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Vestiges of the *Ourobóros* in the Medieval Islamic Visual Tradition

The iconography of the circular serpent or dragon biting its own tail, traditionally known by its Greek name as *ourobóros*, was also known in the Islamic tradition.¹ This type of imagery is vividly described in surviving textual sources. The early medieval writer al-Kisā'ī who probably wrote not long before 1200 refers to the soundly established authority of Ka'b al-Aḥbār, an early Jewish convert to Islam (probably in 17/638), when portraying the creation of the Canopy and the Throne of God:²

Then God created a great serpent to surround the Canopy. Its head is of white pearl and its body is of gold. Its eyes are two sapphires, and no one can comprehend the magnitude of the serpent except God. It has forty thousand wings made of different kinds of jewels, and on each feather there stands an angel holding a jeweled lance, praising God and blessing His name. When this serpent extols God, its exaltation overwhelms that of all angels ...

A related description of the girdling dragon is given by al-Qurṭubī, the 13th-century expert in *Ḥadīth*, or sacred tradition, in a commentary on *Surat Ghāfir* (The Forgiver) (Qur'ān, sūra 40):³

- 1 This article is based on a shortened version of chapter 9 of my Ph.D. thesis (Free University of Berlin 2008) published as *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art* 2011.
- 2 *Qīṣas al-anbiyā'* (tr. Thackston 1978: 7). Cf. the traditionists al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971) and Abū l-Shaykh (d. 368/979), on the authority of 'Abdallāh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Āsh, similarly quoting the saying that the throne is encircled by a serpent; Heinen 1982: 81, 107, 130.
- 3 Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā* (Jayakar 1906, vol. 1: 638); see also *'Arā'is al-majālis* (Brinner 2002: 25).

When God created the Throne, it said, ‹God has not created anything greater than myself, › and exulted with joy out of pride. God therefore caused it to be surrounded by a serpent having 70,000 wings, each wing having 70,000 feathers in it, each feather having in it 70,000 faces – each face having in it 70,000 mouths, and each mouth having in it 70,000 tongues, with its mouths ejaculating every day the praises of God ..., the number of drops of rain, the number of leaves of trees, the number of stones and earth, the number of days of this world, and the number of angels – all these a number of times. The serpent then twisted itself round the Throne which was taken up by only half the serpent while it remained twisted around it. The Throne thereupon became humble.

The descriptions may be associated with the cosmic serpent or dragon (*Ataliā*) known from Syriac cosmography «whose head and tail are always diametrically opposed» (Nau 2010: 254). In the Jewish tradition a great silver serpent likewise encircles the machinery of the throne of king Solomon and by operating the wheelwork, activates the mechanism.⁴ It is of note that Solomon's mechanical throne, which can be likened to a miniature universe, can only be put into motion by the serpent.⁵

In his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* («Tales of the Prophets»), al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035), describes the Ka'ba in Mecca, the central sanctuary of the Islamic world, as a divine throne that is circumscribed by a serpent:⁶

Then Allāh surrounded it by a serpent. ... this serpent wound itself around the throne and the latter reaches to half the height of the serpent which is winding itself around it.

In the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, al-Ḥalabī⁷ similarly relates how the serpent that dwells in the pit of the Ka'ba to guard the treasures there, would

... leave its dwelling place and appear glittering; and often it wound itself on the wall so that its tail approached its head.

4 *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1853–73, vol. 5: 35. Cf. Ginzberg 1909–38, repr. 1946 and 1955, vol. 4: 157–159; Wensinck 1916: 63.

5 *Bet ha-Midrash*, 1853–73, vol. 2: 83–5.

6 *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, Cairo, 1290: 13 (as cited in Wensinck 1916: 62 and n. 3); see also 'Arā'is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' (tr. and ed. Brinner 2002: 151). Wensinck (1916: 62 and n. 3) notes that there are also Greek images in which the serpent is wound around and ascends above the omphalos, which often has a sepulchral character (Elderkin 1924: 109–116).

