

The Dragon and the Pearl

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TO WESTERNERS the most widely known image of Chinese iconography is the dragon. Far from being the virgin-devouring, treasure-guarding monster of European medieval romances, the Chinese dragon is a benevolent creature. As the bringer of life-sustaining rain, he is usually shown cavorting among clouds and playing with a pearl (Figure 1). This pearl in most representations is shown issuing flamelike swirls, which indicate some sort of luminescence.

Because of this setting in the heavens, Western art historians, well aware of cosmological symbolism in Chinese art and philosophy, generally interpret this “flaming” pearl as the representation of a celestial luminary, either the sun or the moon. The dragon’s play is seen as an attempt to swallow the pearl, in order to bring on a solar or lunar eclipse. In Chinese literature the pearl does not seem to be referred to as one of the heavenly bodies but, more generally, as an object of great value that enhances the benign dragon who treasures it.¹

It is interesting that, although the image of the dragon in China goes back to Neolithic times, and a dragon confronting a *pi*-disk, the ancient symbol of the heavens, may occasionally be found during the Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 9),² the combination of dragon and pearl seems to appear only at the beginning of the T’ang period. Under the T’ang dynasty (618–907), “Western,” i.e., Central Asian, influence made its mark on China and, like other innovations in Chinese art, the dragon with the pearl as a motif might have originated in Central Asia.³

Among the swords found in the imperial tomb Pei-Chueu-Shan near Lo-Yang, Honan Province, China, is one whose pommel is composed of two confronting dragons with a flaming pearl between them; this might be one of the earliest surviving examples of the motif (Figure 2). The sword, which is thought to date from about A.D. 600, was probably

fashioned by Chinese craftsmen, but its ring-pommel and P-shaped scabbard mounts are derived directly from sword types that were developed by the nomads of the Eurasian steppes and go back to the Scythian *akinakes*.⁴

In searching for a particular motif, pieces of the puzzle may be found in the most unexpected places. Thus, one of the more striking designs on shields of the Late Roman army in the first half of the fifth century is a dragon curling around the boss of the shield (Figure 3). These shield designs are preserved in the muster roll of Late Roman military and civilian authorities, *Notitia dignitatum*, which survives in three fifteenth- and sixteenth-century copies of an earlier, probably tenth-century, copy of the original, datable to A.D. 428. There are nine dragon devices among the 283 shields illustrated: four of them are associated with a golden or silver ball, one with a crescent, and one with a lozenge; the other three have their dragons arranged around the shield boss in a way that suggests the boss itself takes the place of the “pearl.” The units bearing the dragon-and-pearl device were the *Taifali* and *Citrati iuniores* (Occidentalis VI, 16, 35). The *Marcomanni* (Oc. VI, 22) bore a half moon, and the *Honoriani iuniores* (Oc. VI, 36) a lozenge-shaped “diamond.” The *Mauri alites* (Oc. VI, 15) bore two dragons facing one another over the shield boss. All these units were cavalry troops. Among infantry regiments the *Menapi seniores* (Oc. V, 75) bore a golden dragon and the *Cortoriacenses* (Oc. V, 96) a silver one bent around a shield boss in matching color. Two more shields with the dragon-and-pearl charge are in the frontispieces of the chapters about *Fabricae*, illustrating products of these state factories of military equipment.⁵

The tubular shape of the bodies of these dragons on the cavalry shields makes it likely that they represent *dracones*—the wind-sock battle standards with dragon heads of metal and billowing bodies of fabric—introduced to the West by Eastern steppe nomads, such as the Sarmatians (Figure 4). The *Taifali*

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Metropolitan Museum Journal 26

