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THE DRAGON FIGHTER: THE INFLUENCE OF ZOROASTRIAN IDEAS ON JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC ICONOGRAPHY[1]

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Abstract
Images of dragon-slaying by Eastern Christian warrior saints allegorise the overthrow of evil forces, a topos that appears first on the eastern confines of the Byzantine Empire in Transcaucasia. Representations of a triumphal rider trampling or slaying a fallen enemy are frequent in antiquity but acquire a moral significance only under the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century – a century later than analogous imagery on the investiture relief of Ardashīr I (r. 224–241) at Naqsh-i Rustam. Close parallels in iconography between the Iranian and the Judaeo-Christian traditions expressing the fundamental juxtaposition between victor and vanquished, and the latter often characterised by ophidian features, may in large part be due to the influence of Iranian dualistic notions, and specifically Zoroastrian eschatological thought systems. Conclusive evidence points to the fact that the iconographic semantics of the medieval Western Asian equestrian dragon-fighter in its heroic as well as saintly incarnation owe much to ancient prototypes that germinated in the syncretistic melting pot of the great Near Eastern religions.

The visual representation of a fighter doing battle with a serpent or dragon employs a traditional and enduring iconographical formula of some antiquity and wide diffusion throughout the Near Eastern world. It is part of a stock of popular imagery that survived into medieval times. The fighter takes aim at an ophidian creature using a variety of weapons while the creature is shown either as a lively upright being imbued with fighting spirit, or, more commonly, in the guise of a vanquished being lying on its back beneath the horse's feet with gaping upturned jaws.

The idea of connecting the cult and iconography of the Eastern Christian warrior saints with a serpent-dragon can be traced to at least the early seventh century.[2] In the Christian church the dragon motif developed in the eastern confines of Byzantium,[3] where the so-called holy rider vanquishing a dragon was a well-established literary topos and was represented in early wall painting.[4] Depictions are found on portable items, ranging from magical amulets to luxury objects, as well as on sacred architecture, in particular churches and funerary settings. The motif fell on particularly fertile ground in the southern Caucasus region which was part of the pan-Iranian religio-cultural realm and was steeped in its artistic conventions.

The antecedents of the victorious horseman fighting a serpent-dragon have been sought further west where they have been linked to Roman-period votive reliefs with Thracian horsemen, confronted or single, and a serpent sinuously rising towards the rider's feet, or coiled around his staff or around a tree trunk.[5] Similarly the god Mithras is depicted as rider with an accompanying serpent next to his horse.[6]

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[1] This article is a shortened version of chapter 6 of my Ph.D. thesis (Free University of Berlin, 2008) published as *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, 2011.

[2] Walter, 2003, p. 140.

[3] Although the horseman was one of the most distinctive figures in the pictorial repertory of the Coptic arts of Byzantine Egypt, it is notable that he does not battle with a dragon. For a rare early Islamic example of a rider piercing a dragon on a Coptic tapestry band, see Lewis, 1973, p. 54, fig. 28 (pls. unnumbered). The dragon-fighting horsemen becomes more current in the late medieval Egypt, see, for instance, Badamo, 2011, figs. 29, 30.

[4] Cf. Walter, 2003, p. 37.

[5] Thierry, 1972, p. 259, fig. 22; Mazarov, I., "Opit za rekonstrukcija na hipomita v devna Trakija," *Izkustvo* 35 III, 1985, pp. 20–30, as cited in Walter, 1989a, p. 664 and fig. 2; *idem*, 2003, fig. 11; *Furūsiyya*, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 221–2.

[6] Rostovtzeff, ed., 1939, pp. 112–6, pls. XIV, XV; Cumont, 1937, pp. 63–71. Cf. *idem*, 1939, p. 74. On the relationship between the Iranian and the Roman Mithra, see Zaehner, 1961, pp. 99–104.

Yet there is no evidence that would establish a direct connection,[7] since in none of the cases does the serpent seem to be a noxious beast nor does the rider seem to battle with the serpent.[8] On the contrary, in Mithraism, which became a widespread religion in the Mediterranean basin, Europe and the Near East, the serpent appears to have been "a symbol of beneficial, life-giving force."[9] It has further been suggested that the dragon-slaying iconography grew out of the tradition of associating the saints with ancient Greek mythologies,[10] in particular the legend of Perseus and Andromeda.[11] However, this theory is based on the assumption that the story of a Christian saint rescuing a princess or maiden from a dragon was ancient, whereas it dates back no earlier than the eleventh century, as will be shown in the following.[12]

Conversely, the iconography of a triumphant rider trampling on or slaying a fallen human enemy occurs frequently in antiquity and has been widely used in different contexts.[13] The concept of killing a serpentine adversary was introduced on Roman imperial imagery for the first time to represent the victory of Constantine I (r. 306–337) over his enemy. According to the Roman historian Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* (III, 3), a painting in the vestibule of Constantine's palace at Constantinople showed the emperor and his sons with a dragon writhing under their feet, identified by André Grabar[14] as representing Constantine's vanquished enemy, Licinius, his former co-emperor, who was defeated and killed in 324, portrayed as being pierced and cast down into the deep.[15] The lost Constantinian composition was disseminated throughout the late empire by a widespread coin type represented by the mid-fourth-century gold medallion struck by Constantius II (317–361) after the victory over the usurper Magnentius in 353 (fig. 1). It shows the emperor with outstretched right arm as an expression of authority, mounted on a horse that rears up over a dragon framed by the legend *debellator hostium*.[16] The war horse is represented with hind legs parallel, hooves touching the ground, while the front hooves are raised high over the coiled reptile. However, as Grabar has suggested, even though this newly introduced iconography of the triumphant emperor striking down or trampling a dragon under his

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[7] Hinnells, 1974, pp. 244–5. Khāleqī-Moṭlaq ("Aždahā II," *EIr*) tentatively suggests that the feast of Mihragān (mentioned in the *Shāh-nāma*) held after the victory of the hero Farīdūn over the hominoid dragon Ẓaḥḥāk may possibly be connected to the story of the dragon-slaying by the god Mihr (Mithra), although no direct association between the ritual and worship of the festival and the dragon-slayer has been found. Simulated dragon-slaying by the Emperor Commodus during the mysteries of Mithras is recorded in a passage from Lampridius (*Commodus* 9); see Loisy, 1930, repr. 1983, p. 182. However, Jean Calmard ("Mihragān," *EI*[2] VII, 15a) calls this attempt "another attractive but faulty interpretation," based on the ancient noun *mithrakāna*, associating the suffix *kāna* (no longer *akāna*) with a variant of *ghna* (Ved. *han*, Old Pers. *jan*) meaning to strike or kill; *mithrakāna* thus refers to the killing (or sacrifice) for Mithra, analogous with the expression designating the Indo-Iranian god Verethragna. Nevertheless, it is of note that with Christianisation, the festival of *mithrakān* was consecrated to Saint George. Cf. Boyce, 1981, p. 67.

[8] Walter, 1989b, p. 664.

[9] Hinnells, 1974, pp. 244–5, 247, and *idem*, 1975, p. 295; Skjærvø, "Aždahā I," *EIr*.

[10] The representation of a horseman surmounting a coiled snake features on Greek bronze coins struck at Isinda in Pisidia during the first century BC. However the rider is generally depicted holding his lance as if to thrust it forward, rather than straight down, that is, he is rarely shown to aim at the serpent's jaws, see Hill, 1897, pp. 223–4, pl. XXXVI, 3, 4. Cf. Der Nersessian, 1965, p. 24; Whelan, 1980, pp. 146–7.

[11] Cf. Sakisian, 1937, p. 228; Fontenrose, 1959, repr. 1980, pp. 515–20; Sharon, "Ludd," *EI*[2], V, 798b.

[12] In spite of the analogies of the stories of Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a sea monster at Joppa located close to Lydda, and that of the eleventh-century story of Saint George rescuing the princess from the dragon, the enormous gap of time does not allow for the establishment of a connection. Cf. Walter, 2003, pp. 121–2 and n. 82, p. 140 and n. 195.

[13] It is interesting to note, though, that in Coptic Egypt there appears to be only one rare example of a horseman vanquishing an enemy, in which case a prostrate human figure lies under the horse's hooves (fragmentary tapestry panel, late sixth or early seventh century, Washington, DC, The Textile Museum, inv. no. 71.6). See Lewis, 1973, fig. 7 (pls. unnumbered).

[14] Grabar, 1936, pp. 43–4 and p. 130.

[15] The earliest representation of the symbol of the serpent (-dragon) being slain by a *labarum* as metaphorical victory over evil, a special imperial standard modelled on the cross after Constantine' conversion to Christianity, appears on bronze coins minted in Constantinople in 326–7. *Eusebius*, tr. and ed. Cameron and Hall, 1999, p. 209, fig. 2. Cf. Demougeot, 1986, pp. 94–118, esp. 94–6.

[16] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. no. 462, Vitr. XVIII. Cohen, 1892, vol. 7, p. 443; Merkelbach, "Drache," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Klauser, T., Stuttgart, 1941-78, vol. IV, 1959, p. 255, fig. 2; Lewis 1973, fig. 31 (unnumbered pls.); Weitzmann, 1977, p. 63, fig. 12; Grube and Johns, 2005, p. 232, cat. no. 78.3.

horse's hooves remained essentially a symbol of victory, it also introduced a moral and spiritual meaning.[17]

It is this very motif which provides a link with the hagiographical iconography of the holy rider vanquishing an enemy which appears on Jewish[18] or Christian magical "amulets" that circulated in the Byzantine world. These frequently show on the obverse an anonymous rider saint spearing a prostrate figure, generally represented as female with long hair, who raises her hands in a vain attempt at supplication or defence (fig. 2). More rarely the figure appears to be portrayed with a female torso and what may perhaps be a serpentine lower body.[19] The choice of a female figure as the vanquished enemy reflects perhaps the ancient belief in dangerous female demons which may go back to the Lilith of Jewish legend.[20] Of note is that the term Druj,[21] the demoness of deceit and treachery, is applied in later Avestan texts to a whole class of female demons.[22] It has also been shown convincingly that the prostrate figure on these amulets represents a female demon who harms children and pregnant women as attested by late antique magical sources and that the amulets served as prophylactic charms against a variety of illnesses.[23] However, the systematic study of this iconography is complicated by difficulties in dating the amulets and by the frequent absence of legends which would make it possible to identify the equestrian figure. The rare accompanying legends invoke Solomon the horseman, the formidable enemy of demons, and/or Saint Sisinnios[24] (who is thought to have been a Parthian),[25] permitting identification with either or both of these figures.

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[17] Grabar, 1936, pp. 44, 47.

[18] While monotheism and the prohibition of images restrained Jews from developing divine or demonic figural images, the Second Commandment was not strictly observed by all Jewish communities. Special highlights of Jewish figural art are, for instance, the wall paintings of the third-century synagogue at Dura Europos (see Rostovtzeff, 1939, p. 102) and the mosaics of the sixth-century synagogue of Beth Alpha, see Sukenik, 1932.