7 *Al-Sīra al-Ḥalabiyya*, Cairo, 1292, vol. 1: 189, 3–5 (as cited in Wensinck 1916: 64 and n. 1).



Fig. 1. An *ourobóros* serpent encircling a crescent and stars above a lion.
Seal, Hematite. Probably 5th century. Iranian world.
London, British Museum, inv. no. 119804. After
Azarpay, 1978: fig. 6 (drawing after Bivar, 1969:
26, pl. 11, DL2).

An encircling serpent framing a lion, surmounted by a crescent and star, engraved on a 5th-century Sasanian seal, suggests that the Sasanian representations of the serpent biting its own tail⁸ may perhaps be based on conventional renderings of the dragon in contemporaneous star-maps inspired by astrological works of the Hellenistic east.⁹ In Hellenic astrology, the great celestial serpent encompassed all the spheres of the cosmos, coiling around the heavens and biting its tail (fig. 1; Leisegang 1955: 217).

The motif is also well-known in Semitic cosmography. A key passage in the book of Job (26:12) states:

He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.

The inscribed circle refers to the line of the horizon, which separates the inhabited world from the waters that surround it (Wakeman 1973: 134–5). These waters are symbolised by Leviathan, «the encircler», who is primarily a sea monster.¹⁰

- 8 Cf. Gyselen 1995: 52–3, fig. 60 (photograph of seal recto, verso). For a discussion of the motif in a magical context on Sasanian-period artefacts, such as bowls, tablets and amulet pendants, see Viložny 2012: 35–36 (for an example on an Aramaic bowl, see Shaked et al 2012: 59–61) and on medieval Byzantine amulets, see Spier: 37–38, pl. 6c verso.
- 9 Bivar (1969: 26) connects the *ourobóros* serpent with the Egyptian serpent deity *Āpep* that is regarded as the cosmic antagonist of the Sun and the Moon. Cf. van der Sluijs/Peratt 2009: 4–8.
- 10 Medieval Jewish traditions holds that Leviathan «grips his tail between his teeth and forms a ring around the Ocean». *Piyyuṭ Weyikkon 'Olam* 1964:48; see Ginzberg 1925, vol. 5: 43–46. Cf. Gunkel 1895: 47 and n. 1; Wakeman 1973: 135 and n. 1.

The same motif is used by the great mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī (560/1165–638/1240) whose works draw on many sources, including Gnostic, Hermetic and Neoplatonic writings. In his discussion of the Pole (*quṭb*; an elevated rank of sainthood in *ṣūfī* mysticism) that represents the living Messenger (*rasūl*) in the *Kitāb al-manzil al-quṭb* («Book of the Spiritual Dwelling of the Pole»), he describes an enormous serpent whose head and tail touch and that encircles Mount Qāf:¹¹

The Pole is both the centre of the circle of the universe, and its circumference. He is the mirror of God, and the pivot of the world. ... God is perpetually epiphanized to him. ... He is located in Mecca – whatever place he happens to be in bodily. When a Pole is enthroned at the level of the *quṭbiyya* – all beings, animal or vegetable, make covenant with him ... This explains the story about the man who saw the huge snake that God had placed around Mount Qāf, which encircles the world. The head and the tail of this snake meet.

According to a saying of the Prophet Muḥammad, Mount Qāf is separated from the world «by a region which men cannot cross, a dark area which would stretch for four months walking».¹² It was thus a distant, marginal area at the boundaries of the «civilised» world.¹³ Such liminal regions were often inhabited by demons. Descriptions of dragons and other mythical creatures abound in such regions in medieval Islamic geographical and travel works (cf. Montgomery 2006: 72). This vision of the fabulous distant lands at the remote ends of the world is also found in the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes. In it many wondrous feats are ascribed to Alexander (Iskandar) who made his way to the furthest west and furthest east, the end of the world, entering «the regions not illuminated by the Sun, the Moon and the stars and light as day».¹⁴ However, Mount Qāf does not only encircle the earth: it also encloses the ocean which «forms a girdle around the earth».¹⁵ According to a popular belief recorded by al-Qazwīnī, the earth is supported by the biblical monsters Leviathan and Behemoth.¹⁶ Later Jewish tradition similarly states that:¹⁷

11 The same story, in expanded form, of a man speaking to a serpent appears in the *Risālat rūh al-quḍs*. See Chodkiewicz 1993: 55 and n. 32.

