By their very nature, portable artefacts are characterised by their potential for movement across geographical, cultural and religious boundaries. Most of the objects under discussion testify to an overall westward migration of the dragon iconography from the Western Central Asian regions, facilitated by the movement of ever growing numbers of Turkic-speaking tribes, the dominant force being the Saljuqs, into Western Asia. The latter took much from the artistic traditions of the Ghaznawids whose state they had destroyed. During the Saljuq period, the main artistic centres were located in greater Khurasan and northern Iran, with merchants and artisans becoming the principal bearers of cultural traditions. Able to move freely in the enormous empire, which reached from Khurasan to Syria and Asia Minor, the population aided the diffusion of prevailing styles and tastes which had a "markedly Khurasanian flavour."

Belonging to a wider, shared visual culture across the medieval Central Asian sphere, portable objects shared emblematic themes, reflected also on monumental representations. The dragon motif is found on a great variety of artefacts, notably in the category of personal objects: specifically on accoutrements pertaining to the hunt or war and objects of personal adornment. The semantic value of the dragon motif on the former would naturally have served to enhance the efficacy of these items. When personal in nature and worn on the body, objects with this motif were popularly believed to provide the wearer with a prophylactic or apotropaic safeguard against a variety of real or imaginary dangers. The belief in the magical power of images meant that they could function as talismans intended, for instance, to promote well-being and to protect from the power of evil. This is related to the age-old belief in the agency of envy and jealousy and the Evil Eye, which certainly survived through the medieval Islamic period, and the neutralisation of the harm that was intended to the person by wearing such a piece. Hence the serpent or dragon comes to be looked upon as harbinger of good luck and bestower of prosperity. In addition, such objects were often believed to endow their owners with certain abilities or powers. One of the most widespread functions of talismans was in the form of amulets (tamāʾim, sing. tamīma, or taʿāwidh, sing. taʿwīdḥ) intended to gain the assistance of unseen, supernatural forces that were believed to influence the affairs of humankind to achieve certain desired outcomes. It is of course impossible to fathom how "potent" the motif was for the wearer, it may indeed be that some did not consider the dragon motif to have such explicit powers, using it as an ornament, but with prophylactic intent. In general, though, it may reasonably be conjectured that the dragon iconography carried implicit semantics imbued with passively apotropaic, that is to say protective or actively beneficial properties, in other words empowering qualities designed to be imparted to the wearer.

Other objects such as vessels with this iconography may often have functioned as portable “apotropaia.” In spite of the fact that many pieces have a very varied iconography of which the dragon is only part, it may be hypothesised that dragon motifs, too, served to magnify the
intended effect of the vessels which were presumably meant to protect their maker and more often their owner, so functioning as protective devices. This is emphasised by inscriptions invoking familiar expressions of wishes for blessings, luck, health, or long life for the mostly anonymous owner, which are frequently of amuletic character in themselves; these are rendered often in combination with figural decorations of a symbolic or “magical” significance such as the dragon. A clear function of the dragon’s iconography was thus to reinforce the propitious, apotropaic, or even magical or supernatural powers of such portable objects.

b. The dragon motif on accoutrements relating to the hunt or war

Dragon imagery is attested on weapons and banners from early Zoroastrian times. It is particularly associated with the mace and with the finials of ceremonial weapons or staffs which may carry sculpted dragons with a human or animal figure in their maw. Dragon banners, an important part of military insignia from ancient times, appear in Iranian art and literature. The dragon motif similarly occurs on weapon fittings, ritually significant belt/strap fittings and equestrian accoutrements. The use of such imagery on the paraphernalia of heroism and rulership communicated mastery over the dragon and appropriation of its formidable qualities. When featured on objects of personal adornment such as jewellery or belt-ornaments, the motif endowed such items with prophylactic or apotropaic powers.

The dragon motif on weapons

Cudgels seem to have been the most widespread weapon in early Mesopotamia and Iran. “Cast in yellow bronze,” they were the most powerful and the most victorious of all the weapons of the Vedic and Avestan gods. Cudgels or maces were also associated with the dragon-fighting Indo-Iranian mythical heroes, and hence possibly serve to characterise them as primordial warriors. Significantly, the mace of the legendary dragon-fighting hero Karšāsp (Garšāsp in New Persian poetry), celebrated already in the Zoroastrian Yasna and Videvdāt, is said to have been carved in the shape of a dragon head. Similarly the Mathura portrait statue of the Kushāna king Kanishka is shown with a giant club tapering to an open-mouthed head of a dragon-like creature. The representation of the dragon on ceremonial weapons must be evidence of the intention to endow the weapon and hence its owner with the magical powers of the dragon.

The club was greatly favoured by the Parthians (250 BC–226 AD), too. The club of Herakles, the most popular of Greek heroes, even appears as architectural decoration in the early Parthian monument referred to as the “Round Hall” in Nisa, the Parthian metropolis in present-day Turkmenistan. Maces and battle axes were used in the Parthian and Sasanian periods. An important depiction is found on a bas-relief from a small house-temple in Parthian Hatra in northern Mesopotamia (an integral part of Iran in Parthian and Sasanian times), which shows the composite figure of Herakles-Nergal, the god of the realm of death and the underworld, who can

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6 Cf. the twelfth-century large silver-inlaid brass ewer, now in the Georgian State Museum, Tbilisi, Georgia, which bears the inscription: ... seven heavenly bodies, however proud they may be, are protection for the one who works so.

Allan, 1982a, repr. 1999, p. 49.


9 Idem, pp. 331–2.

10 Wikander, 1938, pp. 60, 64–6, 99; Widengren, 1969, p. 249.


12 Rosenfield, 1967, figs. 2, 2b (photograph on the left).

The heads of the mythical creatures, the Indian composite marine creature, makara, and the Central Asian dragon, were sometimes portrayed in a stylistically closely related manner. Since only the head is portrayed, it is impossible to identify it with a degree of certainty as belonging to either creature, though both the makara and the Central Asian dragon can to a large extent be considered semantically equivalent. Clubs terminating in dragon-like heads are featured in the seventh-century wall paintings at Sogdian Afrāsīyāb; see Albaum, 1975, fig. 13. On the makara in Indian iconography, see Vogel, 1929–30, pp. 133–47; Coomaraswamy, 1928–31, repr. Delhi, 1971, pp. 47–56, esp. pp. 47–9; Combaz, 1945, pp. 146–55; Bosch, 1960; Rosenfeld, 1967, pp. 179–83; Boardman, 1986, pp. 451–3.

13 Collèged, 1986, p. 21 and pl. XXa.