[19] For a detailed analysis of this type, see Bonner, 1950, pp. 99, 208–21, pls. XIV–XVII, nos. 294–301, 306, 309, 311, 314, 315, 318, 319, 323–327. Cf. Perdrizet, 1903, and *idem*, (1922); Peterson et al, 2012, pp. 94–130, esp. 103, 107 (esp. the lower illustration), 113; Grabar, 1970, esp. p. 26, figs. 7 and 8; Engemann, 1975, 1975, p. 25 and fig. 1, p. 37 and fig. 6, n. 111 with references on the so-called seals of Solomon on horseback; Thierry 1999, pp. 238–9 and ns. 20, drawings 2 a–c; Alexander, 1999, pp. 1076–7, fig. 32.2. Cf. also Bank, A.V., *Gemma s izobrazeniem Solomona*, Vizantijskij Vremennik 8, Moscow, 1956, pp. 331–8; as cited in Walter, 1989a, pp. 665–6, n. 57; *idem*, 2003, fig. 14. The reverse of the amulets depict various scenes, the most common being the representation of the "all-suffering eye". The ancient symbol is usually depicted as an eye whose pupil is pierced by various sharp weapons and attacked by several fierce or noxious animals; as portrayed, for instance, at the Dura synagogue Engemann, 1975, pp. 22–48 and p. 27, fig. 5; Doro, 1941, pp. 220–1. Cf. Walter, 1989b; Thierry, 1999, p. 240. For a recent study dedicated to Sasanian-period glyptics with this motif which however sees the subjects represented on the seals as having originated in the Mediterranean and the Near Eastern civilisations, see Magistro 2000, pp. 167–94. For a discussion of Byzantine amulets with a rider saint spearing a prostrate she-demon, see Spier, 1993, pp. 25–62, esp. pp. 60–2, and pl. 2, nos. a, 15, and b, 21, pl. 3, no. a, 33 and pl. 6, no. d.

[20] Cf. Hutter, "Lilith," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, eds. van der Toorn, K., et al, 1995, Leiden, Boston and Köln, repr. 1998, pp. 520–1; Bonner, 1950, p. 210.

[21] See, for instance, Bundahishn 2.3.3.23–4; Boyce, 1984, p. 50.

[22] Cf. Langton, 1949, p. 70; Bonner, 1950, p. 210.

[23] Bonner, 1950, pp. 210–8; Spier, 1993, pp. 25–62, esp. pp. 33–44. For the transmission from early Near Eastern to Jewish and classical Greek mythology of the belief in a female demon, bringer of harm to children and pregnant women, see Barb, 1966, pp. 1–23. The aid of Saint Sisinnios is also invoked in Armenian talismanic scrolls against the female demon Āl, known throughout the Persian-speaking world, who is believed to be the personification of puerperal fever which strikes women in childbed. Cf. Russell, 2004, pp. 447–8. On the Āl, see also Goldziher, 1896, vol. 1, p. 16; Winkler, 1931, pp. 104–7; and, in particular, the monograph of Eilers, 1979.

[24] The most elaborate visual representation of the mounted Saint Sisinnios appears on the sixth- or seventh-century fresco found on the west wall of chapel XVII in the monastery of Apollo at Bawit in Upper Egypt where he spears a prostrate female figure identified as the demoness "Alabasdria". Excavated in 1901–2 by Clédat, 1904–1906, xii. 2, pp. 79–81; Perdrizet, 1922, pp. 13–5; Lewis, 1973, fig. 30 (pls. unnumbered).

[25] Perdrizet, 1922, p. 13; Maguire, 1995, p. 57. Peterson (1926, p. 118) considers the Sisinnios legend to have an Iranian origin. Rika Gyselen (1995, pp. 89–90), moreover, remarks upon the resemblance of the name (and apparent function) of Saint Sisinnios and that of the Iranian "mage" Sāsān found on many Sasanian magical seals while excluding the possibility of an inverse influence (on the figure of Sāsān, pp. 55–6).

Through the use of his "magical" seal and other ritual techniques attributed to him, the Jewish king Solomon was considered to be the archetypal controller of spirits and demons,[26] the quintessential warrior-magician, a figure that reflected a conflation of parallel Jewish, Christian, Greek and Iranian traditions when moreover interest in extraneous doctrines and cults was very active.[27]

These visual images of triumph over the enemy or over the powers of evil were naturally adopted for the presentation of mounted martyr-warriors,[28] the actual systematisation of their cult probably having taken place in Constantinople.[29] The image of the dragon being trampled by a potent rider's horse, traceable to at least the early seventh century, thus mirrors the symbolic meaning of spiritual triumph over the persecutions of tyrannical pagan rulers, representing the crushing of evil and Satan through conversion and the destruction of pagan temples.[30]

The close parallels in iconography between the Iranian and the Judaeo-Christian traditions expressing the fundamental juxtaposition between victor and vanquished, and the latter often characterised by ophidian features, however, may in large part be due to the influence of Zoroastrian and Iranian dualistic conceptions in which the final triumph of good is implicit on the religions of the Near East from the Achaemenid period to the early centuries of the present era.[31] The strong dualistic character of Jewish eschatology, including the yearning for the coming of a world-saviour or messiah, a final struggle between good and evil, in which good will triumph, and the resurrection of the dead, seems to suggest the possibility of parallels between Zoroastrian doctrine,[32] where according to Yasna 30.3–5 the good and bad spirits were "twins" (separate, independent individuals as stated by orthodox Zoroastrianism),[33] as is evidenced by the Qumran texts, early Christianity and all Gnostic religions.[34] Christianity, in turn, inherited most of its eschatological perspective from the Iranian-inspired apocrypha of the Old Testament and the Jewish writings of the period just before its emergence.[35]

Middle Persian/Pahlavī texts place the dragon combat in an eschatological context showing the mythical creature as the being responsible for the lapse into chaos and death that is to take place at the end of time. As a consequence of this metamorphosis the latter has to be fought by valorous characters symbolising the *status quo*. The mythic dragon-fighter Frēdōn (the Avestan Thraētaona) is first mentioned as fulfilling an eschatological role: he overcomes but does not kill the giant dragon, Azhi Dahāka, binding and imprisoning him "in the most grievous punishment of confinement" in a cave at

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[26] Solomon evolved as legendary magician, endowed with exceptional wisdom and believed to be skilled in the art of exorcising spirits and demons. A detailed description of an exorcism is related by the first-century historian Josephus (*Antiquitates Iudaicae* 8.45–49) as well as by the late antique *Testamentum Salomonis*, an uncanonical religious text which appears to be a Christian adaptation of a contemporary demonological Jewish text entirely devoted to Solomon's power over demons (ed. from manuscripts at Mount Athos, Bologna, Holkham Hall, Jerusalem, London, Milan, Paris and Vienna by McCown, 1922, esp. chs. 3–18). Cf. Bonner, 1950, p. 209.

[27] Bonner, 1950, p. 18; Alexander, 1999, p. 1077; Walter, 2003, p. 35; Pancaroğlu, 2004, pp. 152–3.

[28] Der Nersessian, 1965, p. 24.

[29] Walter, 1989a, p. 663.

[30] Especially during and after the exile of the Jews in Babylon, Iranian influence may have been instrumental in bringing about the change in the conception of Satan from a servant of God (for instance, in Zechariah, 3.1–3.3) to his adversary (Duchèsne-Guillemin, "Ahriman," *EIr*). At least in part a Jewish apocalyptic movement, the early Christian faith inherited a worldview in which Satan played a vital role as the ultimate adversary or opponent of God and his agents. In the visions of John, Satan is portrayed as composite beast, which emerges from the sea (Daniel 7), drawn from the myth of a cosmic struggle between a god and a sea monster or dragon informed by a Mesopotamian mythic pattern (cf. also the general discussion in Gunkel, "Die Drachentraditionen," 1895, pp. 29–90, and "die Traditionen vom Urmeer," 1895, pp. 81–111) to which Satan "gave his power and his throne and great authority" (Revelation 13.2). This imagery was used in polemical discourses and played an important role in the "demonisation" of either external enemies or internal adversaries of which the Roman imperial power was a designated agent.

[31] Boyce and Grenet, 1991, pp. 361–490; Gnoli, "Dualism," *EIr*; Hintze, 1999, pp. 72–9, esp. pp. 75–6.

[32] The main locus of contacts between Jews and Mazdāyasnians (as Zarathushtra's adherents refer to themselves in the Younger Avestan hymns) was most likely to be Persia and Babylonia where Jews lived among the predominantly Persian population; Hintze, 1999, p. 78. Cf. Shaked, "Eschatology," *EIr*.

[33] Boyce, 1975, repr. 1996, p. 193.

[34] Shaked, "Eschatology," *EIr*; Gnoli, "Dualism," *EIr*. Cf. Zaehner, "Zoroastrianism," *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, ed. Zaehner, R.C., New York, 1959, repr. London, 1979, p. 159.

[35] Shaked, "Eschatology," *EIr*.

Mount Damāvand.[36] The conquering hero thereby also frees the royal women, Arənauuāčī and her sister Saŋhauuāčī (New Pers. Arnavāz and Shahrenāz), "the two most beautiful women in the world," the two wives of Azhi Dahāka/Ẓaḥḥāk,[37] and, in turn, takes them as his own consorts.[38] The theme of the rescue of a princess or maiden by the dragon vanquisher, which became a regular topos in most Iranian dragon-slaying stories, was introduced when the dragon became identified with a historical person, such as the foreign tyrant Ẓaḥḥāk, who imprisoned the maiden.[39] The dragon remains bound at Mount Damāvand until the end of the world approaches when the other great dragon fighter, Kərəsāspa (who figures as Kirsāsp in Middle Persian and Garshāsp in New Persian) will be awakened (resurrected) by the divine beings Srosh and Neryosang.[40] It is for him that the final victorious battle against the dragon is reserved, the final war between Good and Evil Spirits.[41] His eschatological work takes place and Kərəsāspa defeats the dragon when the monstrous creature emerges near the end of time from his captivity, breaks free of his fetters, wreaks havoc and causes much devastation in the world.[42]

Zoroastrianism, a prophetic religion with a revealed scripture, offers salvation to the souls of its adherents and the possibility of human redemption. The dualistic worldview inherent in its belief system[43] dictates that "Evil must be annihilated by Good, if God is to save His creation."[44] Hence in the Younger Avestan hymns the myth of the dragon-fighter inherited from Indo-European times acquired an additional semantic component, that of the appearance of the future saviour of Zoroastrianism, *saoshiiaṇt-* (Pahl. *sōshāns*), the "one who shall revitalise (existence)" becoming the leader in the final battle against evil.[45] Known as the "victorious" (Av. *vərəthrajan-*),[46] Zoroaster's third and last eschatological son's role in the last days "is conceived of as not only utterly defeating Evil but also as ushering in a new age."[47] He is the one who brings about the final transfiguration of the world (Av. *frashō.kərəti*) in which Ahura Mazdā's good and perfect creation is restored and freed from the forces of evil, after which the divine kingdom would be established on earth.[48] Significantly, his victory over the monstrous dragon became the "pre-condition for the resurrection of the dead and the beginning of a new era."[49]

The Zoroastrian eschatological myth recounts the coming of the final cosmic *saošyant*, who is believed to come from the region of the river Haētumant (modern Helmand) in Sakastān/Sīstān in eastern Iran and southwest Afghanistan.[50] He is the son of the virgin Vīspa.taurvairī, "she who conquers

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[36] Dēnkard 9.12.19, tr. West, W.E., *Sacred Books of the East,* Oxford, 1880–87, repr. Delhi, 1965, p. 40.

