trade  
in Ghent is surmounted  
by a representation of  
Saint Michael, their titular  
saint, and the dragon.

#### 4.9

*Guild medallion from  
the Ghent Guild of  
Stocking-makers, undated*

STAM

Saint Michael was  
the patron saint of  
the stocking-makers'  
trade guild.

# 5. dragons in cities

Dragon legends are told about many cities, including Ghent, Geldern (DE), Tarascon (FR), Kraków (PL), Ljubljana (SI) and Kazan (RU), where the dragon appears as a symbol on documents, flags, gargoyles, memorial stones, door knockers, gates, towers, etc.

In Ghent an impressive gold dragon has protected the city since the late fourteenth century.

With widespread wings it watches over Ghent from the belfry, the proud symbol of an independent city.

## 5.1

*The dragon battle of Geldern, circa 1680–1690*

City of Geldern, Geldern (DE)

In the year 879 the courageous brothers Wichard and Lupold fought a fierce dragon that was prowling the region. The dragon's dying scream 'Gelre' gave the German city of Geldern and the Dutch province of Gelderland their names.

## 5.2

*Dragon tower, Egmond aan Zee*, circa 1500

Hilde's House, Castricum (NL)

Two identical lead dragons were found in the old moat when the tower of Egmond Castle was excavated in 1935.

They had probably fallen into the moat in 1573 when the castle was destroyed to prevent the Spaniards gaining defence points around the city of Alkmaar.

## 5.3

*Weather vane*, undated

STAM

## 5.4

*Signboard*, c.19

The House of Alijn, Ghent

This signboard was attached to a building in Sint-Salvatorstraat in Ghent.

## 5.5

*Roof decoration*,

late c.18 – beginning c.19

STAM

This dragon is one of a set of dragons which decorated a pavilion in the garden of the Instituut van Gent school.

## 5.6

*Daska newsreel on placing Ghent's dragon on the belfry*, 1980

STAM

The dragon has been removed from the belfry several times over the centuries, either to repair the tower or the dragon. In November 1980 a helicopter was deployed from the then Sint-Denijs-Westrem airfield (near Ghent) to put the dragon back in position. After two attempts, the dragon was back in exactly the same spot it had occupied for centuries.

## 5.7

*Model of the dragon  
on the belfry in Ghent,*  
circa 1945

STAM

An identical model was given to Major General D.C. Spry of the Canadian army by the people of Ghent in January 1945.

## 5.8

Felix De Vigne  
and Edmond De Busscher,  
*Chars du cortège des  
comtes de Flandre,* Ghent,  
De Busscher Frères, 1853

City of Ghent, De Zwarte Doos,  
Ghent City Archive

The dragon was found to be in very poor condition when it was taken down in 1839 so that the belfry could be restored.

The dragon was put on display and in 1849 even paraded on a float in a historical procession through the streets of Ghent. It was 1854 before it took up its position on the belfry again.

## 5.9

Jacques Van Brée,  
*Porcelain card  
showing the dragon  
on the belfry,* c.19

The House of Alijn, Ghent

## 5.10

Stefaan Mortier,  
*Drawing giving  
the measurements of  
the belfry dragon,* 1892

Historische Huizen, Ghent

## 5.11

*Medal in the shape of the belfry dragon commemorating the Concours de Tir during the World Fair in Ghent, 1913*

The House of Alijn, Ghent

## 5.12

Herman Verbaere,  
*Design for a poster for the Great International Flying Meeting, 1946*

University Library Ghent

This flying meeting was held in September 1946 as part of the commemorations of the liberation of Ghent. It coincided with the reopening of the Sint-Denijs-Westrem airfield. It looks as though the golden dragon on the belfry is fighting along with the fighter planes and parachutes.

## 5.13

*Beret with insignia of the 2nd Line Regiment, c. 20*

Private collection

After the Second World War, the 2nd Line Regiment, originally stationed in Leopold barracks in Ghent, was given its own insignia with a representation of the Ghent belfry dragon on a crown.

## 5.14

*Badge of the 2nd Line Regiment, c. 20*

Private collection

# 6. western dragons

The word 'dragon' derives from the Latin *draco* and the Greek *drakon*. For the Greeks and the Romans dragons were snake-like monsters. Many Christian stories, including that of Saint George and the dragon, go back to Greek mythology. Take, for example, the story of Heracles who had to slay the Hydra, a many-headed serpentine water monster, and the story of Perseus who freed Andromeda from the claws of a sea monster.

