

Tarasque

Throughout Provence, the most southerly part of France, there was a strong medieval tradition that the region was converted to Christianity soon after the death of Jesus, not by one of the apostles but by his personal friends – the family from Bethany, consisting of Mary Magdalene, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, together with two unrelated Marys mentioned in the gospels (the mother of James and John, and Mary Salome). They had all come to live there, fleeing from persecution. At Tarascon, a town near the Spanish border, attention was focused on St Martha, to whom the local church is dedicated.

The earliest *Life of St Martha* was written in Latin at some time between 1187 and 1212. One episode tells how, soon after coming to Tarascon, she heard that people there were terrorised by ‘a huge dragon, part land animal and part fish’ which lived in a forest beside the Rhône and had killed many people passing the spot or crossing the river. Attempts to destroy it always failed, since it would hide underwater. The description of the monster is vivid and detailed, and by no means that of a conventional dragon:

It was fatter than an ox, longer than a horse, with a lion’s face and head, teeth as sharp as swords, a horse’s mane, its back as sharp as an axe, bristling and piercing scales, six feet with bear’s claws, a serpent’s tail, and a shell on either side like a tortoise.

It was the offspring of the water-monster Leviathan mentioned in the Book of Job and of an animal called the Bonachus, which could set people on fire by jetting its burning excrement over them — the latter being a creature in medieval bestiaries. The people asked St Martha for help:

She found the dragon in the forest, eating a man it had throttled. She threw over it some Holy Water which she had brought and showed it a wooden cross, and the defeated dragon stood as quiet as a lamb. The saint bound it with her girdle, and the people slaughtered it at once with spears and stones.

In its main outlines, the episode is a stereotype. Throughout religious art and legends, a dragon stands for Satan or demons in general; this follows Revelation 12, with its battle between the Archangel Michael and ‘that old serpent called the Devil’, and Mark 16:18 and Luke 10:19, where the power of Christians to overcome evil is symbolized as an ability to hold or trample on deadly snakes. There are hosts of legends about saints who cursed or banished dragons or snakes, or turned them to stone. Holy water and a cross were (and are) routinely used in exorcisms, while Martha’s girdle symbolizes her virginity. But the monster itself is another matter, and it is the monster, imagined as female and affectionately known as La Tarasque, whom the people of Tarascon proudly honour as their town’s emblem and mascot. Her effigy is the focus of a local custom analyzed by Louis Dumont in his classic study *La Tarasque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

For centuries, an effigy of the Tarasque has featured prominently in processions at the town’s religious and seasonal festivals, together with an escort of young men wearing cocked hats, sashes and knee-breeches, called the Tarascaires. It is first mentioned in 1461 and appeared every year up to the time of the French Revolution, though more rarely thereafter. No doubt it often needed to be repaired, or entirely replaced. The pictures shown here, probably dating from the 1920s, are of the magnificent nineteenth-

century Tarasque which is still kept in a museum in the Rue des Marchés. Its hollow body consists of a wooden framework covered in painted canvas, with a jagged spinal crest and spikes emerging from the sides; a long, stout beam projects to form the tail; the head, which can swing from side to side, has a movable lower jaw, huge glassy eyes, and nostrils forming two holes. The head is inscribed 'Jean Andre fecit 1840'; the bodywork dates from the 1850s. Five men would be hidden inside this structure, four to bear the weight and carry it along, while the fifth controlled the movements of the head and jaw; in 1943, however, the whole effigy was mounted on a wheeled platform and pushed along from the outside – a less laborious procedure, but one which limited its movements, spoiling much of the traditional amusement spectators got from the boisterous, mock-aggressive behaviour of the monster.