[37] Yasht 5.34; 17.34. Watkins, 2005, p. 464. In later traditions the female figures became the sisters or daughters of Jamshīd (Yima); Zaehner, 1955, repr. 1972, p. 413. During the remote period of Indo-Iranian unity, an age that long played a key role in the later cultures of the Near East and India, the Indo-Iranians may well have imagined dragons harbouring and restraining the heavenly waters, so causing drought, and not releasing them until overcome by a god or hero. In later myths female figures appear to have replaced water and rain as symbols of fertility and life. Cf. Gershevitch, 1959, p. 45; Remmer, 2006, pp. 212–25.

[38] Yasht 5.34, 9.14, 15.24, 17.35; cf. the late Pahlavi *Vishtāsp Yasht*, see Geiger and Kuhn, vol. 2, p. 86.

[39] Khāleqī-Moṭlaq, "Aždahā II," *EIr.*

[40] Yasht 3.60–62. Christensen, 1931, tr. 1993, p. 95.

[41] Cf. *idem*, pp. 55, 95.

[42] Bundahishn 29.9 and in greater detail in Dēnkard 9.21.8–10. Cf. Hinnells, 1969, p. 172; Hintze, 1999, p. 82. Like Garshāsp, Sām plays a part in eschatological events: on Mount Sagāvand he lies on his back in the cold covered by snow and guarded by ten thousand *fravashis* (Pahl. *fravahr*) of the righteous until the dragon breaks loose and the final battle commences. Bundahishn 197.14–198.6; Monchi-Zadeh, 1975, pp. 108–9, 142–3. In the Avesta Sāma is the name of a clan, to which Thrita as well as his sons Kərəsāspa and Urvākhshaya belonged (Yasna 9.10); Monchi-Zadeh, 1975, p. 109. From Sasanian times onwards, however, Sām and Garshāsp began to be taken as the names of separate persons.

[43] Cf. the definition of the term "dualism" by Hintze, 1999, p. 75 and n. 19) referring to two separate cosmic powers.

[44] *Eadem*, p. 76.

[45] Vevaina, 2005, p. 216.

[46] Hintze, 1995, p. 94 suggests that this epithet was added because of "the connection of the concept of the Saoshiiaṇt with the myth of the hero slaying a dragon."

[47] Hintze, 1999, p. 76.

[48] *Eadem*, p. 76; cf. *eadem*, 1995, p. 96.

[49] *Eadem*, 1999, p. 86.

[50] *Eadem*, 1995, p. 96.

all,"[51] who was impregnated while bathing in Lake Kąsaoya by the prophet Zarathushtra's own seed, miraculously preserved in the depths of the lake guarded by powerful "guardian spirits", *fravashis*, of the just.[52] She will bear a son called Astvaṱ.ərəta, the last and greatest of the ancient Avestan valiant warriors, who will brandish the victorious weapon borne by other heroes before him, especially the mighty Thraētaona when he slew the dragon Dahāka.[53] With this weapon (which belongs to the terminology of the Indo-European myth of the hero killing a dragon, Avestan *azhi-* "snake, serpent, dragon," *jan-* "to kill") the virgin-born saviour will drive out Falsehood from the world of Truth (Zamyād Yasht 19.93).[54] The corresponding Vedic adjective *vṛtrahán-* ("slayer of Vṛtra," lit. "breaking the defence")[55] is used especially by the Vedic god, Indra, who slays the dragon whose name became Vṛtra in the Indian tradition.[56] The ancient myth of the dragon-fighter was thus reinterpreted in a religious way in the popular image of world-saviour overcoming Evil.[57]

In Sasanian royal imagery Ahura Mazdā/Ohrmazd is shown on horseback crushing the head of the Zoroastrian evil principle of the universe, Angra Mainyu, known in later times as Ahriman who is likened to the serpent in the Great Bundahishn ("Book of Primal Creation"), Pahlavī translations based on lost Avestan scriptures and their commentaries written after the Arab conquest.[58] It describes him as having sprung:

> "…like a snake, out of the sky down to the earth, … thereby the sky was as shattered and frightened by him, as a sheep by a wolf."[59]

The association of the serpent with Ahriman is perhaps best portrayed in the monumental third-century investiture relief sculptures of the Sasanian king Ardashīr I (r. 224–241) at Naqsh-i Rustam (figs. 3 a and b). It shows an equestrian scene with a symmetrical opposition. The conquering king Ardashīr appears on the left, facing an anthropomorphic Ahura Mazdā with turreted crown on the right, shown in the act of bestowing on Ardashīr the gift of *khˇarənah*, in the form of a ring to be hung over and secured around the royal crown. Ardashīr's steed is shown trampling on the head of the last Parthian leader Ardāvan (Artabanus) V, while Ahura Mazdā's horse treads underfoot a creature held in the coils of serpents. The plastically sculpted reliefs draw on the age-old universally understood motif of the ruler placing his foot on a prostrate enemy as a symbolic gesture of physical as well as ideological supremacy, the horse serving in this instance as a visual extension of the ruler, his rider.[60] This visual realisation of victory is of particular significance: the vanquished enemy, its head wreathed with serpents, one of which uprears its head at the front, presumably represents the anthropomorphic Ahriman, and is thus the first dated example of a symbolic synthesis of the serpent and Ahriman (fig. 3b).[61] The defeat of the Parthian leader is thus equated with triumphing over the powers of evil. Inscriptions in three languages, Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek, on the horses' flanks identify the god and the conqueror.[62] The representation of the paired mounted horsemen, imperial and divine,

[51] Cf. Yasht 13.142.

[52] Yasht 19.89-96. Boyce, 1975, repr. 1996, p. 282; Hintze, 1999, p. 77. On Vīspa.taurvairī, see Remmer, 2006, pp. 57–8, 144–8, 200–5, 253.

[53] Boyce, 1975, repr. 1996, p. 283; Hintze, 1995, p. 93 and 1999, pp. 77–8.

[54] Hintze, 1995, p. 93 and *eadem*, 1999, p. 77.

[55] *Eadem*, 1995, p. 94.

[56] *Eadem*, 1999, p. 77.

[57] *Eadem*, p. 78.

[58] On the Iranian or Great Bundahishn, see Klíma, 1968, pp. 41–3.

[59] Bundahishn VI.10–11 (*Sacred Books of the East,* tr. West, E.W., vol. 5, Oxford, 1897). Cf. Zaehner, 1961, p. 262; Boyce, 1984, p. 50.

[60] The motif appears in the *Shāh-nāma*, tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 4, p. 81, l. 237. See also the related ancient Oriental motif of "eating/licking dust" as simile for death and the humiliation of the vanquished enemy, which is exemplified in Genesis 3.14. Cf. n. 67; also Martinek, 1996, p. 65 with further examples.

[61] Ghirshman, 1962, p. 132, fig. 168. Cf. Boyce, 1979, repr. 2001, p. 107.

[62] Boyce, 1979, repr. 2001, p. 107.

surmounting prostrate enemies both human and demonic, thus underscores the triumph by metaphorically alluding to a complex of eschatological beliefs.

A well-known Sasanian-period theme, the mounted dragon-fighter appears on appears on seal stones from the Iranian world[63] such as a sixth-century example in brown-red jasper, preserved in the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg. It shows a mounted dragon-fighter distinguished by a rayed flaming halo (fig. 4). Surrounding the rider's head and shoulders it probably symbolises the *khurrak-i Kayan* (the *khˇarənah* of the Avesta and Abu 'l-Qāsim Firdausī's *farr-i kayani*), the Royal Splendour of the Kayanids (the protagonists of a millenary struggle against Tūrān), the radiance that descends upon the heroic warrior and, above all, the ruler and renders him sacred.[64] The rider thus probably represents one of the ancient Indo-Iranian epic heroes that fulfil a mythical quest. He is seen holding a spear and fighting with what appears to be a seven-headed dragon whose body coils along the edge of the seal from below the horse's hooves, rising upwards with one dragon head surmounting the other. He is flanked by the figure of a small scorpion and a star. The depiction visualises here the popular imagery of the hero as a "beneficial force" attacking a monstrous dragon representing a "malevolent force".

In the historical story in the Pahlavī text *Kārnāmak-i Ardakhshēr-i Pāpakān* ("Book of the Deeds of Ardashīr, Son of Pāpak"), written around 600, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty Ardashīr Pāpakān (224–241) himself is related to the valiant ritual of killing a dragon called Hafthān-bōkht (the Haftvād of Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*) who lived in the village of Alār in the *rustāq* of Kōjarān.[65]

Prominent depictions of the equestrian dragon-fighter are encountered on wall paintings discovered by Russian archaeologists in the city of Panjikent in Sogdiana (Zarafashān, north of the Ḥiṣār range), now at the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg. The depictions show pictorial epics from a variety of literatures, among them the Greek fables of Aesop and the Indian epic *Mahabhārata*, as well as episodes from the heroic cycle, the dragon-fighter being identified by Aleksandr Belenitskii as the hero-champion Rustam, who is also well-known from the *Shāh-nāma*.[66] The hero's ancestors were Saka people who are part of the Scytho-Siberian cultural grouping and belong to the Indo-Iranian group that came to Sakastān/Sīstān and Zābulistān in the late second century BC,[67] lands far from Sogdia. Saka heroic tales were nevertheless very popular with the Sogdians,[68] although only a fragmentary Sogdian text survives[69] and only in the tenth century was the tale taken up by Firdausī in his *magnum opus*. The heroic cycle of Rustam's Herculean seven feats *(haft khvān)* attains almost spiritual importance.[70] Before reaching his ultimate goal the hero has to undergo these trials,[71] which represent a kind of rite

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[63] For further examples of Sasanian-period glyptics with this motif, see Gyselen, 1994, pl. 8, 14.1, 14.2 and *eadem*, 2007, pls. 14.2 and 14.3; Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982, p. 58, nos. 14.1–14.3; Gignoux, 1978, p. 54, no. 6.6; Bivar, 1969, nos. BL 3, BL 4; Ghirshman, 1962, p. 243, fig. 300 (Collection of H. Seyrig).

[64] The iconography of *farr(ah)*, *khˇarənah* has been associated with figures connected with light and fire, in other words, by having flames emanating from the human body or partially surrounding it. Cf. Christensen, 1944, p. 146. For the "flaming shoulders" of divine beings or kings on Kushāṇa coins, see Rosenfield, 1967, pp. 17, 23–4, 29, 157, 197–201. Cf. Gnoli, "Farr(ah), Xˇarənah," *EIr*; Carter, 1974, pp. 176–7 and ns. 18–20. On Firdausī's concern with the distinctive hereditary mark of Iranian splendour, *farr-i kayani*, see Rypka, 1968, pp. 155, 159. See most recently, Soudavar, 2002.

