PART TWO

THE DRAGON AND THE NATURAL WORLD
a. The dragon and the elements

Equally at home on land and sea, the dragon is associated with remote places and phenomena of the natural world. Its aquatic nature is profoundly ambivalent: as water dweller it can be both benevolent guardian and malevolent destroyer. In its threatening manifestation the creature is linked to adverse climatological phenomena such as thunder, rain, lightning or earthquakes.

The symbolic complexity of the dragon is thus expressed through its ability to cross boundaries within the natural environment it inhabits. The distinction between land- and sea-beast is often blurred. That the dragon or the large serpent can be both aquatic and terrestrial was noted in the fifth-century Armenian theological writings of Eznik of Koghb.1 According to the texts of the Ikhvān al-Ṣafāʾ (Brethren of Purity, established c. 373/983), the likeness, character and manner of the dragon is like the sea serpent.2 Both aquatic and terrestrial, the dragon, like its close cousin the amphibian serpent, is thus characterised by a wet-dry dichotomy as noted by the fourteenth-century scholar Kamāl al-Dīn al-Damīrī in his Hayāt al-hayawān al-kubrā.3 They dwell not only in springs, wells, rivers, lakes or sea water, but also in mountains, forests, caverns, caves, crevices and other subterranean enclosures, hence lending themselves to association with the underworld and chthonic forces. In tunnelling into the earth and resurfacing again above ground, they are associated with the fertilisation of the earth. Their absence and re-emergence according to the cycle of the seasons (during the dormant season it hibernated in the ground)4 may also be seen as a metamorphosis.

In the Rigvedic pantheon a primordial “serpent of the deep,” Ahi Budhnyà, is known;5 the Vedic āhi- meaning “serpent, snake,” while budhnyà- is an adjectival derivative of budhnàs “bottom, base.” The origin and abode of the “dragon of the deep” is the dark bottom of heavenly waters, he is “sitting in the depth of rivers” (budhne nadīnā/rājahsū sidān).6 In the Rigveda (dating from 1500–1000 BC) budhnàs is used of the root (in heaven) of the cosmological Nyagrodha tree (1.24.7),7 hence associating the serpent with a tree.8 In later Indian literature water is known as the abode of serpent demons.9 Apart from the aquatic monster Gandaraṇḍa who lives in Lake Vārukasha (originally perhaps denoting a specific location such as Lake Aral or the Caspian Sea), the Iranian Zoroastrian dragons were terrestrial creatures, “inhabitants of this world,” and the connection with water is less evident in Zoroastrian literature, with the exception of some references to river-dwelling dragons.10 Yet in almost all of the stories in Iranian literature, the dragon’s lair is close to either a source of water or the sea,11 for instance, the dragon-fighter Garshāsp in the Garshāsp-nāma kills a dragon which had emerged from the sea and made its abode on Mount Shekāwand, while Sām in the Shāh-nāma slays

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1 Elc alandoc, tr. and ed. Mariès and Mercier, 1959, pp. 593–4, ch. 133.
2 Tr. and ed. Dieterici, 1858, pp. 114–6.
4 This observation is recorded by al-Bīrūnī in his Kitāb al-Āthār al-Bāqiya (“The Chronology of Ancient Nations”) (tr. and ed. Sachau, 1876–8, p. 248) in which he states that during the cold season he himself found that:

...in Khwārizm, they gather in the interior of the earth and roll themselves up one round the other so that the greatest part of them is visible, and they look like a ball. In this condition they remain during the winter until this time.