This aggression was particularly marked on Whit Monday, the first of the two dates when she customarily appeared. This was a secular festivity known as the 'running' of the Tarasque; various nineteenth-century accounts describe the events. The centre of activity was a fairly narrow street, the Place de la Mairie, where a crowd gathered and danced the farandole to the beat of drums, which from time to time would change their beat to one that heralded the arrival of the Tarasque. After some deliberate false alarms, she did indeed appear, running at full tilt through the crowd, with swaying head and snapping jaws, and fireworks shooting from her nostrils. Worst of all, the carriers would swing round unpredictably to one side, with the inevitable result that the long rigid tail swung in the opposite direction, knocking down those who were not nimble enough to get out of the way, and sometimes breaking their bones. As Claude-François Achard wrote in 1787:

This kind of accident, which perhaps anywhere else would interrupt the festivities, in this region simply arouses satisfaction and joy in the public. No sooner has someone been struck by this raging beast than the people applaud and shout at the top of their voices: Well done! Well done!

In 1808 Aubin-Louis Millin recorded the cry more fully:

A que ben fé! A que ben fé!
La Tarascon a rou un bré!

('Oh that's well done! Oh that's well done! The Tarasque has smashed an arm!')

Meanwhile the Tarascaires accompanying the effigy would wield whips to drive back the crowd, especially anyone who tried to catch hold of the Tarasque and pull off one of its spikes – an act which if successful was said to bring good luck. At intervals the effigy halted and the bearers took a rest, while the Tarascaires danced. Eventually the Tarasque made her last 'run' in front of St Martha's Church, and bowed to it three times before being taken away.

During the rest of the day, various religious guilds and occupational groups – wine growers, shepherds, fishermen, farmers, porters, etc – held a parade during which they displayed their skill at various 'sports', many of which also involved tricks or minor attacks on spectators. Wine-growers, for instance, would mime the process of planting vines and aligning them with the help of a long rope; they skipped and danced around this rope, but then would suddenly rush with it into the crowd, tripping people over. The fishermen's cart carried a boat filled with water, and they would hurl bucketfuls over the

spectators. Market-gardeners would throw prickly spinach seeds, especially at pretty girls. Needless to say, a great deal of alcohol was consumed.

The Tarasque's other regular appearance was altogether more decorous. On the feast of St Martha (29 July) – or, since the late nineteenth century, on the following Sunday – a procession would leave the church after High Mass, headed by the Tarasque. This time, however, she did not run freely. A pretty little girl, dressed as St Martha, would lead her by a ribbon, as if on a leash, while carrying in the other hand a vessel of holy water. From time to time the Tarasque would try to jerk free, only to be subdued by an aspersion of holy water. Behind her came men dressed approximately like medieval soldiers, supposedly representing those who killed the dragon in St Martha's time; the rest of the procession consisted of priests, monks and religious fraternities, escorting a shrine containing relics of the saint.

Nowadays, the Tarasque's annual outing has been transferred to the last Sunday in June, as part of a festival celebrating the history and legends of Tarascon. Instead of the wooden effigy discussed above, a lighter fibreglass one is currently in use; this has a much shorter tail, curled up over its back, as on the town's coat of arms. This eliminates any risk to spectators.

As usual with legends about local monsters, various interpretations and rationalizations have been proposed, both by oral informants and by authors. Was a real exotic animal, e.g. a crocodile, ever killed there? Does the story symbolize floods on the Rhône? Or the defeat of paganism? One fruitful approach is not to view the Tarasque in isolation but as kin to various other monster effigies used in religious rites and/or popular festivals, notably those in Rogationtide processions. The best English parallel is the dragon Snap in midsummer civic parades in Norwich. Above all, as Dumont puts it:

The sociological factor is fundamental: the Tarasque is above all the eponymous beast, the palladium of its community. . . . It would seem that on the level of popular festivity the official catholic patron saint of the locality [Martha] is outshone by the Tarasque, the true and far more brilliant secular patron, whose 'runs' are a violent glorification of local energy, often at the expense of strangers.

The status of the Tarasque as a major example of European folkloric legend and custom was internationally recognized in 2005, when UNESCO declared this tradition to be 'part of the oral and immaterial inheritance of humanity'. The scientific community paid tribute too when in 1991 a particular type of recently discovered dinosaur was given the name Tarascosaurus.

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