[65] Nöldeke, 1879, ch. 6; Minorsky, "Lār," *EI*[1] III, pp. 15–7.

[66] Belenitskii, 1981, pp. 103–5, 199. Cf. Azarpay, 1981, p. 195. Guitty Azarpay 1981, pp. 96–7 also points out that the "dramatis personae" were subject to change and not necessarily connected to any specific hero.

[67] Boyce, 1975, repr. 1996, p. 101 and n. 104; de Bruijn, "Rustam," *EI*[2] VIII, 636b; P'yankov, 2006, p. 505.

[68] P'yankov, 2006, pp. 505–6.

[69] The Sogdian fragment from Dunhuang which records part of the Rustam legend is fully quoted in Klíma, 1968, p. 53; Azarpay, 1981, pp. 6–7. Cf. Marshak, 2002, p. 51.

[70] Cf. Russell, 2004, p. 543 and n. 30. For a discussion of the close parallels of the *haft khvān* (dragon slaying being one of the exploits) of Rustam and Isfandiyār, see Yarshater, 1983, pp. 469–70 and n. 5.

[71] The number seven was specifically important to the "Avestan people," and plays a significant role in the rites and customs of the Zoroastrians, for whom seven is the number of the creations and of the Amahraspands (Aməsha Spəntas), the positive creatures or "Bounteous Immortals," who guard them. The number seven gained even greater prominence in the Islamic period, when it acquired additional symbolism. Cf. Hartmann-Schmitz, 1989, pp. 12–120; Schimmel, 1994, p. 27. Moreover, seven often conveys ideas of perfection and periodicity (for a list of examples see Shahbazi, "Haft (seven)," *EIr*). It is a favourite number in Eastern Semitic civilisations with magico-religious features; among the Israelites it was used in ritual incantations (2 Kings 13 and Joshua 6); and in the Old Testament seven is the number of completeness. Cf. Jeffers, 1996, p. 87, n. 286.

of passage.[72] During his third feat, which is reminiscent of Herakles defeating the Hydra of Lerna,[73] Rustam slays a magical dragon that emerges from the forest at night. Twice, as it approaches the sleeping hero,[74] Rustam is woken by his formidable mount Rakhsh, but each time the dragon vanishes. On the third occasion the monster fails to conceal itself in time and with the help of the faithful Rakhsh the hero succeeds in killing the dragon. Interestingly, the *Shāh-nāma* portrays the dragon with human traits such as the power of reflection[75] and speech: during the battle he declares himself master of the whole desert.[76] Correspondingly, Rustam is shown confronting the dragon as if it were a human adversary.[77]

Igor P'yankov notes the archaic style of Firdausī's records of the Rustam cycle and has demonstrated its close parallels with ancient Greek records, particularly Herodotus' accounts of one of the genealogical myths of the Scythians (*Histories* IV 8–9).[78] According to the father of Greek historiography, the hero, known by the Greeks as Herakles, comes to an arid region at the Pontus Shore (Black Sea) where he loses his horses and in the search for them, meets a mythical creature in a cave in the forest. This creature is described as a woman with the lower body of a serpent.[79] With this anguipede woman, he engenders three sons, the youngest and worthiest of whom, named Scythes, becomes the first king of the Scythians. In Firdausī's account, Rustam's first feat is his victory over a lion whose pelt he wears just like the Grecian Herakles after the latter's vanquishing of the Nemean lion.[80] The second exploit is the discovery of a spring in the desert country.[81] The third is the victory over the dragon. While there is no love theme in the third trial, the fourth episode recorded in the *Shāh-nāma* mentions a sorceress in the form of a beautiful girl who tries to seduce Rustam near a small river in the shade of some trees.[82]

Parts of the story are shown on a continuous frieze of the Sogdian wall paintings on the north wall in Panjikent. The monster is depicted as a terrifying she-dragon who has coiled her elongated serpentine tail around all four legs of the horse (probably to be understood as Rakhsh),[83] her female upper body rises up, naked to the waist. With her long arms she is dragging the mounted Rustam-like hero's head towards her. However the hero has succeeded in wounding the dragon twice with his axe (fig. 5).[84] In the next scene the dragon, its wounds gushing blood, is in its death-throes. In contrast to the preceding images, it now lies prostrate on the ground (fig. 6).[85] Boris Marshak explains the depiction of the serpentine she-dragon with human arms and lion's mane as a conflation of three trials mentioned in the *Shāh-nāma*, namely the fight with the dragon, the lion and the sorceress.[86] While the genealogical aspect

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[72] Cf. Omidsalar, 2001, pp. 262, 265–6.

[73] For a discussion of the points of resemblance between Hercules and Rustam, see Melikian-Chirvani, 1998, p. 178.

[74] A view of the entire scene is reproduced in Azarpay, 1981, p. 96, fig. 42. *Shāh-nāma*, tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 1, pp. 517–21.

[75] *Shāh-nāma*, tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 1, p. 517, ll. 565–70.

[76] *Idem*, vol. 1, pp. 519–521, ll. 396–400. This exploit is also recorded by the eleventh-century Armenian scholar Grigor Magistros who moreover notes that the battle took place near Mount Damāvand; see Tchukasizian, 1964, pp. 321–2. Cf. P'yankov, 2006, p. 507.

[77] Tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 1, pp. 519–21, ll. 393–5, 400–2.

[78] P'yankov, 2006, pp. 505–11, esp. pp. 506–7.

[79] Cf. Sulimirski, 1985, p. 168.

[80] It is notable that the Nemean lion was one of the offspring of the *drakōn* Typhon and Echidna, who had the face and torso of a woman and the body of a serpent (Hesiod, *Theogony* 306–8).

[81] Tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 1, pp. 513–7.

[82] *Idem*, vol. 1, pp. 521–3.

[83] Comparable imagery is represented on a Sasanian seal in the British Museum, London, which shows a double-headed serpent coiled around each of the four legs of a bovine and rearing up above its head and inscribed with the name of the owner in Pahlavī. Mordtmann, 1864, pl. I, no. 4, republished in Ettinghausen, 1955, p. 282, pl. XXXIX, no. 8. Cf. Bivar, 1969, p. 8, pl. 15.1; Marshak, 2002, p. 43.

[84] Azarpay, 1981, pl. 6; Marshak, 2002, p. 40, figs. 17–20, colour pl. 3; Grube and Johns, 2005, p. 233, cat. no. 78.5.

[85] Azarpay, 1981, pl. 7; Marshak, 2002, p. 43, fig. 20.

[86] *Idem*, 2002, p. 51. An anachronical but perhaps not entirely irrelevant parallel exists in the Kushāṇa period chthonic creatures, sometimes referred to as *vyāla*, which were represented as half-females, half-serpents, with a female upper body whose lower limbs transform into a long spiralling serpentine tail terminating in a fan-shaped caudal fin. Cf. Czuma, 1985, p. 53, cat. no. 3.

of the myth was apparently forgotten, some analogies with the original theme of the mythical anguipede progenitrix appear to have been retained.[87]

An equestrian dragon-fighter is also portrayed on a tympanum from the medieval city of Bunjikat (20 kilometres south of the modern town of Shahristan in northern Tajikistan) in the Sogdian principality of Ustrushana, probably dating from the seventh to the ninth century. A row of pearl roundels frame the rim of the monumental wooden arch-shaped tympanum (partly destroyed by fire) that adorned the top of the portal leading to the throne hall of the Qal'a-i Qahqaha, now preserved in the National Museum in Dushanbe in Tajikistan.[88] In one of the roundels a mounted horseman is seen taking aim at a twice-knotted dragon.[89]

While there appear to be no surviving representations of the dragon-slayer around the turn of the millennium in the Islamic realm of Western Asia, the equestrian dragon-fighter can nonetheless be seen as a *leitmotif* which links the pre-Islamic Sasanian and the Sogdian times with the Islamic period. After an apparent lacuna in the tenth and perhaps the early part of the eleventh century (a period during which the motif occurs in the Christian art of the Caucasus, particularly in Armenia and Georgia, as examined below), it is depicted with great regularity on Islamic works of art from Central Asia to Anatolia and the Jazīra.

The *Abu Muslim-nāma*,[90] which records the life of the charismatic Abū Muslim Khurāsānī (d. *c.* 137/754–5) who led a popular movement for the Abbasid cause and became a legendary figure after his assassination, recounts the heroic exploits of the fourth caliph 'Ālī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660), Muḥammad's cousin who married Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima. 'Ālī is portrayed as accomplishing the feat of vanquishing the dragon at a very early age and is eulogised as infant dragon-slayer with the words:

> "Bare-handed in the cradle with his mighty arms he tore apart the dragon's jaws."[91]

It is interesting to compare this imagery with that of the infant Rustam whose arms are associated with courageous dragons in the *Shāh-nāma* account.[92]

The theme of the dragon-slayer appears in a mid-twelfth-century book on cosmography written in Persian and dedicated to the last Great Saljuq *sulṭān* of Iran and Iraq, Ṭoghril III ibn Arslan (r. 571/1176–590/1194). The story in Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad-i Ṭūsī's "Book of Marvels," entitled '*Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt* ("Wonders of Creation"),[93] illustrates the power of talismanic images

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[87] Igor P'yankov (2006, pp. 508–10) notes that traces of the ancient genealogical tales are still preserved in today's folklore of Southern Tajikistan where the Scythian people once lived and where he heard oral traditions from local people about a dangerous serpentine woman who lives in the river.

[88] Unfortunately, the panel remains unpublished; it was not permitted to photograph it in the museum nor was it possible to obtain a photograph from the museum. For a description of the site, see Negmatov, 1996, repr. 1999, pp. 259–74, and fig. 41.

[89] The first fire is associated with the time of the Abbasid conquest of the town in 206/822, the second with the annexation to the Samanid state by Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad I (279/892–295/907) providing a *terminus ante quem* for the dating of the wooden panel.

[90] The *Abu Muslim-nāma* was written by Abū Ṭāhir Ṭarsūsī, who was part of the retinue of the Turkic Ghaznavid *sulṭān* Maḥmūd (r. 389/999–421/1030). The legends of Abū Muslim are surveyed in Mélikoff, 1962. See also *eadem*, 1960, vol. 1, p. 43.

[91] The translation is based on the manuscript in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Pers. 843, dated 1145–6/1732–4; Mahdjoub, 1988, p. 63. The motif of the infant dragon-slayer is found in classical literature in the depiction of the infant hero Herakles struggling with two serpents described by the classical Greek poet Pindar (*c.* 518–438 BC) in the *Nemean Ode* 1, 42–7. Another early classical example is given by the infant Apollo who when only a few days old shot arrows from the arms of his mother Leto at a multi-headed snake, the story being depicted on a fifth-century BC lekythos (predating Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, 1239–1251); see Fontenrose, 1959, repr. 1980, pp. 16–7 and fig. 1.