The Vikings built large longboats for transporting cattle and merchandise and for waging war, also known as 'drakkars' (literally 'dragon ships'). The prows of these ships were decorated with a representation of a dragon's or snake's head to protect the ship and crew from evil on the voyage and to instil fear in the enemy.

## 6.1

Neck amphora with Hydra, 650 BC

Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam (NL)

This Etruscan amphora features a woman confronting a three-headed serpent or dragon. The woman appears to be overpowering the dragon. It could be Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes, who cast a spell on the dragon that was guarding the Golden Fleece.

## 6.2

### *Drinking vessel,*

late c. 4 BC

J. Moonen-Gijs collection, Ranst

This Greek drinking vessel is in the shape of a sea dragon. The dragon's head contains elements of a griffin (the crest) and a dog (the ears).

## 6.3

### *Four griffins, c. 4 BC*

J. Moonen-Gijs collection, Ranst

The griffin is a mythical creature, usually having the hind legs and the tail of a lion and the head, forelegs and wings of an eagle. The griffin was seen as a kind of dragon, or as a beast that was the dragon's worst enemy.

## 6.4

### *Dragon head, undated*

J. Moonen-Gijs collection, Ranst

## 6.5

### *Sea dragon, c. 1–3*

Allard Pierson Museum,

Amsterdam (NL)

This dragon was part of a Roman army standard.

## 6.6

### *Figurehead with dragon terminal, c. 9 (replica)*

MAS (Maritime collection), Antwerp

## 6.7

### *Figurehead from a Viking ship, c. 4–5 (replica)*

MAS (Maritime collection), Antwerp

Cast of a figurehead found in the River Scheldt between Schoonaarde and Appels during dredging operations in 1914. This figurehead is thought to derive from a Norwegian drakkar. The original is preserved in the British Museum in London.

# 7. oriental dragons

Oriental dragons have access to different worlds. As magical creatures they have the ability to dive into the earth or ocean and to fly. So they are messengers between different worlds. The dragon is the master of the clouds and controls the rivers, the thunder and the lightning.

In the eastern world the dragon often represents a creative and fertile force rather than disorder and evil. In the east dragons are a sign of happiness, wealth and fertility. The dragon is arguably the most frequently depicted symbol in China. An oriental dragon is made up of the parts of the body of nine different animals. It can make itself as big or as small as it likes and it is invisible and intangible. The dragon has nine sons, each being different from each other both in appearance and character. Until the fall of China's last imperial dynasty in 1911, the dragon was the imperial emblem. The dragon with five claws on each foot was the preserve of the emperor while a four- or three-clawed dragon was assigned to nobility.

## 7.1

*Chinese dragon head*,  
undated

MAS, Antwerp

The dragon dance is a form of traditional dance and performance in Chinese culture.

A team of people form a long procession. The person in the front wears the dragon's head and the others form the body.

The dragon dance is often danced at festive celebrations such as Chinese New Year. The dragon banishes symbolic evil spirits.

## 7.2

*Dress uniform of a Chinese general*, c.19 (Qing dynasty)

STAM

This extraordinary uniform belonging to a Manchu general is decorated with dragons and dragon motifs.

The last imperial dynasty in China (Qing, 1644–1911) was one of foreign oppressors (Manchus). They had their own uniforms, which they went on wearing after conquering China.

## 7.3

*Chinese coat*, undated

STAM

This dark coat is decorated with lucky dragons, which seem to float effortlessly and play above oceans and mountains. The dragons connect deep water with high mountains and the heavens.

## 7.4

*Vase*, late c.16  
(Ming dynasty)

STAM

Pictured on this vase are imperial dragons with five claws on each foot. Above them are phoenixes. The phoenix is a highly revered, mythical bird and the symbol of the empress. A dragon and a phoenix depicted together refer to the sacred marriage of the emperor and the empress, of yin and yang, of heaven and earth. The imagery denotes great happiness and harmony.

## 7.5

*Socle*, c.19  
(Ming dynasty)

STAM

This little table is borne by two dragons with impressive antlers. They seem to be playing with the round tabletop, as if it was a pearl.

## 7.6

*Dish*, c.18  
(Ming dynasty)

STAM

This dish features dragons playing with a pearl. They dive deep into the ocean and then continue their game high up in the clouds. Dragons cavorting with a pearl in the clouds bring life-sustaining rain.

## 7.7

*Vases*, undated  
STAM

## 7.8

*Incense burner, c. 19*

STAM

This incense burner is shaped like a Chaofeng dragon, one of the nine sons of the Chinese dragon.

## 7.9

*Two scroll paintings depicting a noble couple, c. 19*

STAM

This lady and gentleman are wearing garments embellished with dragons. The large yellow dragons with four claws identify them as being of noble rank. Dragons fly from the earth to the heavens, they connect our world with the ancestors' heaven. Such illustrations were often placed near the family altar after the death of the person depicted.

