a. The dragon and talismans

As has been seen in preceding chapters, the range of symbolic meanings associated with the figure of the dragon extends to include an important role in those branches of knowledge that encompass the more esoteric or magical sciences, in particular sympathetic and talismanic astrological magic and the preparation of verbal and material talismans. The dragon’s ability to eclipse the great luminari is allegorically treated in the quest for “mastery” of magic and the concomitant mystical illumination of life.

This is apparent in medieval Islamic literature such as Nizāmī’s *Iskandar-nāma*. The story recounts how the well-known sage and magician of the first century AD, Apollonius/Balīnūs, who in the Islamic Middle Ages became known as the great master of talismans (ṣāḥīb al-ṭīlāsmāt),1 overcomes a powerful priestess, Ā/z+dotbelowar Humā, who had transformed herself into a black dragon to guard the holy fire of the temple.2 However the wise Balīnūs not only breaks the resistance of the dragon-priestess but, interestingly, also marries her and manages in so doing to acquire knowledge of many of her magical practices. Nizāmī’s account makes clear that it was only his association with Ā/z+dotbelowar Humā that enabled Balīnūs to become a famous magician.3 It is notable that solely through union with a priestess who has the power to transform herself into a dragon can the great talisman-maker Balīnūs acquire knowledge of the magical sciences. In one of the oldest popular Persian prose narratives, the *Kitāb-i Samak ʿAyyār*, the magnanimous hero Samak is said to be taught two charms, one for dispelling serpents and another for calling them forth.4 Similarly, the pre-Islamic romance, *Wis u Rāmīn*, translated and versified in the mid-eleventh century, mentions snake charming by means of sorcery.5

The magical aspect of the dragon is allegorically alluded to by ʿAshādī Marwāzī (as indicated by his nīsba he was presumably a native of Marw), a court poet of sūltān Maḥmūd of Ghazna, who writes:

Don’t expect the world to be good to you
The snake is only [made] kind by the power of magic.6

An important magical science was talismanic astrology. On the premise that stars can predetermine the course of future events, and that those well-versed in the motions of the heavens can accordingly foretell the future, the position of Islamic religious doctrine was, as already mentioned, fundamentally antithetical to astrological science. However, while astrology contented itself with mere prediction, magic on the other hand concerned itself with harnessing the forces of the cosmos to achieve predetermined ends. Between these two categories, there was also the magic of theurgy (tīlāsf), the adjuration of divine powers, which concerned itself among other things with the making and the use of talismans, a process dictated by the observance of specific conditions in the making of objects designed to protect the bearer.7 Islam ultimately accepted the use of “magic” and theurgy under certain strict conditions. Hence binding supernatural beings to human purposes was allowed as long as the aim was not to bring harm (so-called “white” or “natural” magic,ʾilm al-sīmīyā), which to a certain extent validated the use of amulets and talismans. The astrological iconography of the twelve zodi-

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1 On Apollonius of Tyana, see Szegin, 1971, pp. 77–90.
acal signs and the seven planets fulfils a central function in talismanic design. The visual conceptualisation of the dragon thereby also plays a role, rendered as part of particular conjunctions which form the basis for astrological prediction.

The Qur’anic exhortation not to worship the Sun and Moon, two signs created by God, occurs once (sūra 41, 37). The codification of Rabbinic laws, Mishna, also specifically refers to images of the Sun, the Moon and, in addition, of the dragon, all of which must have been commonly represented in or before at least the fifth century AD (certainly the latest possible date of the composition of the Mishna), resulting in the Talmudic tract ‘Avodah Zarah (“Mishna on Idolatry” 3, 3) which contains the following prescription:

Whenever a vessel is found on which the picture of the sun, or of the moon, or of a dragon (draqōn) is shown, it must be thrown into the salt sea.

Rabbi Judah explains with regard to the imagery of the dragon (draqōn) that it is “anything that has fringes between the joints ... of the neck.”

Commenting on this prohibition of the use of idolatrous images of the luminaries and the dragon in Moreh Nebukhim (“The Guide for the Perplexed”) the great twelfth-century Jewish theologian Abū ’Imrān Mūsā ibn ’Ubaid Allāh ibn Maymūn/Maimonides (1135–1204) says:

When the picture of the sun or the moon is mentioned, this does not mean that the picture of the sun is represented by a round disk, or that of the moon by a bow, but it refers to those figures which are called telesmata, and which are ascribed to the stars by the men who made them. Thus, for instance, they used to represent Saturn like a black old man, Venus like a gold-adorned fair young girl, the sun as a crowned king sitting on a chariot, and likewise they ascribe many figures to all of the constellations and stars though there is no agreement on it among them ... But the picture of the dragon [draqōn] which is mentioned in this Mishna is a scaled and finned figure like that of a fish. This figure was highly renowned with them because they attribute it to a certain part of the celestial sphere. And one of them who used to make such pictures told me that this one picture represents the dragon in the sphere of the moon [ṟḻi] – called in Arabic “al-Djawzahar” – and that it is made after a certain model and in a certain hour. As I have never seen such a picture I asked him in what book I might find it mentioned. Whereupon he answered me that his teacher himself had devised that picture and confided it to him as a secret, together with many other things.

It is interesting that Maimonides thereby equates the draqōn with the dragon in the sphere of the Moon (ṟḻi), the meaning of the latter however remaining unclear. The commentary thus shows, as Hartner put it:

...that still in the twelfth century the astrological doctrines of the Djawzahar had by no means become a generally known matter but used to be treated as a secret by the initiated, in such a way that even a highly erudite scholar like Maimonides could make only a rather vague statement about it.

It reveals, moreover, the extent to which the fabrication of telesmata, or talismans, was shrouded in secrecy. It is also associated with the fact that, like astrology, the practice of magic (sihr) was frowned upon by the religious establishment.

As objects which were made to protect their owner and to ward off evil, the action of talismans is based on the concept of sympathetic magic, which operates through the connectedness and interdependence of all phenomena through their qualities and attributes. Magic was defined by the Khurasanian theologian and religious reformer, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (450/1058–05/1111), as “based on a combined knowledge of the properties of certain terrestrial elements and of propitious astral risings.”

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9 Hartner, 1938, pp. 149–50. It is of note that the serpent-dragon image is to be cast into the salt sea, that is the Dead Sea, presumably meant as symbol of death. A baraita (extra-canonical Mishna) similarly maintains that “all planets except the sun and moon are ‘permissible’ as are all faces except the human face and all figures except the dragon,” as cited in Epstein, 1997, p. 142, n. 38. For a detailed discussion of rabbinic texts on the theme of the dragon and idolatry, see Schlüter, 1982, pp. 62–129.
11 Cited after the English translation by Hartner, 1938, p. 150. For a German translation, see Chwolsohn, 1856, vol. 2, pp. 484–5; Schlüter, 1982, p. 130.
12 Hartner, 1938, p. 150. See however Schlüter’s (1982, pp. 141–1) suggestion that Maimonides, who in spite of being well-versed in astrology was, as is generally known, ill-disposed towards the science, may thus intentionally have equated the Moon ṟḻi with the draqōn (which the Mishna so expressly proscribed) partly in order to take distance from his contemporaries who placed such great importance on the Moon ṟḻi.