[92] Tr. and ed. Mohl, 1838–1878, vol. 5, p. 353, ll. 1707–9.

[93] Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad-i Ṭūsī, '*Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt*, ed. Sotūde, M., Tehran, 1345/1966, as cited in Pancaroğlu, 2003, p. 31 and n. 4 who dates the book to the years between 562/1167 and 573/1194. Cf. Radtke, 1987, pp. 278–88.

hidden in the pre-conquest Byzantine capital Constantinople (al-Qusṭantīniyya).[94] Three bronze statues representing Muḥammad and two of his closest followers, ʿĀlī and Bilāl (the first muezzin), were zealously guarded by the local people; they knew from past experience that damage to the statues would set off a devastating earthquake.[95] Significantly, of the three statues only the one which shows ʿĀlī on horseback striking a dragon with a spear is illustrated in the manuscript.[96] While on the one hand this story is buttressed by apocalyptic traditions, such as the prophetic *ḥadith* foretelling the city's capture by an Islamic ruler bearing the name of a prophet,[97] it is also worth noting that it was the Byzantine capital which was associated with the figure of the equestrian dragon-slayer. However, the story also shows that the dragon-fighter represented a well-established iconographical theme in medieval Islam. It was indeed so firmly entrenched as to be deemed the most appropriate imagery for the representation of the Companion of the Prophet who for the Sunnī Muslims represents the fourth caliph and for the Shīʿītes the divinely appointed successor *(khalīfa)* and heir *(waṣī)* of Muḥammad.

By the twelfth century, dragon-fighter iconography was a prevalent part of a set narrative genre often inspired by textual sources such as the early eleventh-century Iranian national epic, the *Shāh-nāma*, and was a motif of choice depicted on many portable objects produced in medieval Western Central Asia. There is quite clear evidence of close affinity between Iranian and Islamic ideas so as to suggest probable dependence on eschatological beliefs. Islamic eschatology derived a good deal of material from Jewish and Christian sources, which in their turn were also dependent, it seems, on Iranian antecedents.

The theme was often chosen as part of a visual narrative on metalwork, for instance on a copper alloy bucket, the famous twelfth-century Bobrinski bucket probably made in Herat, which is dated *muḥarram* 559/December 1163. The third figural relief that circumscribes the body of the bucket shows a procession of riders. Behind one of the mounted warriors, a twice looped dragon with enormous gaping mouth rears up threateningly (fig. 7).

A variant of the motif is found on the base of a well-known thirteenth-century copper alloy penbox *(qalamdān)* inlaid in silver, gold and niello from Iran, which bears the name Maḥmūd ibn Sunqur and the date 680/1281–2 inscribed on the hasp. Here not a single equestrian fighter but a second genus, that of the paired horsemen, is reproduced. Two scenes of confronted fighting horsemen, separated by three large roundels filled with a geometric pattern, are shown: on the scene to the left one horseman attacks an upright double-headed dragon with a sword while the other turns backwards to shoot a lion with bow and arrow (fig. 8).[98]

The depiction of a fighter on foot in direct combat with a dragon whom he attacks with his sword – a motif which appears to be absent from Christian iconography – is found on the outer walls of a celebrated early thirteenth-century "Freer dish" whose interior is decorated with a large battle scene featuring the siege of a fortress and inscribed with the names of the warriors.[99] Datable to the early thirteenth century, the bowl is housed in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (fig. 9).[100] The outer walls show a richly clad warrior carrying bow and arrow, shown in three-quarter view and facing a writhing dragon in rampant posture.

Following the Saljuq victory at the battle of Manzikert in 463/1071 and subsequent large-scale Turkish penetration into Anatolia, the Saljuq *sulṭān*s of Rūm, being closely affiliated with Iranian cultural and artistic traditions, also perpetuated these semantic horizons in their new homeland. The

[94] First section of chapter six which includes descriptions on talismanic portraits, statues and tombs of prophets and kings, ed. Sotūde, M., Tehran, 1345, 1966, pp. 333–4; Pancaroğlu, 2003, pp. 33-37 and appendix.

[95] *Eadem*, pp. 34, 37.

[96] First section of chapter six, Aḥmad-i Ṭūsī, *ʿAjā'ib al-makhlūqāt*, ed. Sotūde, M., Tehran, 1345, 1966, pp. 333–334); *eadem*, pp. 34,-37 and appendix.

[97] See, for instance, Eisener, 1987, pp. 129–37. Cf. Pancaroğlu, 2004, p. 155.

[98] Cf. *Furūsiyya*, 1996, vol. 1, p. 173, fig. IVa detail to left, and IV view of entire lid, vol. 2, p. 232, cat. no. 194.

[99] Atil, 1973, cat. no. 50.

[100] In 1983 the conservation department of the Freer Gallery of Art discovered that the original plate had some overpainting and subsequently restored it back to its original state. As a consequence part of the upper body and head of the warrior and a section of the snake's protome are no longer visible after the restoration. In this paper a photograph of the plate that pre-dates the conservation was used in order to make the imagery more easily recognisable.

image of a mounted figure battling a dragon was applied widely to objects and architectural decoration in Anatolia and the neighbouring Jazīra. The motif occurs on an important frieze fragment from the now destroyed pavilion (once part of the palace) of Qılıch Arslan II (r. 551/1156–588/1192), one of the greatest Rūm Saljuq *sulṭān*s, noted both for his military achievements and his patronage of the arts. It shows two haloed horsemen charging each other and attacking respectively a dragon and a lion (fig. 10). The rider on the left thrusts his long spear into the gaping jaws of the dragon. The second horseman turns around to grasp the lion's mane with one hand while dealing him a blow with the sword held in the other. The Rūm Saljuq depiction thus provides a parallel to the version emblematised on the Iranian penbox made by Maḥmūd ibn Sunqur almost a century after the making of the frieze (fig. 8).

Yet another manifestation of the mounted dragon-fighter is found in a mid- to late thirteenth-century Anatolian manuscript, known as *Daqā'iq al-Ḥaqā'iq*, dedicated to the Saljuq *sulṭān* Ghiyāth al-Dīn Kay Khusrau III, which is variously dated Ramaḍān 670/April 1272 and mid-Shawwāl 671/early May 1273,[101] although the illustrations may be of a later date.[102] It shows the warrior as a mounted angel with long beard, wearing a three-pointed Iranian crown and shawl that streams in the wind. The figure is identified as Shamhūrash (an angel known as judge and ruler of the *jinn*), who is about to pierce a dragon with a sword.[103] The weapon of choice, a sword, recalls the stucco relief from the Saljuq palace in Konya. The dragon's head was partly cut off when the margin was trimmed, leaving only the open snout with curled tip; the long tail forms a large pretzel-like knot and a simple loop (fig. 11). The manuscript comprises a compilation of five different Persian texts on various topics related to astrology and magic, influenced to a certain extent by Byzantine prototypes. The painting is part of a treatise on geomancy and talismans which is further illustrated by the depiction of magic writing on the page, composed of rows of numbers and letters.

It may be postulated that the representations of the single fighter, mounted or on foot, and of the paired horsemen fighting a dragon in medieval Islamic art did not fulfil a solely decorative purpose. Illustrating the belief in the magical power of images, they very likely served as prophylactic and apotropaic representations with a talismanic function, precisely because as André Grabar has observed, "in this domain the possibility of a 'consubstantiality' of the representation and the thing represented is implicitly acknowledged."[104]

The earliest surviving representations of the dragon-slaying model in Eastern Christian art are found, as mentioned above, on the eastern confines of the Byzantine empire in Transcaucasia. This region, and in particular Armenia, was profoundly influenced by Parthian Iranianism, hence it is safe to assume that the artistic traditions had to a certain extent developed in symbiosis with the Iranised world.[105] The model underwent a comparable process of development in neighbouring Cappadocia which was located at the crossroads of the Byzantine, Arab and Transcaucasian worlds.

The metaphysical struggle between fighter and dragon of course represents in a basic sense an "antagonism of the light, celestial (sun), and the dark, terrestrial, principles."[106] By extension traditional depictions of combat convey the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness. The older Eastern

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[101] Blochet, 1926, pl. XIX; Hartner, 1938, p. 143, fig. 22; Barrucand, 1990-91, pp. 113–4, pl. 3c.

[102] Rogers, "Saldjūḳids," *EI*[2] VIII, 936a.

[103] Winkler, 1930, p. 102.

[104] Grabar, 1957, p. 140.

[105] Sasanian-style iconography is found in reliefs with scenes of the hunt on the seventh-century church of Ptghni (Ptghnavank') in Ararat province. On the right side, below the archivolt on a window of the south façade, is a galloping rider armed with bow and arrow taking aim at the protome of an excessively long-necked monster with large gaping mouth. The accompanying inscription identifies the rider as Manuel Amatuni (d. 389), who has been portrayed in the same manner as was customary for the Sasanian kings who were overlords of this part of Armenia (Der Nersessian, 1945, p. 89). The weathered condition of the carving makes it difficult to determine the long-necked mythical creature with long agape snout and forelegs (identified by Der Nersessian (1945, p. 88) as a griffin; the description mistakenly confuses the attribution of the lion and the standing man with the griffin and the rider; however on account of its very long sinuous neck and the excessively long wide open mouth with what appears to be a projecting tongue, it might represent a dragon). *Eadem*, 1945, pl. X.1 (photograph represented mirror-inverted); Thierry, 1987, p. 365, fig. 199.

[106] Hartner, 1938, p. 143, n. 45.

model of the iconography of the light-bearing horseman lent itself naturally to Transcaucasian Christian imagery, resulting in an identification between the mounted saint as the embodiment of light and the positive principle, seen in the act of crushing the dragon, the quintessential symbol of evil and darkness.[107] One illustration of this concept in a Sasanian context is the third-century depiction of the god Ahura Mazdā/Ohrmazd on horseback crushing the head of the Zoroastrian spirit of evil, Ahriman/Angra Mainyu (fig. 3 a and b).

The eschatological concept in the struggle against a dragon in Judaeo-Christian tradition has close analogies in ancient Iranian texts, cited above. In the Old Testament the resurrection is connected with the myth of the dragon Leviathan (Hebrew *liwyātān*; Ugaritic *ltn*) who is slain by Yahwe and thus plays a role in the eschatological struggle.[108] In the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (29.4; perhaps early second century AD) Leviathan together with another mythical monster, Behemoth, rises out of the sea at the coming of the messiah.[109] In the Apocalypse of John (20.1–3) the "old dragon" is identified with Satan, evil incarnate. An angel descends from heaven with a key to the underworld and a chain to fetter the dragon there for one thousand years.[110] Once this term has expired, the dragon is freed to take part in the final great struggle in which it will be decisively defeated and cast into the lake of fire, resulting in the resurrection of the dead and the coming of a new age in which death and evil are no more.[111] Almut Hintze concludes:

> "It is very likely that the Jewish/Christian tradition took over the image [of the struggle against a dragon] from the Zoroastrian one in order to formulate its own eschatological myth."[112]

Among the earliest known instances of bas reliefs with the motif is a sixth- or seventh-century Georgian stone stele from Ekikilise (fig. 12)[113] preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Tiflis. Even though the relief is damaged, the iconography of a single unnamed dragon-fighting equestrian figure spearing a dragon, rendered as twice coiled, which succumbs at his horse's feet, can be clearly made out.[114] Just as in the later examples from the Islamic world considered above, the rider is portrayed with his upper body turned so as to appear almost frontally; the horses usually have their hooves firmly planted on the ground and the serpent is knotted or coiled beneath them. Yet significantly, the battle with the dragon is almost exclusively reduced to the moment of triumph visualised by the weapon of choice being invariably plunged into the animal's throat, thus killing it.