12 Cf. Streck [Miquel], «Qāf», *EP* IV: 400a.

13 In ancient Greek lore the ends of the earth were inhabited by primeval and/or mythical creatures (for instance in Hesiod’s *Theogony* 270–276). Inaccessible by land, they could only be reached by the crossing of waters, often described as world-encircling.

14 Pseudo-Callisthenes II, ch. 40 (tr. and ed. Stoneman 1991: 121).

15 Streck [Miquel], «Qāf», *EP* IV: 400a.

16 *Midraš ‘Aešeret ha-Dibbārōt*: 1: 63. Wensinck 1916: 62. Cf. Marzolph/van Leeuwen 2004: 356.

17 *Apocalypse of Abraham* (Codex Sylvester): 21. Cf. Streck [Miquel], «Qāf», *EP* IV: 400a. It is noteworthy that Behemot is known as Lawatyā (Leviathan, see Job 41:1), the patronymic part of the

... the Ocean surrounds the whole world as a vault surrounds a large pillar.
And the world is placed in circular form on the fins of Leviathan.

Similarly a large serpent is said to encircle the bier of a righteous person, an Islamic tradition which provides a microcosmic allegory of the whole world surrounded and supported by a giant serpent.¹⁸ It also shows that the Islamic conceptions are in some way connected with ancient biblical notions, which in turn have precedents in the Babylonian tradition of chaos.¹⁹ This world serpent, which likewise serves as liminal motif between order and chaos by encircling the cosmos, in other words the realm of order, was of course a symbol of great antiquity in the Mesopotamian world and beyond (Schütt 2002: 106).

The writings of mystics such as Ibn al-‘Arabī were also influenced by the esoteric science of alchemy (*al-kīmiyā*’), considered a form of revealed knowledge that had both its spiritual goals and practical applications. And a special alchemical symbol is that of the tail-eating serpent, the *ourobóros* (the etymology being from *oura* «tail», and the root of *bora* «food», *boros* «voracious».)²⁰ The *ourobóros* symbol is depicted in Arabic alchemical texts, such as the writings of the 12th-century Muḥammad ibn Umayl as-Šādiq (c. 287/900–287/960, known in the west as «Senior Zādith»). His most renowned work was the *Kitāb al-Mā’ al-Waraqī wa ’l-Arḍ al-Najmīya* («Book of the Silvery Water and Starry Earth»), known in Latin as the *Tabula Chemica* (Stapleton/Ḥusain 1933: 117–213), in which the schematic depiction of a pair of winged creatures biting each other’s tails is shown (**fig. 2**).²¹

It is significant that in medieval Islamic iconography the *ourobóros*-dragon was doubled and is often pictured as two entwined dragons eating one another (or, in other words, swallowing one another), in an act both self-destructive and at the same time parturient, the cycle that is recreated in the self-devouring. In the symbolism of medieval Islamic alchemy, the paired interlaced dragons represented a fundamental polarity, on which the cosmic rhythm is based, the *solve et coagula* of the alchemical process: the sulphur and mercury of alchemy (Moulierac 1987: 88).

name (*kunya*) is Balhūt and Bahamūt (Behemot, see Job 40:15). Cf. al-Tha‘labī, *Qiṣas al-anbiyā*’: 4, cited after Thackston (tr. al-Kisā’ī’s *Qiṣas al-anbiyā*’) 1978: 338, n. 9.

18 Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metsiah* 84b–85a, as cited in Epstein 1997: 74. This is supported by the Hasidic verse *zaddik yesod olam*: «a righteous person is the foundation of the world» (Proverbs 10:25), cited after *idem*: 74.

