

The Dragon in Medieval East
Christian and Islamic Art

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The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art

With a Foreword by Robert Hillenbrand

By

Sara Kuehn



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For my parents

Wie sollten wir jener alten Mythen vergessen können, die am Anfange aller Völker stehen, der Mythen von den Drachen, die sich im äußersten Augenblick in Prinzessinnen verwandeln; vielleicht sind alle Drachen unseres Lebens Prinzessinnen, die nur darauf warten, uns einmal schön und mutig zu sehen.

Rainer Maria Rilke "Briefe an einen jungen Dichter"

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NOTES ON THE BIBLIOGRAPHY, TRANSLITERATION, DATING AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The bibliography is limited to works and articles that are cited in the study. All bibliographic references for books and periodicals are given in abbreviated form in the footnotes with complete citations appearing in the bibliography. Encyclopaedia articles and dictionary entries are cited only in the notes. Unless passages are quoted, editions of classical authors are not cited.

The system of transliteration of Arabic, Persian and Turkish words used in this work is based on that of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, with several modifications:

“q” replaces “ḳ”; “j” is used instead of “dj.”
“Th,” “kh,” “dg,” “sh” and “gh” are not underlined.

With the exception of certain words such as Qur’ān, neither italics nor diacritical marks are used for those Arabic, Persian or Turkish names and terms that have entered into common English usage like large cities, geographical locations and dynasties.

Where specific dates pertaining to the Islamic realm are referenced, both Islamic (*hijrī*) and Christian (Gregorian) dates will be given, the Islamic date appearing first. Where a century or decade is mentioned only Christian dates are cited.

Photographs included in the illustrations were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

FOREWORD

This book is part of a much longer and comprehensive study on which Dr Kuehn has been labouring for over a decade and whose aim is to trace the iconography of the composite mythical creature known as the serpent-dragon from the mists of antiquity to the later middle ages. Her geographical focus in the study as a whole is principally Western and Central Asia but she remains continually alert to the manifestations of her theme in neighbouring cultures to the east (including India and China) and the west. The continuity of this arresting image across vast gulfs of space and time in the most diverse cultures of the Old World from the Atlantic to the Pacific is quite startling.

That continuity in itself constitutes a major challenge to anyone seeking to tell a connected story that extends across continents, cultures and millennia. The volume of scholarship on the art of Western and Central Asia has grown exponentially in the last couple of generations. In the field of Islamic art alone, it is clearly no longer a reasonable ambition to produce a companion volume to Creswell's magisterial *Bibliography of the Architecture, Arts and Crafts of Islam to 1st Jan. 1960*; such a work would need to be several times the size and weight of that huge tome in order to cover what has been produced in the last fifty years. But as the volume of scholarship expands, so, by a seemingly ineluctable law, does its scope contract. More and more people write about less and less. The dangers of over-specialisation and tunnel vision loom large. Artificial boundaries, whether chronological, geographical, cultural or confessional, are set and then ferociously policed. Scholarship operates in watertight compartments, to the detriment of that open-mindedness, that cross-fertilisation of disciplines and, more generally, the linking of disparate bodies of information that have traditionally been regarded as the litmus text of creative thinking in academe.

Iconographical studies are especially vulnerable to this shift from the macroscopic to the microscopic mode. Images readily adapt to changes in use, in faith and context, not to mention changes in location or scale, but they do tend to guard their core meanings most tenaciously. Neverthe-

less, an altered context, especially if it involves a transfer from one faith to another – such as Isis suckling Harpocrates, often regarded as an immediate model for the Christian image of the Virgin and Child – can trigger unexpected accretions and adaptations of meaning. Thus there can develop over the centuries a pool of ideas associated with a given image, and it requires expert judgment and erudition to make the right choices from that pool in any particular case. The body of evidence and allusion that accumulates in this way becomes increasingly difficult to control and to understand.