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[107] Cf. Mačabeli, K., *Pozdneantičnaja torevtika Gruzii: Pomaterialam torevtiki pervych vekov nashej ery*, Tbilisi, 1976, p. 85, translated into German by Scholz, 1982, p. 245.

[108] Isaiah 27.1. Heidel, 1942, repr. 1951, p. 103; Hintze, 1999, pp. 89–90.

[109] Hintze, 1999, pp. 80–1 and n. 38. Cf. 1 Enoch 60.7. Related beliefs are found in Gnostic traditions. It is interesting to consider a much later fourteenth-century Samaritan chronic which reverts to earlier Jewish, Christian and Samaritan traditions and relates of the first-century Dositheans: "These people believed that the Serpent will govern the lives of creatures until the day of resurrection." See Isser, 1976, p. 80.

[110] Cf. Hintze, 1999, p. 81, n. 39 with further examples.

[111] *Eadem*, p. 81, and n. 41. Cf. parallels in the Book of Revelation (20.1–6) where there appears the story of the leader of the powers of darkness, also referred to as "the dragon, the primeval serpent, which is the devil and Satan", being overpowered and cast into the abyss by an angel who "sealed it over him, to make sure that he would not deceive the nations again" for a thousand years. Cf. Boyce and Grenet, 1991, pp. 421, 446.

[112] Hintze, 1999, pp. 86–7.

[113] Another contemporary, yet unpublished fragmentary relief with the same motif from Berdadzor is also preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Tiflis. Thierry, 1999, p. 236. An early example appears on one side of a fragmentary capital, dated to the sixth century, found at Duin, the ancient Armenian capital, now preserved in the Historical Museum, Yerevan, inv. no. 2604, featuring a serpent protome beneath the hooves of a horse. The rider's hand is shown holding the horse's reins but he is not shown holding a weapon, hence it is unclear whether he is intended to represent a mounted warrior. Khal'pakh'chian, 1980, p. 92, pl. 9.

[114] Thierry, 1999, pp. 236, 240, fig. 4. The stone relief is also reproduced in Süslü, 1987, p. 644, pl. 119, ill. 27 (wrongly identified as coming from Ani and as preserved in the Historical Museum, Yerevan).

An important, possibly seventh-century, wall painting with confronted warrior saints fighting two dragons is found in Cappadocia, now in a very poor state of preservation, in the rock-cut church known as Mistikan kilise in the village of Güzelöz, region of Çavuşin.[115]

It is one of the earliest surviving examples of the paired portrayal of equestrian warrior saints battling dragons, a significant feature, as will be seen in what follows, introduced to augment and reinforce the intended effect, making the paired dragon-fighters a doubly potent emblem. Here a unique feature is added to the symmetrical composition of the two horsemen in that they direct their spears at two horned dragons which are entwined around the "trunk" of a central tree-like composition (fig. 13).[116] The horses do not prance or rear up on their hind legs, but pose heraldically with one foreleg raised. Nicole Thierry sought to explain the composite aspect of the iconography by the fact that Cappadocia served as a large military encampment from where Byzantine troops, among whom were large mercenary contingents of differing nomadic origin,[117] went to wage war against the Persians and later against the Arabs. The influence of the mercenary troops was also felt in the progressive adaptation of military techniques and equipment of a "Turanian cultural community," which sometimes occurred directly or through Parthian or Sasanian mediation.[118]

The depiction is in the tradition of widely employed symmetrical Sasanian imagery exemplified in the third-century investiture relief of Ardashīr I at Naqsh-i Rustam with the equestrian scene of Ardashīr facing Ahura Mazdā whose horses' hooves are shown to trample, respectively, the head of a dead enemy and the serpent-wreathed head of Ahriman (fig. 3b).[119] This conceptual doubling aspect is also found on different media, notably on Sasanian and Sogdian textiles.[120] Here, too, the pairing of the iconography was presumably not purely intended to create the effect of pictorial symmetry but rather aimed at reinforcing its potency. Hence the visual symmetry of the dragon-fighters was also intended to bring into play the belief in a double protection through the agency of its essential meaning, the triumph of good over evil.[121] Yet while the influence of the Iranian symbolic repertoire is certainly felt in the symmetrical composition of horsemen and the tree-with-serpents, it is represented here in a Christian context. The motif therefore may allude to the subject of the serpent and the fruit-bearing tree in Paradise, as is frequently shown for instance in Armenian miniatures of the late medieval period. The representation may thus be seen as a compound motif linking the dragon-fighting horsemen and the tree-with-serpents.

Comparable symmetrical imagery of two confronted equestrian warriors also flanking a large stylised tree with curling foliage is found on a now lost stone relief plaque (extant only as a drawing) from a church in Ani. Mounted on caparisoned horses with large saddle blankets, the horsemen again mirror each other's actions. Yet instead of directing their weapons at serpents entwined around a tree as in the early, possibly seventh-century, Cappadocian wall paintings at Mistikan kilise, the warriors plunge their long lances down the upturned throats of the dragons whose prostrate bodies are arranged in three loops under the horses' hooves (fig. 14).[122] The depiction in the Ani relief thus follows more

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[115] It is noteworthy that while the wall paintings are very faint, the overall composition could still be clearly discerned in 2008 (which is probably due to the fact that this particular church is hardly ever visited). Thierry (1972, pp. 258–63; *eadem,* 1984–85, pp. 293–302, esp. pp. 300–2, fig. 88, pl. 156a) dates this painting as early as the seventh century, a date that Walter (2003, p. 125 and n. 99) cautions as perhaps being too early. It is of note however that in a late sixth–century church, dedicated to Saint George, at Zindanönü, near Çavuşin, traces remain of a fighting warrior saint, identified by an inscription as Saint George (only the upper section featuring the upper body of the saint remain showing him holding a long lance and the frontally represented head of his horse, so it is unknown what he is spearing below).

[116] Cf. Thierry, 1999, p. 242, drawing 4; Walter, 2003, p. 56, fig. 27.

[117] Cf. Darkó, 1948, pp. 85–97, esp. pp. 90–1.

[118] Cf. *idem*, 1935, pp. 443–69, esp. pp. 463–9. See Thierry, 1972, pp. 263 and n. 67 with further references.

[119] Ghirshman, 1962, p. 132, fig. 168.

[120] See for instance the *zandaniji* silk with the scene of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac from Moshchevaya Balka. Belenitskii, 1980, p. 228, line drawing at the upper right; Jerusalimskaja, 2000, p. 98, fig. 11.

[121] Pancaroğlu, 2004, pp. 153–4. See also Henry Maguire's discussion (1994) on the significance of regular repetition of geometric designs in early Christian floor mosaics and textiles as protective devices.

[122] Strzygowski, 1918, pp. 287–90, fig. 329, drawing after Brosset, 1860, p. 33, text, pl. XXXVII. The church is dated 622 and Josef Strzygowski suggests a contemporary dating for the relief; however Marie-Félicité Brosset, who recorded the relief

common visual conventions current both in Christian and Muslim contexts.

In another Cappadocian wall painting, found above the vestibule door of the late ninth- or tenth-century funerary chapel known as Yılanlı kilise ("serpent church") in the Ihlara valley, paired warrior saints thrust their lances into the gaping mouths of a powerful bicephalous dragon, elaborately speckled, who rears up diagonally across the space between the two horses; the larger of the two dragon heads is horned (fig. 15).[123] Just above the two dragon heads is a cross with an inscription running on either side that establishes a semantic relation between the idea of Christ's triumph over evil on the cross and the victory of the saints over the dragon.[124] The pictorial and textual elements in the composition of this painting above an entrance have been interpreted as apotropaic in intention.

A related composition is found on a relief frieze on the western entrance to the Georgian church of Mart'vili, founded by king George II of Aphkhasia (912–957). Here two confronted unidentified holy riders with fluttering cloaks are shown to spear the raised gaping heads of a massive twice looped bicephalous scaled dragon (fig. 16).[125] As in the wall painting at Yılanlı kilise, one of the dragon heads is larger, has a more pronouncedly curved upper snout and is crowned by what appear to be long pointed ears. A pair of winged figures, probably angels, hover on either side of the riders, extending towards them crowns won by the martyrs for their courage in the struggle with demons and invisible enemies.[126]

Among the military saints Theodore and George were predominantly associated with the miracle of dragon-slaying and often appear together.[127] In the hagiographical tradition, Saint Theodore[128] clearly preceded Saint George[129] in the role of dragon-slayer. Prior to the eleventh century Saint George is almost invariably depicted in combat with a man. Then during the eleventh century the iconography alters and the saint is increasingly represented slaying a dragon.[130]

The earliest dated and visually identifiable representation of Saint George, killing a man and not yet a dragon (fig. 17b), seems to be a relief depiction on the façade of the Armenian palace church dedicated to the Holy Cross which stands on the small island of Aght'amar situated southeast of Lake Van (now in eastern Turkey), erected by King Gagik Artsruni, ruler of the southern Armenian kingdom of Vaspurakan between the years 915 to 921.[131] In addition to Saint George, two further mounted warrior saints, Theodore and Sergius, are portrayed (fig. 17 a). The rendition of three equestrian saints, an

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in his *Ruines d'Ani* published in 1860 (after a drawing by M. Kästner), believed that it could not have been carved earlier than the Islamic conquest in 1072.

[123] This visual differentiation between the two dragon-heads might also indicate two different identities. Cf. Thierry, 1999, p. 234. A visit to the church in October 2008 showed that the imagery was effaced to the point of being barely recognisable.

[124] An inscription above the cross states the words that are uttered by the pierced serpent heads: "Cross, who made you shine? The Christ, he who is struck in me!" Thierry (1999, p. 234) interprets these words as the serpent, the personification of evil and death, recognising the defeat inflicted upon it by Christ through his death.

[125] Cf. Aladaşvili, 1977, pp. 48–56, 150–1, pls. 149, 150; Thierry, 1999, p. 240 and n. 40, fig. 5.

[126] Walter, 1995, p. 301; Thierry, 1999, p. 243 and n. 64.

[127] Walter, 1995, and *idem*, 1999. See also, *idem*, 2003, pp. 44–66 and 109–44. For a discussion of the cult of saints, in particular Saint George, in Georgia, see Schrade, 2001, pp. 169–98.