19 Streck [Miquel], «Kāf», *EP* IV: 400a.

20 Needham/Wang 1965: 374; Anawati, «Arabic Alchemy», *EHAS*, 1996, vol. 3: 863.

21 The highly stylised illustration is accompanied by an Arabic inscription in the Lucknow manuscript as: «... two Birds [with an indication of the position of the respective heads and the tails]; the Male and the Female; Two in One». *idem* 1933: pl. I, A. A closely related, yet even more stylised, version of the motif is depicted in the Paris Ms. no. 2610, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, see *idem* pl. 2 B.

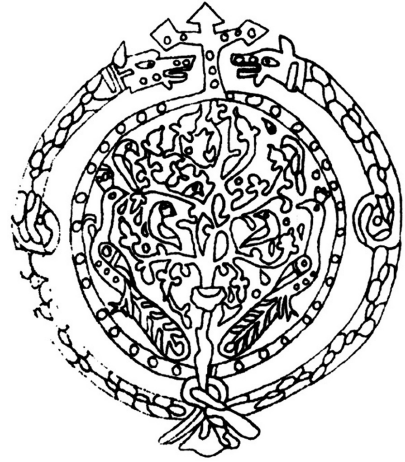


Fig. 2. A pair of fabulous creatures in circular arrangement biting each other's tails. Painting in a copy of Muhammad ibn Umayr al-Sādiq al-Tamīmī's *Kitāb al-Mā' al-Waraqī wa 'l-Ard al-Najmiya*. c. 287/900–287/960. India, Lucknow, State Museum. After Stapleton/Husain 1933: pl. I A.

Fig. 3. A pair of interlaced dragons encircling «the earth». Medallion from the Pala d'Oro, enamelled silver. Constantinople. 11th century. Venice, Treasury of San Marco. Drawing by courtesy of Scott Redford.

This double aspect is echoed in the popular belief, mentioned earlier, that the earth is supported by the biblical monsters Leviathan and Behemoth.²² It is also found in rabbinic tradition where it is stated that:

Behemoth and Leviathan are serpents on the edge of the ocean who encircle the earth like a ring (*Vocabularium Aethiopicum*: 83).

The motif of the paired encircling dragons also makes an appearance in the well-known legend of the Ascent of Alexander the Great. Certain editions of the romance of the 4th-century Pseudo-Callisthenes describe how, as Alexander is carried to heaven by eagles, he sees «a large snake coiled in a circle, and inside it a round building like a very small threshing-floor» which represented «the earth; the snake, however, is the sea, which surrounds the earth».²³ The depiction of this scene also reflects the force and ongoing cultural resonance which the Alexander Romance possessed at the time; in particular, the meaning associated with this imagery. It is portrayed on a small 11th-century Byzantine enamelled medallion

22 Streck [Miquel], «Kāf», *EP* IV: 400a.

23 *Vita Alexandri Magni* (Greek version) 2.41.10–12. See van der Sluijs/Peratt 2009: 10. Pseudo-Callisthenes II, ch. 41 (tr. and ed. Stoneman 1991: 123). Cf. Millet 1923: 94, ch. 102.

from the Pala d'Oro on the high altar of St. Mark's in Venice, representing the schematised composition of Alexander's view of the world as seen from on high (**fig. 3**; Grabar 1951: 48, fig. 10c photograph). The plaque is decorated with a large central tree flanked by a pair of addorsed peacocks. The composition is encircled by a pair of giant serpents with looped bodies and interlaced tails (Grabar 1951: 48).

This form of imagery provides a bird's eye view of the terrestrial universe current in the medieval Iranised sphere. The motif was thence adapted to a Christian context and, as Grabar notes, it is possible that the stylised cruciform motif on the apex of the tree represents a Christian cross which served to «convert» this oriental representation of the universe into a Christian one (Grabar 1951: 48, n. 17). Evidently the motif had wide currency in the medieval world, both Islamic and Byzantine.

