Today, thanks in no small part to the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien and the early role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, dragonslayers have once again become a staple part of modern storytelling and appear in books, comics, and movies too numerous to mention. But there were times, in centuries past, when people truly believed in dragons, when deadly giant serpents with poison breath could lurk in any hole or cave. Those were the days of the great heroes. Those were the days of the dragonslayers.
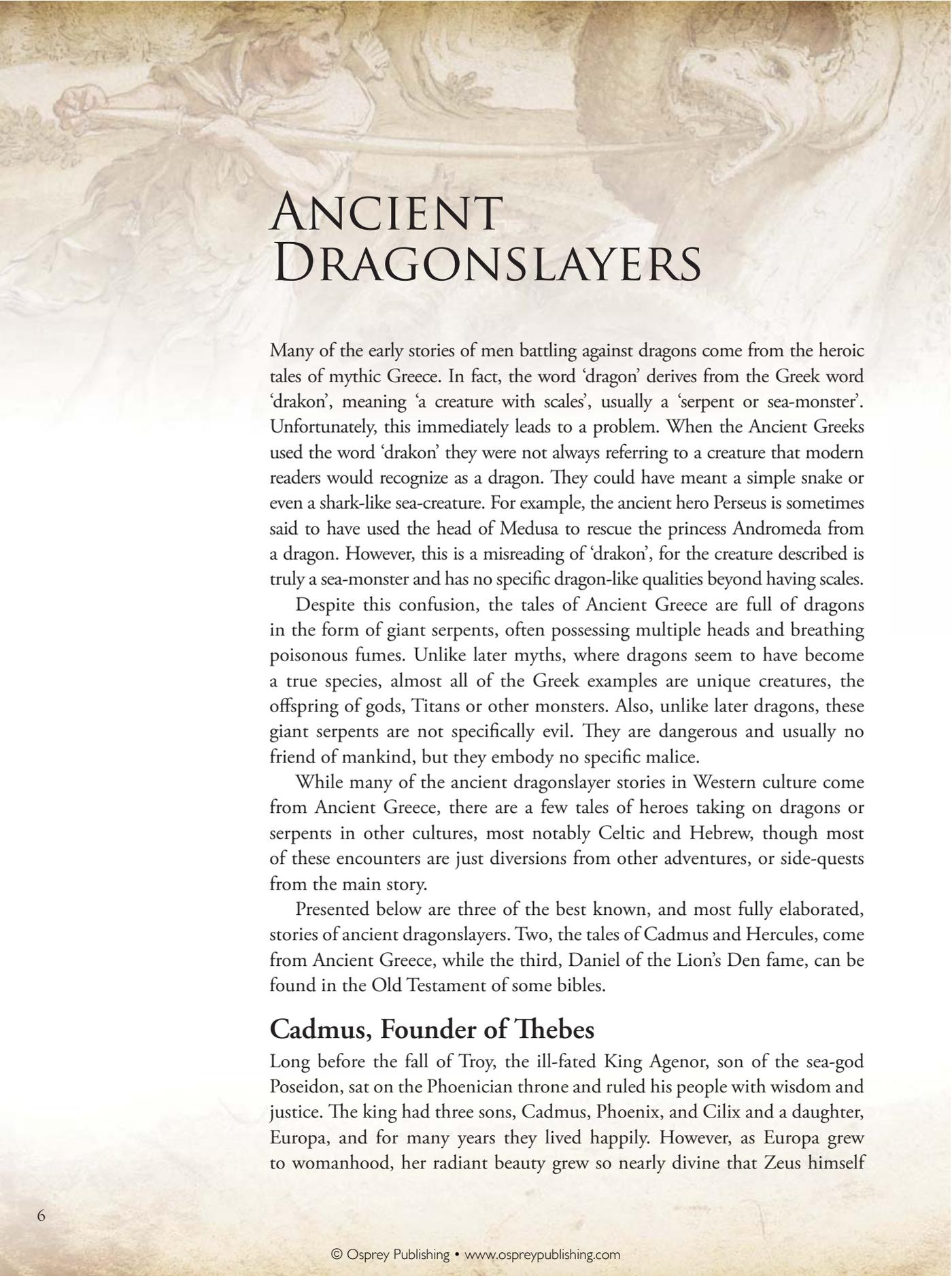
Ancient Dragonslayers

Many of the early stories of men battling against dragons come from the heroic tales of mythic Greece. In fact, the word 'dragon' derives from the Greek word 'drakon', meaning 'a creature with scales', usually a 'serpent or sea-monster'. Unfortunately, this immediately leads to a problem. When the Ancient Greeks used the word 'drakon' they were not always referring to a creature that modern readers would recognize as a dragon. They could have meant a simple snake or even a shark-like sea-creature. For example, the ancient hero Perseus is sometimes said to have used the head of Medusa to rescue the princess Andromeda from a dragon. However, this is a misreading of 'drakon', for the creature described is truly a sea-monster and has no specific dragon-like qualities beyond having scales.

Despite this confusion, the tales of Ancient Greece are full of dragons in the form of giant serpents, often possessing multiple heads and breathing poisonous fumes. Unlike later myths, where dragons seem to have become a true species, almost all of the Greek examples are unique creatures, the offspring of gods, Titans or other monsters. Also, unlike later dragons, these giant serpents are not specifically evil. They are dangerous and usually no friend of mankind, but they embody no specific malice.

While many of the ancient dragonslayer stories in Western culture come from Ancient Greece, there are a few tales of heroes taking on dragons or serpents in other cultures, most notably Celtic and Hebrew, though most of these encounters are just diversions from other adventures, or side-quests from the main story.

Presented below are three of the best known, and most fully elaborated, stories of ancient dragonslayers. Two, the tales of Cadmus and Hercules, come from Ancient Greece, while the third, Daniel of the Lion's Den fame, can be found in the Old Testament of some bibles.

Cadmus, Founder of Thebes

Long before the fall of Troy, the ill-fated King Agenor, son of the sea-god Poseidon, sat on the Phoenician throne and ruled his people with wisdom and justice. The king had three sons, Cadmus, Phoenix, and Cilix and a daughter, Europa, and for many years they lived happily. However, as Europa grew to womanhood, her radiant beauty grew so nearly divine that Zeus himself

Cadmus slays the dragon by Hendrick Goltzius.

came down from Olympus and bore her away. When King Agenor learned of his daughter's disappearance, his grief overwhelmed him. In his madness, he commanded his three sons to go out and search for their sister and not to return unless they found her.

Despite his father's unkind order, Prince Cadmus gathered together a group of companions and set off on this quest. For months he led his men through many adventures, through battles and hardships, but not one clue did they find concerning the missing Europa. In desperation, Cadmus took his men to Delphi in Greece, to consult with the famed Oracle of Apollo. There, where Apollo had slain the dragon, Python, the Oracle instructed Cadmus to abandon his quest, for he would never find his sister. Instead, he should go forth and follow the first animal he encountered until it laid down to rest. In that spot he should found a city.

Troubled by the failure of his quest, Cadmus left the Oracle and returned to his companions. Soon after, he spotted a lone cow, with the sign of the moon on one flank, and decided to follow the beast. For days, Cadmus trudged along after the heifer, which never stopped and never rested, until, finally,