

Dragons and Dragonslayers

T I M C H E S T E R

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CHAPTER 1

Everyone Loves a Dragon Story

It's Christmas Day 1153. A group of Vikings led by Earl Harald has landed in Orkney. If you travel to the very top of Scotland and then keep going, across ten miles of open sea, you come to the islands of Orkney.

Back in the twelfth century dark clouds filled the sky and the air felt heavy. But Harald and his fellow Vikings saw no reason to fear as they set out on foot to cross to the east side of the island. After they

had walked a few miles, beautiful flakes of snow began drifting towards them on the breeze. Soon the ground was covered, as if it had been made new. Still they saw no reason to fear. But, as the snow fell more thickly and the wind turned violent, they found themselves struggling through a blizzard.

Without a word, they formed themselves into a line, following in each other's footsteps. From time to time one of them stumbled into a snow drift. The first man scrambled to his feet, embarrassed at his fall. But by the time the fifth man had fallen, they were glad to grasp hold of a hand to pull them up. These were men who had sailed across seas and fought in battles. They were not going to be beaten by snowflakes. Yet by now their clothes were soaked with sweat from the inside and melting snow from the outside. Even the strain of tramping through snow drifts could not stop them shivering with cold. It was no use. Night was coming fast. They could not go on. They needed shelter.

Harald knew Orkney well enough to know that nearby was an old tomb, a mound as high as a house enclosing a stone-walled cavern. Harald led the party away from the road. It took a while to find with snow filling the dusky gloom. But finally it loomed up in front of them. The ancient entrance had long ago been sealed with boulders. So the Vikings dug down through the roof to hide among the dead. Today the tomb is known as Maeshowe (pronounced “Mice-how”). When the Vikings sheltered there, this stone age burial site was already over 4,000 years old.

We know this story because of a Medieval manuscript called the Orkneyinga Saga. The Saga says: “On the thirteenth day of Christmas they traveled on foot over to Firth. During a snowstorm they took shelter in Maeshowe and two of them went insane which slowed them down badly.”

There’s a second reason we know it happened. While they were stuck in the tomb, the Vikings covered the walls with graffiti! All over the stone chamber are Norse

letters called “runes” scratched into the rock. You can see them for yourself if you ever visit Orkney.

Here are some of things they wrote: “Haermund Hard-Axe carved these runes.” “These runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes in the western ocean.” “Tholfir carved these runes high up.” That line, as you might guess, is scratched on the roof!

A couple of the runes speak of missing treasure. So maybe the Vikings hoped to find gold in the Maeshowe tomb. But most of these inscriptions are a bit of a disappointment. You might have hoped for some ancient spell or at least a Viking riddle. But it’s just graffiti.

Yet there is one exception. Among all the runes is one picture. It’s a picture of a dragon with a man who appears to be spearing it from behind. Perhaps Earl Harald and his men told each other dragon stories as they huddled together that night in Maeshowe. What we can know for sure is that Vikings told stories of dragons.



And not just Vikings.

In May 1939 Basil Brown began excavating a mound in Suffolk in England. Brown had taught himself archaeology, the study of ancient remains. He had already dug up three other nearby mounds. There he had only found a few fragments of iron and glass because the mounds had all been robbed 500 years before by treasure-hunters.

On the third day Brown and his helpers found an iron nail. Within a few hours they found others, all in a line. They soon realized this was not a few bits of old metal, but a complete ship. In places the wood had rotted away leaving a line of nails in the earth. But in other places the wood was preserved. Here was a whole ship looking as if it had sunk, not beneath the waves, but beneath the soil.

In the middle was a tomb. This was an Anglo-Saxon ship burial. Back in the seventh century a great king had been buried in his ceremonial armor with an entire ship. Historians believe it was probably

The Red Dragon

Our next dragon story is found in another medieval manuscript. The *Mabinogian* is a Welsh collection of ancient stories, some over 2,000 years old. One story is the tale of King Lludd (pronounced “Cluth”). According to the *Mabinogian*, it was Lludd who first made London the capital city of Britain.

Lludd was a good king. He protected his people from their enemies and made sure there was justice for rich and poor alike. So every year people were able to plant their crops in peace. And every year

they were able to harvest them without fear. Every year until one terrible morning in spring.

It was not long after dawn. Across the land people were making their way to work in the fields. Suddenly a terrible shriek cut through the morning air. It's hard to capture how it sounded. It was like the cry of a hawk. But instead of being a single shout, it was long, sustained scream that echoed deep into your soul.

Two or three times a day it could be heard from somewhere beyond the horizon.

Knights who had once plunged fearlessly into battle lost their strength. Young men lost their senses. Pregnant animals miscarried. Even the emerging seedlings seemed to shrink back into the earth. Then after a month it stopped as suddenly as it had started. As May turned to June people replanted their crops and hoped the shrieking plague was gone for good.

But the following year, as the May blossom bloomed, the terrible cry could once again be heard across the land.

King Lludd was heartbroken by this mysterious plague. With no idea what he could do, he consulted the wisest man he knew, his own brother, Llefelys (pronounced "Clevelis"). Llefelys had married a French princess and become a king in France. So Lludd sailed across the channel to seek brother's counsel. Llefelys had studied ancient books, collected folk tales, and learned the stories of the past. Other people regarded such stories as childish nonsense, but Llefelys was convinced they contained echoes of important truths. Llefelys realized immediately that the shriek was a dragon. "A white dragon has come from across the seas," he said, "and the red dragon of Britain is fighting to defend its territory."

This may have solved the mystery, but it was hardly a solution. "What can I do?" pleaded Lludd.

Llefelys told Lludd to dig a great pit like a giant cauldron and fill it with mead, a drink made from honey, and then cover the pit with cloth.