The origin of this iconography may plausibly be seen to lie in the Zoroastrian cosmological motif of the Saēna Tree, the perch of the great mythical Saēna bird (the Mid. Pers. *sēn murw*, and the Pers. *sīmorgh*; see Boyce 1975: 88–91, 137–138, 143). The tree on which the Saēna nests, grows in the middle of Lake Vārukasha (in Yasht 12.17) and is called Vīspō. bish (that is the Gaokərəna-Tree, in Mid. Pers. Gōkirn), the Tree of All Remedies, because it bears the seed of all healing herbs (cf. Janda 2010: 320–321). According to the Bundahishn the revered Vāsī Panchā.sadvarā lives in the lake (Yasht 42.4). It appears to be a kind of sea dragon and is «so huge that if it were to rush swiftly along from sunrise to sunset it still would not have covered as much ground as the length of its own body» (Boyce 1975: 89).

The encircling dragon iconography is also found on architectural elements such as a wooden door, once possibly part of a mausoleum (cf. Hauptmann von Gladiss 2006: 95). The door, dated to the first half of the 13th century, is thought to come from the Tigris region (**fig. 4**; cf. Meinecke 1989: 54, 58, detail). It is carved with a pair of large dragons whose serpentine bodies wind tightly around a medallion containing an interlaced star pattern.

A similar conceptualisation governs the depiction on a large stone fragment carved with a pair of antithetically-arranged dragons that frame a large rayed orb which carries clear solar associations (**fig. 5**). Only part of the pretzel-like knot of the dragon to the right has survived. Discovered near Alaeddin Tepe in Konya, it was probably part of a 13th-century Saljuq monument, which no longer exists.

The *ourobóros* aspect is also evident in the double frontispiece of the *Kitāb al-diryāq* («Book of the Theriac»), dated 595/1198–9, on which the encircling dragons are juxtaposed with a personification of the Moon (**fig. 6**; cf. Grube 1967: pl. 27 colour illustration; Grube/Johns 2005: 230, fig. 77.1). Although realised in an entirely different medium, the representations in stone and on paper probably share a relatively close geographic provenance and period of production. The astral personification on the Pseudo-Galen double frontispiece, moreover, might provide a link between what appear to be composite stellar symbols on the Jazira door (**fig. 4**) and the Konya architectural stone fragment (**fig. 5**).



Fig. 4. A pair of interlaced dragons encircling a large medallion containing a star pattern. Relief carving, wooden door. Tigris region, the Jazira. First half 13th century. Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. I.1989.43.

Fig. 5. A pair of interlaced dragons encircling a large medallion containing a star pattern. Relief carving, stone fragment. Anatolia. First half of the 13th century. Konya, İnce Minare Müzesi, inv. no. 5817.

The motif also features conspicuously on several Kashan-style ceramic vessels; here the encircling imagery is rendered in the form of interlacing bands comprising multiple pairs of «Saljuq-style» dragons circumscribing a central composition (Grube 1965: pl. 28. Enderlein et al. 2001: 51; Pope 1945: 121, pl. 84). On one early 13th-century bowl, the ophidian bodies encircle a well-known motif, often portrayed on early 13th-century Kashan-style ceramic artefacts, of two seated human figures conversing. The serpentine interlace is in turn framed by epigraphic bands in Kufic and cursive script in Arabic and Persian. The main theme of the inscriptions is love, the longing for the beloved and the anguish and suffering occasioned by love (Pancaroglu 2007: 133, cat. no. 86. Cf. Meisami 1987: 237–298). This microcosmic ideal is aptly framed by the interlaced dragons. It may be inferred that, although generally perceived to be a mere decorative device on Saljuq-period objects, the iconography of encircling dragons may well have conveyed some cosmological and, possibly, mythological significance.