[128] There are two saints called Theodore in the Orthodox tradition: Theodore Tyron ("the recruit") and Theodore Stratelates ("the general"). On the confusion between the two Theodores, see Oikonomidès, 1981, pp. 327–35. The legend of the Theodore Tyron mentions that he was "born in an eastern land" and died in Amaseia (Amasya), in present-day Turkey (from where his remains were taken to Euchaita, present-day Avkat). His exploit of vanquishing a dragon with a spear only appeared in the second state of his *Passio Prima* (dated 890); *Bibliographica hagiographica graeca*, 1762d in Paris *graec*. 1470. Walter, 1995, p. 309 and n. 87, and *idem*, 2003, p. 50 and n. 38. Cf. Hengstenberg, 1912, pp. 78–106, 241–80; "Theodore Teron," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Kazhdan, A., Oxford, 1991, vol. 3, pp. 2048–9. Some antecedents of Theodore's dragon-slaying feat may be found in the seventh-century *Passion* of Marina of Antioch. Cf. Merkelbach, 1959, pp. 246–7; Boulhoul, 1994, pp. 255–304, esp. p. 263; Thierry, 1999, p. 242, n. 52.

[129] The Cappadocian warrior (d. *c*. 303) was martyred at Lydda (Diospolis) in Palestine during the reign of Diocletian. For a comprehensive investigation of Georgic saints and georgic cults in the Levant, see Haddad, 1969, pp. 21–39.

[130] Thierry, 1999, p. 241. The earliest dated example of Saint George piercing a dragon is depicted in Cappadocia at the church of Saint Barbara at Soğanli (1006 or 1021). See De Jerphanion, 1925–1942, vol. 2, pl. 189. 2; Thierry, 1999, p. 241. It is noteworthy, however, that in Cappadocia George was never represented as killing a man; cf. Walter, 2003, p. 128. The fullest repertory of Georgian representations of Saint George piercing a human figure with his lance is given by Tschubinashvili, G.N., *Georgian Repoussé Work*, Tbilissi, 1957, cited after Walter, 1989a, p. 665.

[131] Cf. Der Nersessian, 1965, p. 19, figs. 49, 50.

example of the serialisation of the images, again illustrates the intent to amplify their role visually and thereby intensify their beneficial effect as apotropaic devices. The Armenian martyr Saint Sergius, traditionally considered the defender *par excellence* against all kinds of evil and dangers, was here added to the commonly paired military saints Theodore and George. He is depicted killing a feline, probably a panther. Saint Theodore is shown thrusting a lance into the upraised open mouth of a dragon, portrayed without wings or legs, its body patterned with spots and tied into a heart-shaped knot,[132] while Saint George tramples a supine fettered human figure that in eleventh-century legends is sometimes identified as his persecutor, the emperor Diocletian.[133] The warrior saints hold long cross-ended lances and are portrayed in full military attire according to iconographic types derived mainly from elements borrowed from antiquity, such as the chlamys tied on the right shoulder, the cuirass, short tunic and buskins.[134]

The belief in the saints' power to vanquish evil probably inspired the representation of the motif on the interior and the exterior of churches and funerary structures. Its recurrent depiction in the Transcaucasian region, notably on Georgian churches, attests to the great importance accorded to the motif. Dragon-slaying riders were progressively identified as warrior saints and can conclusively be interpreted as exercising an apotropaic or protective function.[135]

The legend of Eastern Christendom's best known and most venerated dragon-slayer, Saint George, who also enjoyed considerable popularity in the Latin West, partly as a result of the Crusades,[136] is first attested in the eleventh century when miracles were introduced into the Saint George cycle which includes the feat of rescuing a princess from a dragon.[137] One such typical story is recorded in an eleventh-century Georgian manuscript preserved in the Patriarchal Library, Jerusalem.[138] It describes how Saint George stopped at a lake where he saw a weeping girl, the daughter of a king, about to be sacrificed to the dragon, who had settled in a cave, and there performed the miracle of vanquishing the monstrous creature; thereafter the saint accompanies the princess who leads the dragon on a leash[139] towards the legendary town of Lasnia while her father, king Selenios, and the citizens look on. The miraculously subdued beast is tamed and symbolically tied to the princess' girdle and led about, a crucial detail that establishes the ceremonial and ritual of the subjection of the dragon. The earliest dated manuscript in which this story is illustrated is also found in Georgia at Pavnisi (*c.* 1158–64) (fig. 18).[140] However there are other Georgian examples that can be dated slightly earlier on stylistic grounds: Adisi (late eleventh century),[141] Bočorma (*c.* 1100),[142] and possibly Ikvi (twelfth century).[143] Thereafter the dragon miracle was incorporated as a regular feature in the iconographical repertoire of Saint George. Yet in Greek the miracle of the dragon is first attested in a late twelfth-century manuscript as an appendix to an account of the Passion of Saint George, and in a roughly contemporary illustration from Anargyroi in Kastoria (*c.* 1180).[144] It is therefore very possible that the miracle narrative of Saint George and the dragon originated in the Transcaucasian region, probably in Georgia, from where his cult and

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[132] The cross-ends of his lance are broken off. Cf. *eadem*, p. 19.

[133] Scholz, 1982, p. 242 and n. 1; Walter, 1989a, p. 665, and *idem*, 2003, p. 56 and n. 64, and p. 129 and ns. 125 and 126.

[134] Walter, 2003, p. 22.

[135] Cf. Walter, 1989a, p. 665.

[136] The town Ludd (Lydda) in Palestine to the south-east of Jaffa is traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Saint George. Cf. Sharon, "Ludd," *EI*² V, 798b.

[137] Walter, 1995, pp. 320–2, and *idem*, 2003, pp. 128–9; Schrade, 2001, p. 177, n. 56.

[138] Georgian manuscript, datable to the eleventh century, Greek Patriarchal Library, Jerusalem, cod. 2. The Georgian text has been translated into English by Walter (1995, pp. 321–2 and *idem*, 2003, p. 141) on the basis of the translation into Russian (Privalova, 1977, p. 73 and n. 57).

[139] For early Christian examples of dragons harnessed by a saint with an item of personal clothing and led like a dog on a leash, see Ogden, 2013, pp. 190–4, 236–7, 240–44, 249–55.

[140] Privalova, 1977, pp. 16–7, 19, fig. 5 (line drawing). Cf. Thierry, 1999, p. 241, n. 50.

[141] Privalova, 1977, p. 77, fig. 18 (line drawing), pl. XVIII, figs. 1, 2.

[142] On account of the weathered surface, the drawing is too indistinct to identify whether the body was looped or knotted; *eadem*, p. 83, fig. 20 (line drawing).

[143] Horned undulant dragon with long, flaring snout and goatee beard; *eadem*, p. 80, fig. 19 (line drawing), pl. XIX, figs. 1, 2. Reproduced in Walter, 1989b, p. 357, fig. 3. Walter 2003, p. 142.

[144] Aufhauser, 1911, pp. 31–3; Walter, 1989b, pp. 350–1.

his fame spread throughout the Near East – as well as Europe – as attested by the popularity of the personal name and by the many churches, monasteries and shrines dedicated to him.[145]

Yet another Cappadocian wall painting in the Kırk Dam Altı kilise, datable to between 1282 and 1304, shows Saint George or Haẓrat Jurjīs and a bicephalic dragon (fig. 19). The Saint is identified in an inscription in an adjacent painting depicting him together with a Georgian lady, Thamar, her husband, the Emir and Consul, Basil, with the Saljuq Sultan Masʿūd II and the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II.

The iconographic semantics of the equestrian dragon-fighter – from the greater Khurāsān region to Asia Minor – in its heroic as well as saintly incarnation, thus owe much to ancient prototypes that germinated in the syncretistic melting pot of the great Near Eastern religions. These were probably inspired to a large extent by ancient Iranian dualist notions, and specifically eschatological thought systems, which resulted in close parallels between Iranian and Jewish concepts, inherited, in turn, by Christianity and then Islam.[146] As can be seen in both material culture and written sources, there is overwhelming evidence that the figure of the Iranian holy rider battling the dragon largely served to articulate the many strands of this complex image. The latter thus informed a visual vocabulary that proved to be meaningful as an internationally recognisable symbol for adherents of different faiths in the medieval Central Asian sphere. As a consequence it allowed for effortless re-contextualisation and seems to have served as connecting symbol between different cultural and religious spheres on a popular level, in some ways coming to symbolise a cultural syncretism.

These strong syncretistic aspects are evident on a twelfth- or thirteenth-century nielloed silver scabbard which sets the dragon-slaying iconography alongside the dragon's inherently prophylactic aspect. Its decoration presents a pastiche expressing in visual form the coexistence of themes from different religio-cultural repertoires. The scabbard is inscribed in relief around the rim with customary good wishes in Arabic rendered in cursive script. Below this appears an unusual, shallowly incised depiction which differs not only in subject matter but also in style and execution from motifs shown on metal objects fabricated in the medieval Islamic world.[147] A warrior-saint in crusader attire is shown to aim at a prostrate dragon, its slender serpentine body forming a pretzel-like knot at mid-section, while the "Hand of God" projects from the right to point at the warrior (fig. 20). The dragon-slayer motif surmounts a register containing an ancient iconographic theme of almost worldwide currency, again executed in relief, showing a bird of prey attacking a quadruped, probably a deer. The dragon-slayer motif surmounts a register containing a similarly time-honoured theme, a procession of animals of the hunt, set against foliate scrolls, typical for the decorative repertoire of a local workshop which conceivably employed craftsmen belonging to one of the monotheistic religions of the Near East, where this sheath is thought to have been made for a Christian, probably Crusader, client.[148]

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[145] Walter, 1989b, p. 351, and *idem*, 1995, p. 322. His image was brought to Europe by the Crusaders and he was adopted by King Edward III as the patron saint of England. In the Rus the first depiction of the miracle is preserved on wall paintings of the church of Saint George in Staraya Ladoga (c. 1167) near Novgorod; Lazarev, 1966, pp. 107–14, 249.

[146] Cf. Shaked, "Eschatology," *EIr*; Hintze, 1999, pp. 86–7.

[147] I would like to thank Professor Robert Hillenbrand for drawing my attention to this point.

[148] Cf. *Chevaux et cavaliers arabes*, 2002, pp. 118–9, cat. no. 57; *L'art des chevaliers*, 2007, pp. 155–7, cat. no. 148.