Such, then, are some of the difficulties confronting an extensive iconographical study of the kind that Dr Kuehn has produced. To overcome those difficulties calls for a special kind of scholar, one that was much more commonly encountered several generations ago. Happily Dr Kuehn fits that bill, and has the sheer erudition, the wide-ranging sympathies, the creative imagination and the indefatigable intellectual curiosity to match. Methodically and passionately she follows the leads of her research wherever they take her, crossing numerous disciplinary boundaries *en route*.

The result is a many-textured study of remarkable boldness and finesse that, firmly grounded in the thought-worlds of Bronze Age Central Asia and the Hellenistic empire, explores the full flowering of the serpent-dragon motif in medieval East Christian and Islamic art, most especially in Anatolia. The range of reference is extensive – from the mythic origins of the theme to such detailed aspects as the dragon tamer, combat scenes, the significance of knotting, and the serpent-dragon as an element of personal adornment. We learn of its interaction with other animals and how it functioned as an emblem of war and of the hunt, as a guardian of treasure and as an avatar of chthonic powers; and its sinister side helps to explain its appearance in Christian contexts in association with such saints as George and Theodore. Yet it also had multiple royal and heroic associations, as shown for example by the dracontine throne with its apotropaic role. Small wonder that this fabulous creature developed an apocalyptic significance and figured largely in the Islamic sciences

– whether in star lore or toxicology, magic or cosmology. These various excursions reveal a many-layered thought world shared by Arabs, Persians and Turks as by Byzantine, Armenian, Syriac and Georgian Christians. The serpent-dragon appears on mausolea and gravestones, on mosques and *madrasas*, on monasteries and churches, on bastions and caravansarais, on city gates and palace frescoes, on pottery galore, on coins and figured silks, on mirrors and belt buckles. Usually it carries a symbolic charge, for example as an amulet or talisman, but it is also at home in narrative contexts.

Altogether this is pioneering original work, and it demonstrates an enviable capacity to move from

one culture to another – classical, Christian, Zoroastrian, Islamic – in a remarkably sure-footed way. It is packed with cogent arguments and unexpected insights. Dr Kuehn is a born explorer and has a natural affinity for cross-cultural work. She disdains the quick fix and is ready to do whatever is required to prove her point. Her list of authorities is startling in its length and completeness. But those authorities are merely a means to an end – the tale's the thing, and it casts a potent spell.

Robert Hillenbrand
University of Edinburgh

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The topic of dragon iconography in medieval Islamic art was suggested to me for my doctoral thesis by my Doktorvater Professor Claus-Peter Haase in 1999. I am immensely grateful to him for having given me the opportunity to work on the tremendous and awe-inspiring yet, at the same time, exceedingly challenging topic that now forms the basis for this book. I especially valued his continued support and advice while he was extremely busy as director of the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin.

During the years in which I was engaged in this research, I regularly worked on the preparation of curatorial documentation for the al-Sabāh Collection, Kuwait National Museum, in Kuwait. This allowed me to gain an insight into one of the most outstanding collections of Islamic works of art, among whose treasures are many objects bearing revealing manifestations of the dragon. I would like to express my gratitude to His Highness Shaykh Nasser Sabāh al-Ahmed al-Sabāh and his wife Her Highness Shaykha Hussah Sabāh al-Salem al-Sabāh for generously granting me permission to publish several objects from their collection. I am much indebted to the curators of the collection, Manuel Keene and Sue Kaoukji, for their long-standing encouragement and help. My thanks also extend to my colleagues at the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah.

It took ten years to complete this vast research project and put it into writing. The text has been read with keen intelligence and an extraordinary editorial eye by Jill Tilden who moreover was a valued source of intellectual support and encouragement throughout these years. I feel profoundly grateful for the privilege of her friendship.

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All errors and inadequacies that remain are, of course, to be attributed to me alone.