The encircling dragon motif is also found on textiles. Their eminent portability and high status within the medieval Islamic and Eastern Christian cultures assured their important role in establishing an international visual vocabulary (cf. Hoffman 2001: 26). This led to shared decorative themes in Islamic and Byzantine textiles, and consequently to difficulties in distinguishing between centres of production.²⁴ The iconographic scheme of encircling serpents is clearly rendered on this 11th- or early 12th-century wine-red and gold samite, the

24 Soucek 1997: 405–7; *Glory of Byzantium*, 1997:416; Hoffman 2001: 18, 26.



Fig. 6. A pair of interlaced dragons encircling a personification of the Moon.

Detail of the right half of the double-page frontispiece painting in the *Kitāb al-diryāq*. The Jazīra, Mosul (?). Rabī' al-awwal of the year 595/31 December 1198–29 January 1199. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Arabe 2964; current pagination 36–37.

so-called relic cover of Saint Amandus, one part of which is preserved in the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, the other in the Cleveland Museum of Art.²⁵ Thought to have a Western Asian provenance the fragment features double-headed eagles surmounting pairs of adorned feline quadrupeds whose tails terminate in dragon heads. A pair of giant double-headed dragons frames this composition.

25 A further fragment is preserved in the collection of Rina and Norman Indictor, New York.

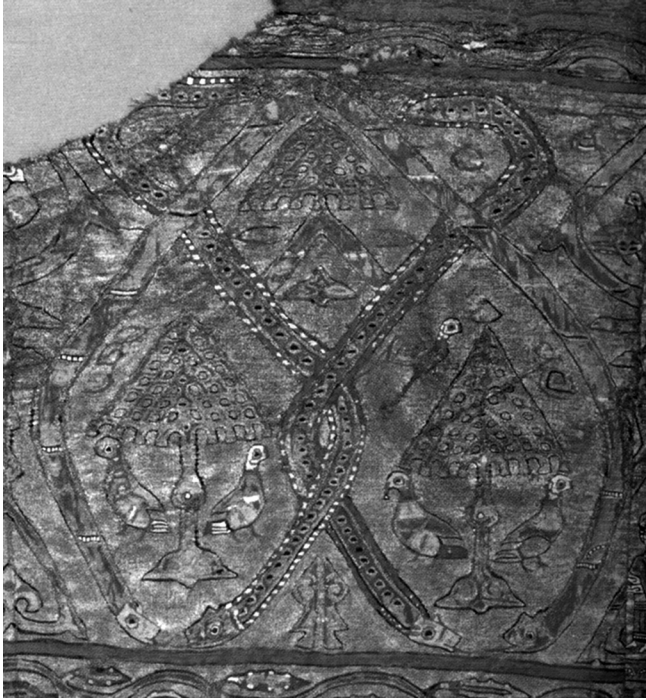


Fig. 7. A lozenge-shaped all-over pattern interlace formed by two pairs of confronted dragons.

The «Bird Cloth» (detail). Lining fabric of the coronation mantle of king Roger II of Sicily and southern Italy, woven silk. Perhaps 13th century. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Schatzkammer.

An extended form of the encircling dragon motif is also found on the lining fabrics of the coronation mantle of Roger II, the Norman ruler of Sicily and southern Italy. The outer face of the famous red silk cloak, which carries an inscription in Kufic dating it to the year 528/1133–4, is embroidered with a palm tree separating addorsed tigers attacking camels.²⁶ The lining shows a grid-like lattice composed of paired interlaced serpent-dragons that define the overall surface and enclose groups of human figures, birds, trees and foliate motifs (fig. 7).²⁷ Since this imagery was chosen for the lining of the coronation mantle, its symbolic content must have been imbued with a special significance. Research into the silk and gold thread textiles underlines on the one hand the characteristics of Byzantine court production, the *panni imperiali*, while on the other hand pointing to stylistic features pertaining to Central Asia and the Ancient Orient (cf. Hoffman 2001: 34).