Ai Weiwei, *Dragon*  
*in progress, 2014*

Ai Weiwei Studio, Beijing (CN)

# 8. unknown worlds

For centuries it was believed that dragons really did exist. The medieval bestiaries and the later nature encyclopaedias were sources of information about dragons.

Cartographers drew imaginary, dragon-like sea monsters in unknown oceans. The sea monster illustrated the dangerous unknown. On long journeys to distant climes people encountered unfamiliar animals, which provided new elements for the form of the dragon. For example, the crocodile head we now associate with the dragon was inspired by the crusaders' encounters with the Nile crocodile.

Dragons are also depicted on celestial globes and maps. Since ancient times we have used lines to join the stars in constellations and named

these after the shapes they represent. The Dragon constellation winds its way between the Great Bear and the Little Bear. The story of this constellation goes back to the Greek myth of Heracles who killed the dragon that was guarding the tree with the golden apples.

## 8.1

Willem Janszoon Blaeuw,  
*Celestial globe*, 1603

University Library Ghent

A celestial globe shows the sky with the brightest stars and heavenly objects which don't seem to move with respect to the earth. The star sign Draco is the name of a large constellation situated around the north celestial pole.

## 8.2

*3D model of Willem  
Janszoon Blaeuw's  
celestial globe, 2016*

University of Ghent, Geography  
Department, Ghent

## 8.3

Lodewijk Vlasblom,  
*Stellatum planisphaerium  
boreale...australe,*  
circa 1680

HEK collection, Lisse (NL)

This celestial map of the starry northern and southern sky shows a reproduction of the planets according to Ptolemy and the known star constellations according to Copernicus. The celestial chart was made for Johannes van Keulen's nautical atlas. Nautical atlases always begin with a map of the world and a celestial chart.

## 8.4

Anders Vedel,  
*Map of Islandia, 1585*

HEK collection, Lisse (NL)

This map of Iceland appears in the Ortelius atlas of 1585 and later editions and is thought to have been drawn by Bishop Thorlaksson. The island itself seems to have acquired the shape of a dragon, surrounded by a sea peopled with monsters and dragons. The sea monsters are identified with letters which are keyed to the — largely fictitious — explanation on the verso.

## 8.5

Christiaan Schrot,  
*Terra Sancta*, c.16

HEK collection, Lisse (NL)

The map of the Holy Land appears in this post-1595 version in Abraham Ortelius' atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in Antwerp. The map is based on information provided by cartographer Petrus Laicstain in 1556 and was made by Christiaan Schrot (s Groten).

The Bible story of Jonah and the whale is depicted bottom left. The Jordan and the Dead Sea (*Mare Mortuum*) are shown.

## 8.6

Georg Matthäus Seutter,  
*Map of Africa*, 1730

HEK collection, Lisse (NL)

One of the four continents from the *Atlas* published by Georg Matthäus Seutter. The Nile rises in Zaire Lacus (Lake Zaire) and another, unnamed lake. Perched on top of the title of the decorative cartouche is a flying dragon.

## 8.7

*Crocodylus niloticus*,  
pre-1928

Royal Museum for

Central Africa, Tervuren

The crusaders encountered unfamiliar animals, such as the Nile crocodile. After that the crocodile's head influenced depictions of the dragon's head.

## 8.8

Conrad Gesner,  
*Historiae animalium*, 1587

Royal Library, Brussels

(December 2016 – February 2017) /

Plantin-Moretus Museum, Antwerp

(March–May 2017)

Conrad Gesner (1516–1665)

was a Swiss naturalist.

He placed a new emphasis on accurate description and so, along with his contemporary Ulisse Aldrovandi, he is regarded as the founder of zoology.

## 8.9

Ulisse Aldrovandi,  
*Monstrorum historia cum  
Paralipomenis historiae  
omnium animalium*, 1642

Royal Library, Brussels

(December 2016 – February 2017) /

Plantin-Moretus Museum, Antwerp

(March – May 2017)

Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) was an Italian naturalist who collected animals from all over the world.

## 8.10

*Jenny Haniver*, c.17

Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg (NL)

In the seventeenth century a bourgeois home boasting a *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities containing collections of unusual objects or rare animals, such as a miniature dragon, was a sign of good taste and wealth. So, to earn a little extra money, seafarers in the port of Antwerp made little dragons from the carcasses of rays. They sold them as *jeune d'Anvers*, which was corrupted to *Jenny Haniver*. Similar dragons were depicted in, for example, Aldrovandi's famous book *Monstrorum historia*.