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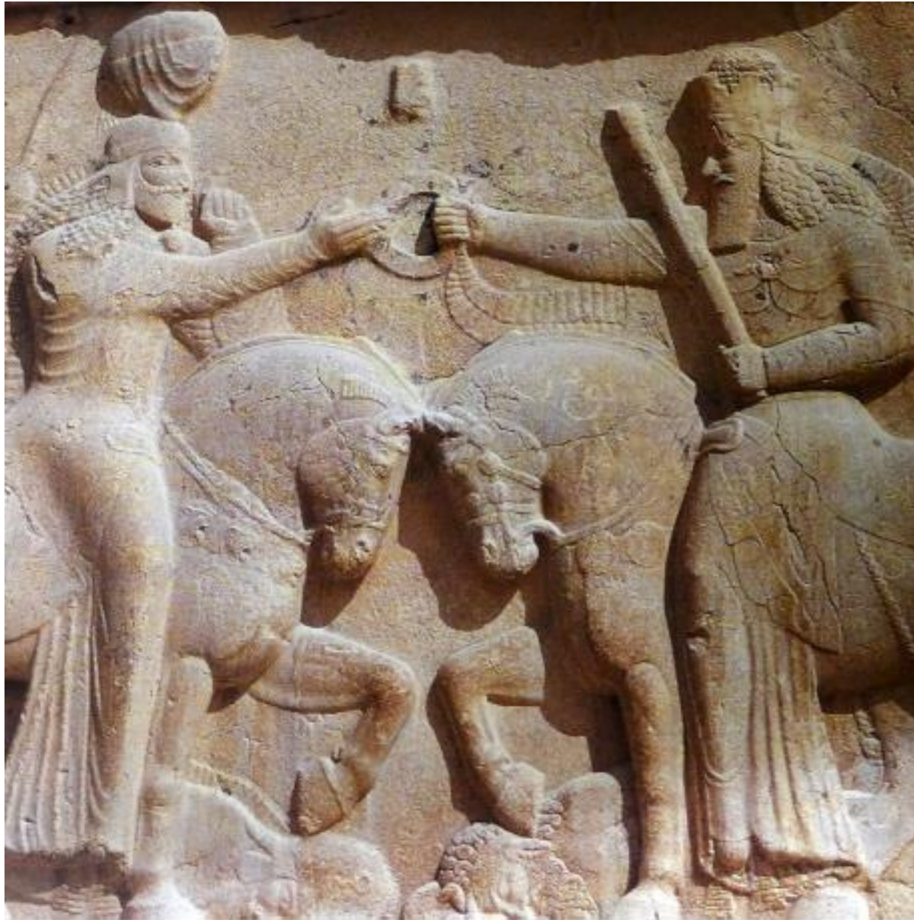
1. Constantius II with raised right hand, mounted on a horse that rears up over a dragon framed by the legend *debellator hostium*.
Medallion of Constantius II (317–361).
Byzantium.
Mid-fourth-century. Gold.
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. no. 462, Vitr. XVIII.
After Merkelbach 1959, fig. 9.

2. Obverse: an anonymous rider saint spearing a figure.
Byzantium.
After Gyselen 1995, p. 54, fig. III.



3. a. and b. Investiture of Ardashīr I.
Rock relief.
Iran, Naqsh-i Rustam.
Third century.

4. A horseman fighting a seven-headed dragon.
Seal.
Iranian world.
Sasanian period.
Brown-red jasper mottled with black.
Height 1.9 cm, bezel 2.5 cm x 2 cm.
Formerly in the collection of the counts Shuvalov.
St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. Gl. 883.
Photograph by courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

5. Rustam fighting a dragon.
Wall painting in a private house, northern wall of room 41/VI, Sogdia, Panjikent. *c*. 740.
St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. SA 15902.
Photograph by courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

6. Rustam departing after killing the dragon.
Wall painting in a private house, northern wall of room 41/VI.
Sogdia, Panjikent. *c*. 740.
St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. SA 15902.
Photograph by courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

7. A horseman fighting a dragon.
Detail from the Bobrinski bucket. Eastern Iran, possibly Herat. Muḥarram 559/December 1163.
Made by Muḥammad ibn Abd al-Wāḥid and Masūd ibn Aḥmad.
Copper alloy, inlay in silver, copper and niello.
Height to rim 18.5 cm, diameter 22 cm.
St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. JR-2268 (detail).
Photograph by courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

8. A warrior on foot fighting a dragon.
Detail from the base of the so-called "Freer Plate".
Eastern Iran. Late twelfth or early thirteenth century.
Fritware, overglaze painted *(mīnāʾī)*.
Height 11.1 cm, width 47.8 cm, depth 47.8 cm.
Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1943.3 (detail).
Photograph by courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

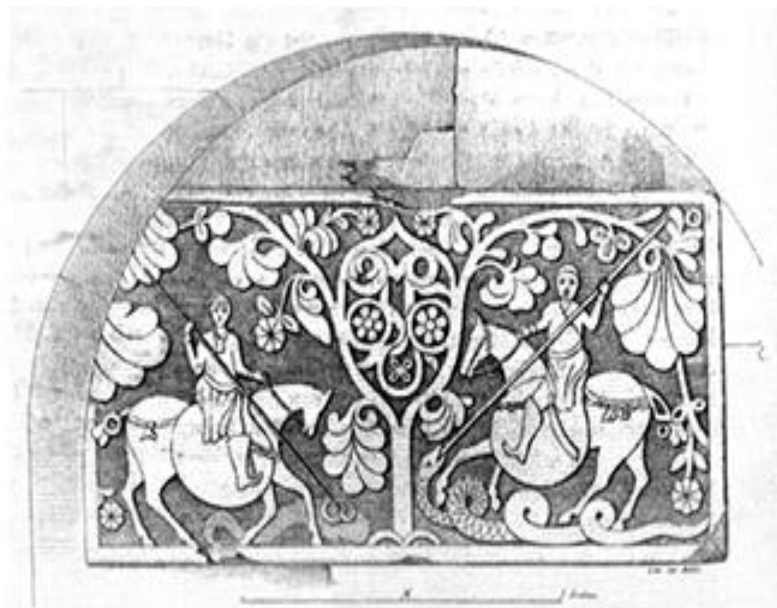
9. A pair of confronted horsemen fighting an upright double-headed dragon and a lion.
Base of a penbox. Iran.
680/1281–2. Signed by Maḥmūd ibn Sunqur.
Height 3.2 cm, length 19.7 cm, width 4.3 cm.
London, British Museum, inv. no. ME OA 1891.6–23.5
After *Furūsiyya*, 1996, p. 173 (drawing).

10. A pair of confronted horsemen fighting a winged dragon and a lion.
Relief frieze from the pavilion of Qılıch Arslan II (Alaeddin Köşkü).
Central Anatolia, Konya.
Second half of the twelfth century (probably 551/1156–588/1192).
Height 29 cm, width 58 cm.
Istanbul, Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi, inv. no. 2831.
After Sarre, 1909, vol. 2, pl. III.

11. The angel Shamhūrash as mounted dragon fighter.
Painting in a copy of Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAbdallāh al-Rummal al-Muʿaẓẓam al-Saʿati al-Haykali, *Daqāʾiq al-Haqāʾiq*. Central Anatolia, Aksaray.
Mid- to late thirteenth century (variously dated 10 Ramaḍān 670/10 April 1272 and mid-Shawwāl 671/early May 1273); illustrations of various dates.
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Persan 174, fol. 83r.
Photograph by courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

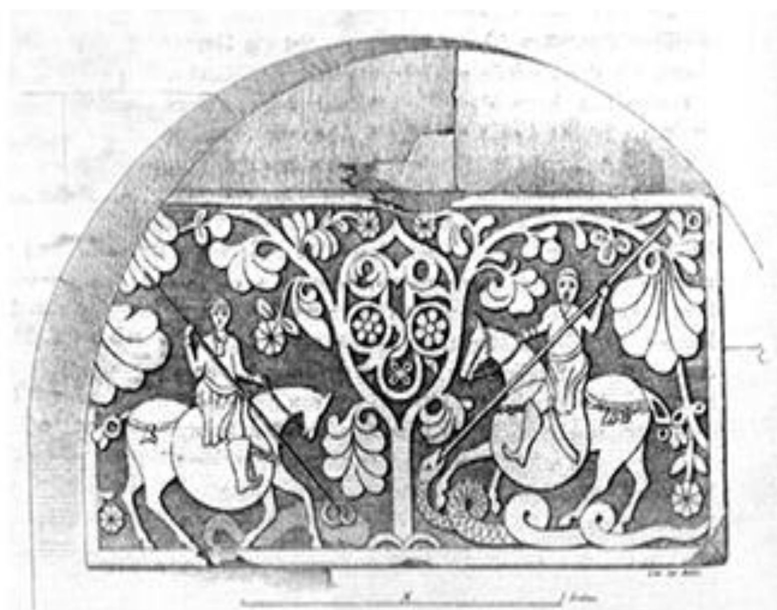
12. A horseman fighting a dragon.
Relief carving. Georgia, Kartli region, Ekikilise.
Seventh century.
Tbilisi, Museum of Fine Arts.
Photograph by courtesy of Nicole Thierry.

13. A pair of confronted equestrian saints fighting dragons coiled around a tree trunk.
Wall painting.
Eastern Anatolia, Cappadocia, region of Çavuşin, village of Güzelöz, Mistikan kilise.
Perhaps seventh century. Line drawing by courtesy of Nicole Thierry.



14. A pair of confronted horsemen separated by a tree fighting dragons.
Drawing of a relief carving. Eastern Anatolia, Ani.
Dating uncertain but probably before 1072.
After Strzygowski, 1918, pp. 287–90, fig. 329 (drawing after Brosset, 1860, p. 33, text, pl. XXXVII (drawing by M. Kästner))

15. A pair of confronted equestrian saints fighting a bicephalic dragon.
Wall painting.
Eastern Anatolia, Cappadocia, Yılanlı kilise (“Serpent Church”), Ihlara (Yeşilköy).
Late ninth or tenth century.
Line drawing by courtesy of Nicole Thierry.



16. A pair of confronted equestrian saints fighting a bicephalic dragon.
Relief carving.
Western Georgia, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti province, Martʿvili, church of the Virgin, above the western entrance. Tenth century.
After Baltrushaitis, 1929, pl. LXVII, fig. 109.

17. a. The saints Sergios and George killing a feline and a supine human figure.
Relief carvings.
Eastern Anatolia, Akhtʿamar island (Akdamar Adası) in Lake Van, northwestern façade of the church of the Holy Cross. 915–921.
Photograph by the author.

b. Saint Theodore killing a dragon.
Relief carvings.
Eastern Anatolia, Akhtʿamar island (Akdamar Adası) in Lake Van, northwestern façade of the church of the Holy Cross. 915–921.
Photograph by the author.

18. Saint George accompanying the princess, daughter of king Selenios, who leads the dragon on a leash towards the city of Lasnia.
Wall painting.
Georgia, Pavnisi. *c*. 1158–1164.
After Privalova, 1977, pp. 16-17, 19, fig. 5.

19. Saint George and a bicephalic dragon.
Wall painting. Eastern Anatolia, Cappadocia, region of Hasan Daği, Belisirama, Kırk Dam Altı kilise. 1282–1304. After Restle, 1967, ill. 515.

20. An equestrian saint killing a dragon; the sloping quillons terminating in dragon heads.
Detail from a dagger with scabbard. Syria or Palestine.
Twelfth or thirteenth century.
Silver, niello inlay.
Vaduz, Furusiyya Art Collection, inv. no. R-937.
Photograph by courtesy of the Furusiyya Art Collection.