The possibility of an eastern, and perhaps Central Asian, provenance for the overall iconography is strengthened by the discovery of a silk fragment from Samangan province in Afghanistan (fig. 8). In the same manner as on the «Bird Cloth», the Samangan fragment also shows a large pretzel-like interlace, formed by the bodies of four serpent-dragons. All

26 *Nobilis Officinae*, 2005: 259–64, cat. no. 66; Tronzo 2001: 241–53.

27 *Nobilis Officinae* 2005: 256–9, esp. 257, cat. no. 65.

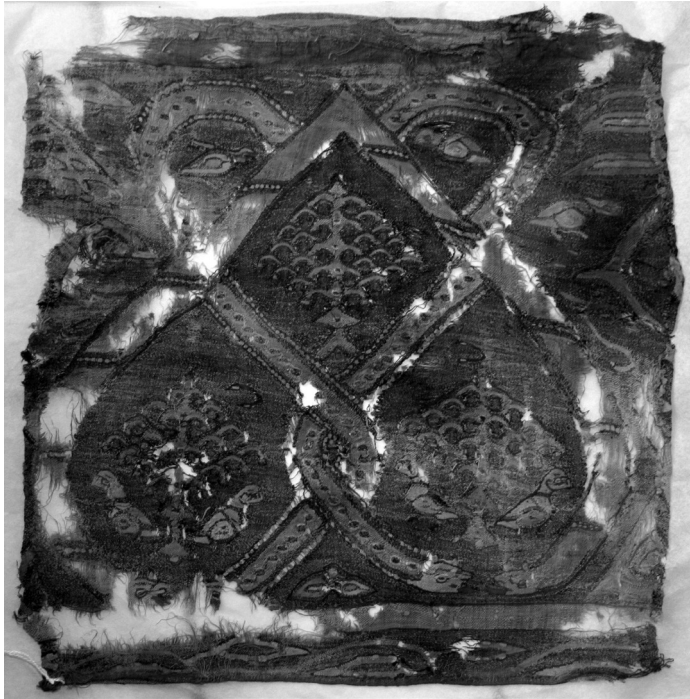


Fig. 8. A lozenge-shaped all-over pattern interlace formed by two pairs of confronted dragons. Textile fragment, woven silk. Afghanistan, Samangan province, Dar-i Suf. C-14 date from 1154 to 1282 (Institute of Particle Physics (ETH), Zurich, 87.7%; 29 January, 2000). Kuwait, al-Sabāh Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait National Museum, inv. no. LNS 519 T.

the details of the iconographic expression, including trees flanked by perched birds in the lobes of the interlace and the beaded or striped demarcation of the ophidian bodies as well as their projecting red tongues, are near-identical to those of the «Bird Cloth».

It would certainly be wrong to attempt to assign the motif to a single artistic tradition. It is worth noting though that the motifs enclosed by the confronted giant dragons that divide up the entire surface include the ancient Iranian cosmological motif of the tree with birds. This motif is closely related to the representation on the Byzantine enamelled medallion from the Pala d'Oro, which, although it was made in Constantinople, was clearly inspired by Iranian and Central Asian visual expressions. This artistic tradition permeates also the more complex iconography on the «Bird Cloth» lining fabric found in the coronation mantle of Roger II.

Even though it would at first sight seem likely that the lining fabrics were inserted at the time the coronation mantle of Roger II was made (dated 528/1133–4), Anne Wardwell has tentatively dated the lining of the mantle to the period between the third decade and the last quarter of the 13th century, hence suggesting that the lining was perhaps added at a later date (Wardwell 1988–1989: 110, with references, and fig. 48). The Samangan fragment has been radiocarbon-dated to between 1154 and 1282. Regrettably, the test results are not specific enough to be able to determine in which of the two centuries the textile was fashioned. The

Samangan fragment with heart-shaped knots fashioned of serpent-dragons certainly underlines the wide circulation of this significant iconographic representation. The continued use of a motif associated with ancient Iranian ideas is not surprising given that, despite the triumph of Islam, the people of the eastern Islamic lands hung on to their pre-Islamic roots and associated iconographic notions more assiduously than those in most other areas of the Islamic world.

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