# 9. dragons in nature

Though the length and breadth of the natural world was explored from the nineteenth century, dragons were never found. Giant snakes and large lizards were studied, but biologists have never caught or even seen a single living, fire-breathing or flying dragon. However, many of the dragon's characteristics, such as the fire-breathing, the scaly skin and the claws, are to be found on animals which do exist.

## 9.1

*Draco volans*  
(open patagium)

Ghent University Museum,  
Zoology collection, Ghent

The flying dragon cannot actually fly, but it does have the ability to glide short distances of several scores of metres.

## 9.2

*Draco volans*  
(closed patagium)

Ghent University Museum  
(Zoology collection), Ghent

Flying dragon

### 9.3

#### *Rhinolophus hipposideros*

University Museum Utrecht (NL)

The Lesser horseshoe bat's flight is fast and agile. Its wingbeat makes a whispering sound.

### 9.4

#### Chiroptera

The World of Kina: the House, Ghent

The bat with its leathery wings often serves as a model for a dragon's wings.

### 9.5

#### *Chrysopelea ornata*

Ghent University Museum,

Zoology collection, Ghent

The Flying snake glides by spreading its ribs to make its ventral side wide and hollow. This enables it to travel several scores of meters.

### 9.6

#### *Hirundichthys speculiger*

University Museum Utrecht (NL)

When the Flying fish leaves the water, it spreads out its fins. It doesn't fly, but uses air pressure to glide.

### 9.7

#### *Varanus salvator bivittatus*

Ghent University Museum,

Zoology collection, Ghent

This Two striped water monitor is a good illustration of the forked tongue we associate not only with lizards but also with dragons.

### 9.8

#### *Varanus* sp.

The World of Kina: the Garden, Ghent

## 9.9

### *Gonocephalus grandis*

The World of Kina: the Garden, Ghent

The most striking characteristic of this impressive Great anglehead lizard, also known as the Giant forest dragon, is the high dorsal crest just behind its head.

## 9.10

### *Calotes versicolor*

The World of Kina: the Garden, Ghent

The Oriental garden lizard or Changeable lizard has a nuchal or neck crest with upright, needle-like spines, and a saw-like dorsal crest.

## 9.11

### *Iguana iguana*

The World of Kina: the Garden, Ghent

Its length (up to two metres) and its sometimes very large crests make the green iguana look rather dragon-like. It is the most impressive of all the iguanas.

## 9.12

### *Varanus niloticus*

The World of Kina: the Garden, Ghent

The Nile monitor is feared by the local population in Africa, who consider it a man killer. Indeed, it can defend itself by lashing out with its sharp claws.

## 9.13

### *Chimaera monstrosa*

Ghent University Museum,

Zoology collection, Ghent

The Rabbitfish is a lesser-known elasmobranch and the 'ugly brother' of sharks and rays.

## 9.14

### *Varanus komodoensis*

Royal Belgian Institute

of Natural Sciences, Brussels

Not only does the Komodo dragon have a cocktail of fatal septic bacteria in its saliva, it also produces its own poison, just like a dragon.

## 9.15

### *Brachinus crepitans*

Ghent University Museum,  
Zoology collection, Ghent

#### The Bombardier beetle

is well known for its remarkable explosive defence mechanism.

When the beetle is threatened, a chemical reaction in its 'firing chamber' causes it to release a volatile liquid at a temperature of around 100 degrees Celsius.

## 9.16

### *Film compilation of the Brachinus crepitans in action*

De Kennis van Nu (YouTube)

# 10. dragon studies

The dragon skeleton you see here was made with anatomical accuracy and based on the characteristics of several different animals. The actual skeleton is that of a python, the other bones are from rabbits, cockerels and a turkey. Next to the skeleton lie remains of prey, some laid out in a circle. The dragon is a young male that is only just

sexually mature, so he has made a decorative nest using the bones of prey with a chicken head in the middle as a food offering to attract a female.

Here we are building on the tradition of the animal encyclopaedia, in which dragons were described until the seventeenth century as if they really existed.

## 10.1

Dominick Vershelde,  
*Serpentodracō deevesi*  
Vershelde, 2016

Ghent University Museum,  
Zoology collection, Ghent

The scientific name of this dragon was of course invented, but then according to the rules of taxonomy and scientific naming in biology.

The name means ‘Deeves’ serpent dragon’, referring to the initials of the maker of the skeleton.

STA'M



Vlaanderen  
verbeelding werkt



Limburgs Museum  
wat je met, neem je zelf



DeMorgen.