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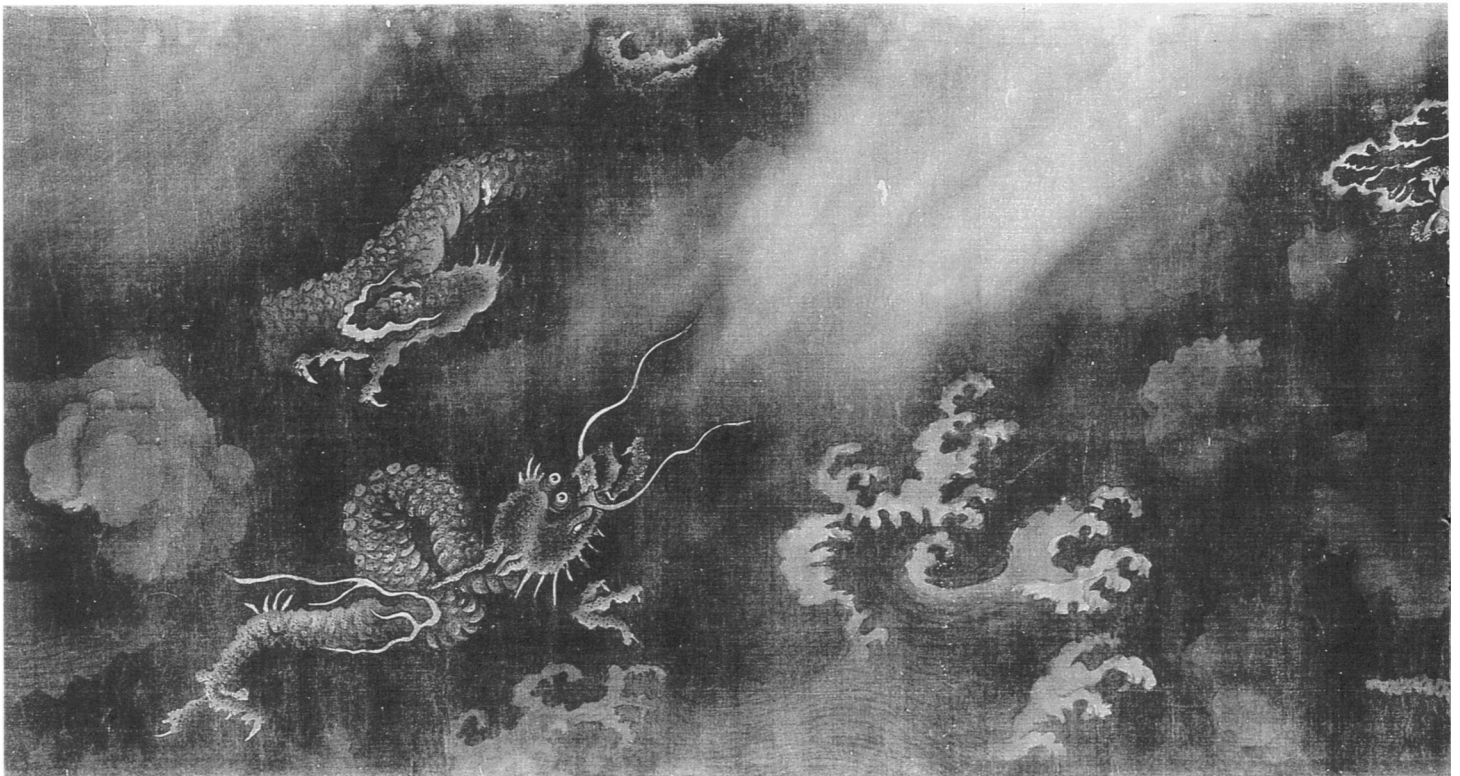


Figure 1. Chang Yu-ts'ai (died 1316), "Beneficent Rain," handscroll, ink on silk. Chinese, Yüan Dynasty (1279–1368). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1985, 1985.227.2

and Marcomanni were Germanic tribes that drifted into what is now the Ukraine and Hungary, where they adopted many features of the equestrian culture of their nomad neighbors, including the *draco* standard. The Taifali mercenaries, incidentally, were stationed in Britain,⁶ and the Menapii were a Celtic tribe from an area between the Meuse and Scheldt rivers that by the fourth century had important garrisons of Sarmatian auxiliaries.⁷

The *draco* standards, among the trophies taken from the Dacians and their Sarmatian allies in the Dacian Wars (A.D. 101–106) and represented in the reliefs at the base of Trajan's Column, have no accompanying pearls, and neither have those in the Victoria panoply of the Column of Marcus Aurelius with trophies captured in the Marcomanni Wars (A.D. 167–180). This may have been because of the technical difficulty of affixing a free-floating pearl to such a standard,⁸ but this motif must have been present as an underlying idea, as indicated by the dragon-and-pearl shield designs. There is in the

State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, a silver *draco* head that was found in west Siberia and is probably of Sarmatian origin. It closely resembles the carved *dracos* on the Roman reliefs mentioned above. It has a semi-globular protuberance on its brow that gives the impression of a cabochon jewel and might be a prototype of the pearl (Figure 5).⁹ A much later—seventh to eighth century—representation from Eastern Turkestan (Figure 6) shows a *draco* mounted on a lance with a globular object, the pearl, on top of the dragon's head.¹⁰

The most famous dragon standard in European lore is that of King Arthur, who inherited it from his father, Uther Pendragon. Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (completed about 1136) tells of its origin: At the death of King Aurelius Ambrosius, Uther's brother, a star "of great magnitude and brilliance" appeared "with a single beam shining from it. At the end of this beam was a ball of fire, spread out in the shape of a dragon." On Uther's succession to the kingship, he

