

A Book of Creatures

The Mysterious Dragon of Lucerne

How did you do on the recent picture quiz? If you guessed anything related to Lucerne or Mount Pilatus, you are absolutely right. And you'd also be right if you said the words Kircher or Scheuchzer. But what on earth is this thing? It's not a regular tatzelwurm, it doesn't have cat features or look small and snaky. It looks Chinese, if anything. What's it doing in Lucerne?



I'm going to tell you a story. The marvelous tale of Vietor, the cooper of Lucerne. His adventures are told in Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus*. Scheuchzer copies the story and adds the image you see above in his *Itinera Alpina*.

Vietor was a humble cooper (that is, he makes barrels) who lived in Lucerne around 1420. He set out one day to fetch wood on the slopes of Mount Pilatus, only to fall through a deep pit. The cave Vietor ended up had no exit save the one he fell in from, and the walls were too steep and dangerous to scale. Somehow this situation got even worse when two hideous dragons showed up!

Fortunately for Vietor, his prayers were answered and the dragons were not allowed to harm him (or maybe they were already harmless? The text makes it clear that it's a miracle though). They weren't much help either. The dragons spent their time sleeping or eating a sort of oozy liquid that came out of the rocks. Vietor followed their example. On this meager diet and in the slithery companionship of the dragons he survived from November 6 to April 10 – 6 months. On the last day the dragons took to the air to find greener fields, and Vietor held on to the second dragon's tail as it took off.

Thus Vietor escaped his imprisonment in the cave and returned to Lucerne, where he had long been thought dead. But his liquid diet had ruined his digestive system, and he died two months later.

I bet you're wondering what the dragon image has to do with all this. Well, before Vietor died he had the dragons and himself embroidered on a chasuble, which was presented to Saint Leodegarius' Church in Lucerne. Scheuchzer reproduces the image of one of the dragons.

And that's where Scheuchzer gets sassy about it, pointing out that it looks a lot like an imperial Chinese dragon. So what exactly happened? My guess is that a piece of far Eastern embroidery somehow ended up in Lucerne*, and the story of Vietor grew around that piece of cloth long after its origin was forgotten. At any rate all records of the event were destroyed in a fire.

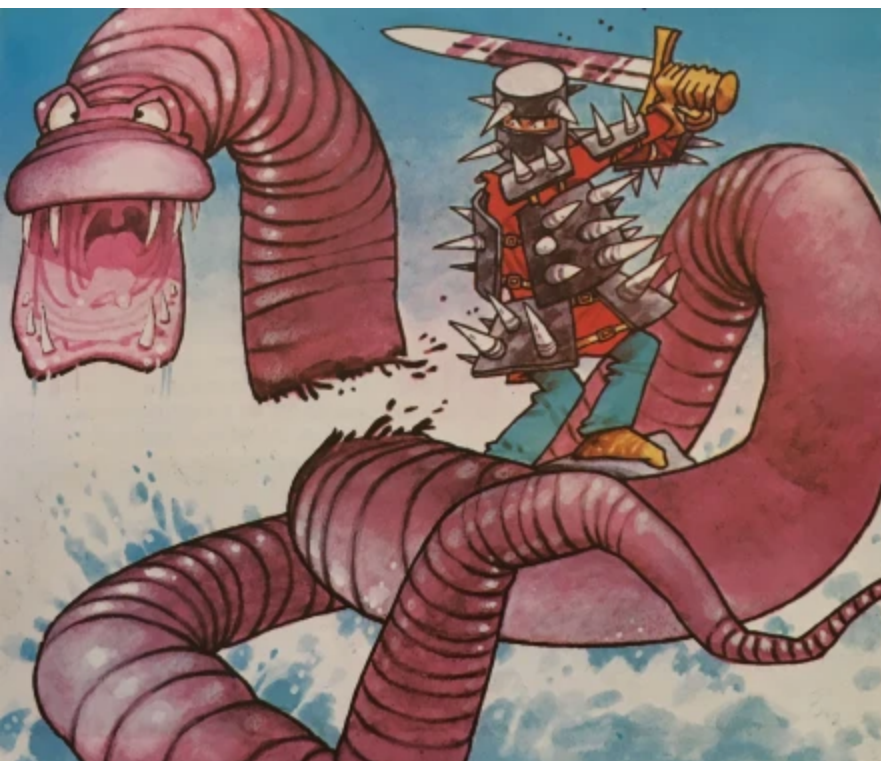
*Now there's an Indiana Jonesesque adventure plot if I've ever seen one.

Which just goes to prove how much cultural cross-pollination was constantly happening. Folklore and mythology doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Vietor's dragonscapades were also colorfully retold in Usborne's *Stories For Young Children* by Christopher Rawson and Stephen Cartwright. It's also where I first read the story, long before embarking on ABC. Here he has the more common name of Victor.



It also has a lovely wormy Lambton worm.



""""""for young children""""""



... as well as this cool Candeljack Willy the Wisp [sic].

7 Comments



Or maybe he saw dragons from China outside of their normal range? That's always a possibility! 😊

posted December 20, 2017 at 1:09 PM by [tetradactyl410](#)

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I've been to Pilatus, and there's a carving? of a dragon near the top of the mountain, although it's not as obviously eastern as the illustration. I really liked the story since the dragons are just large wild animals rather than monsters in it, but it seems like the story behind the story is just as interesting.

posted December 30, 2017 at 1:38 PM by [Fluffysminion](#)

[Reply](#)



i like candel jack better

posted February 25, 2019 at 10:26 AM by [Noah](#)

[Reply](#)



Does anyone know the ISBN number for the Willy the Wisp book. It is the last image in the list and was one of my favourite books as a youngster.

posted December 24, 2019 at 6:02 AM by Dave

0746008007 or 978-0746008003 I believe!

posted December 24, 2019 at 7:10 AM by abookofcreatures in reply to Dave



Yes I too am looking for the book of Willy The Wisp from the last picture.

posted March 18, 2021 at 6:46 PM by Gronan barbarian



I was going to say something involving European contact with East Asia...

posted March 23, 2021 at 3:36 PM by beattiesnick4132



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