Finally, immeasurable thanks are due to my parents, Heidi and Michael Kuehn, who generously helped me emotionally and financially to complete this project. Their manifold support and tolerance have sustained me throughout. For all these reasons, the book is dedicated to them as a small token of my thanks.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to contextualise and chart, as far as possible, the complex iconography of the dragon in the medieval Islamic world,¹ by interrogating the many factors, contexts and contingencies that helped to shape and transform it.² The study focuses on the identification of the dragon imagery in a medieval Central Asian³ cultural context, in what may be described as Irano-Turkish territories, from where it was disseminated by people of predominantly Turkic and Iranian stock.⁴ It necessarily draws on a vast corpus of imagery of long artistic and iconographic tradition which originates from an equally vast geographic area of enormous cultural and ethnic complexity, with a primary emphasis on the transmission of the dragon iconography from Central Asia to Anatolia. Importantly, the latter comprises to a large extent parts of the region that formed part of the empire of Alexander the Great at his death in 323 BC, constituting ancient Sogdia, Bactria, the Indus Valley, Parthia, Media, the Transcaucasus and Anatolia. A common feature of these regions is therefore to have been subject for three to four centuries to intermittent waves of Hellenistic influence.

Arab conquests of Central Asia began to gain momentum from 86/705 when Qutayba ibn Muslim was appointed governor of Khurasan, from where he led incursions into neighbouring regions.⁵ This led to a process of Islamicisation in the city states of sedentary Central Asia and the subsequent transformation of the entire region

into a centre of Islamic civilisation. It also resulted in the assimilation and subsequent Islamicisation of the steppe peoples of Turko-Mongol heritage.

Islamic-period Central Asia naturally inherited artistic traditions from preceding dynasties such as the Sasanians (c. 224–651) and the Sogdians (fifth–eighth centuries). A true melting pot of peoples and cultures, the region had from earliest times served as a mediator and transmitter of artistic trends as they passed from east to west Asia and vice versa. This phenomenon was taken even further in the vast spatial entity of Islam, where economic links facilitated the transmission of knowledge as well as cultural and artistic exchange among peoples of different backgrounds and thus, in spite of the multicultural setting, conveyed a feeling of unity and a sense of belonging to a common civilisation.⁶ Medieval Islamic society was a mixture of several regional cultures which included Muslims and non-Muslims speaking many languages, including Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish and various local dialects. The approach in the following essays is thus necessarily broadly comparative since evidently, as Julie Scott Meisami has aptly put it, “the medieval world does not stop at, say, the border between Christian Byzantium and Islamic territories, it is also clear that valuable insights may be gained from comparing the various manifestations of what is, to a great extent, a unified tradition, which shares certain basic attitudes and assumptions despite the par-

¹ Throughout this investigation the traditional historical era, commonly referred to as the medieval period, is defined as spanning the eighth to the thirteenth century.

² On the history of the study of iconography in Islamic art, see the recent resumé of Ernst Grube (2005, pp. 13–33) with an extensive list of references.

³ Today “Central Asia” has acquired a narrower meaning associating it with its use in the former Soviet Union and can be said to include the territories of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan as well as Mongolia, the Tibet Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province in northwest China. However throughout the present study the term is used in its broader sense following the cultural definition of Central Asia given by UNESCO in two meetings of experts, held in 1978 and 1979, which is anchored in the multi-volume *History of Civilization of Central Asia*. The Final Report of 12 February 1979, Paris, reads that the spatial dimensions include “territories lying at present within the boundaries of Afghanistan, the western

part of China, northern India, northeastern Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan and the [former] Central Asian Republics of the USSR.” See Miroshnikov, 1992, repr. 1999, pp. 259–80 (the discussion also includes a brief outline of the historical usage of the term). The problems of defining the conceptual geographies of Central Asia are revisited by Akiner, 1998, pp. 3–62.

⁴ The words “Turkic” as well as “Iranian” are used as general designations to denote people whose ruler or majority spoke a Turkic or an Iranian language. Tribal confederacies in Central Asia were very heterogeneous and under various cultural influences. Cf. Frye, 2005, p. 149, n. 1.

⁵ On the Muslim Arab campaign in Central Asia and subsequent consolidation of power, see the classical study of Gibb, 1923.

⁶ The accounts of medieval travellers show that there were, in fact, apart from sea frontiers, no clearly defined boundary lines within the Islamic empire. See Bauer, 1995, pp. 34–6.

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