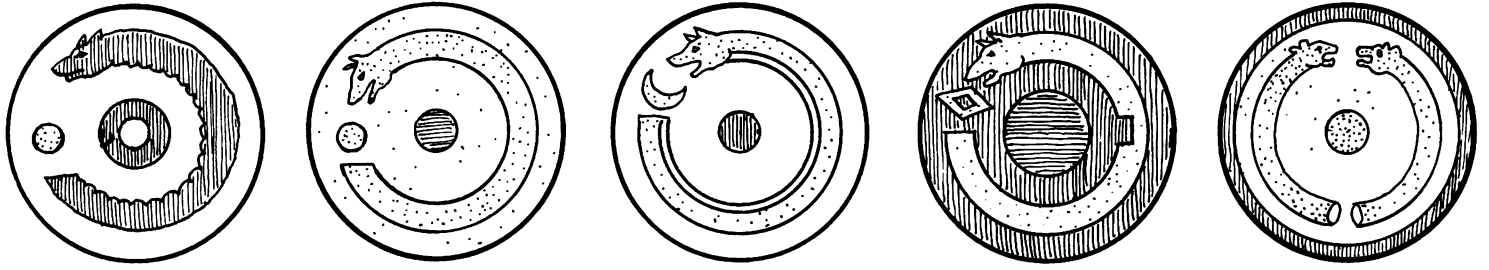


ordered “two Dragons to be fashioned in gold, in the likeness of the one he had seen in the ray which shone from the star.” One he presented to the cathedral of Winchester, the other he carried as his battle standard, “and from this moment onwards he was called Utherpendragon, which in the British language means ‘a dragon’s head.’”¹¹ The parallel of the brilliant star and the dragon in the sky to the Chinese dragon cavorting in the clouds with the flaming pearl is quite striking.

In the Nine Heroes Tapestries at The Cloisters, King Arthur does not display his dragon standard. Instead, he carries a lance pennon charged with the three crowns, which appear as his “official” coat of arms as of the thirteenth century.¹² However, the first of the Three Hebrew Heroes, Joshua, whose shield device is a winged black dragon on a silver field, has his footrest covered with a rich fabric patterned with dragons and flaming pearls (Figure 7). In this case these pearls are rendered to look more like suns—clearly a reference to the biblical story of



Figure 2. Sword, iron with silver and gilt bronze mountings; ring-pommel in shape of two dragons facing a (now lost) flaming pearl. Chinese, ca. A.D. 600. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Clarence H. Mackay, 1930, 30.65.2



Joshua commanding the sun to stand still at the Battle of Gibeon in order to finish the slaughter of the Amorites (Joshua 10:12).

In biblical contexts it is also tempting to think of the apocryphal story of the Dragon of Babel swallowing the pill Daniel fed him (Apocrypha: Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon of Babel, 23–27) and of the Dragon of the Apocalypse pursuing the woman robed with the sun and beneath her feet the moon (Revelations 12:1–6, 13–14).

A sublimation of the dragon-and-pearl motif similar to the episode of the Apocalyptic Dragon is to be found in the Christian legend of St. Margaret, who was swallowed by a dragon but by the strength of her faith overcame and killed the monster, who burst its belly (like Daniel's Dragon of Babel) and let her emerge unscathed. Here the European perception of the dragon as feeding on virgins is blended with the Eastern motif of the pearl pursued by the dragon. The connecting link and clue lies in the saint's name, *margarita*, Latin for "pearl" (Figures 8, 9).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For kind and generous assistance I would like to express my warmest thanks to my friends and colleagues at the Museum—Joan Mertens, Charles T. Little, and James Watt—to Gunnar Freibergs, Los Angeles Valley College; Dennis Sinor, Indiana University; and Burchard Brentjes, Berlin.



Figure 4. Sarmatian *draco*; detail from a relief at the base of Trajan's Column (A.D. 113–117)

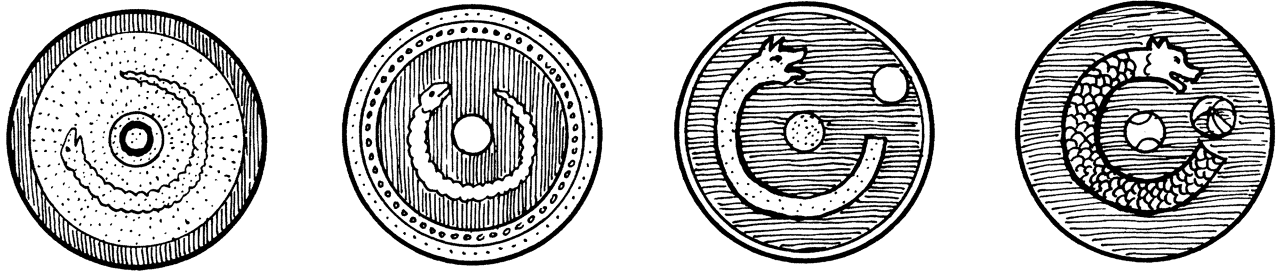


Figure 3. Shield designs in *Notitia dignitatum*. Late Roman, first half of 5th century A.D. Left to right: *Taifali*, *Citrati iuniores*, *Marcomanni*, *Honoriani iuniores*, *Mauri alites*, *Menapi seniores*, *Cortoriacenses*, two unidentified shields from *Fabricae* (drawing after Berger)

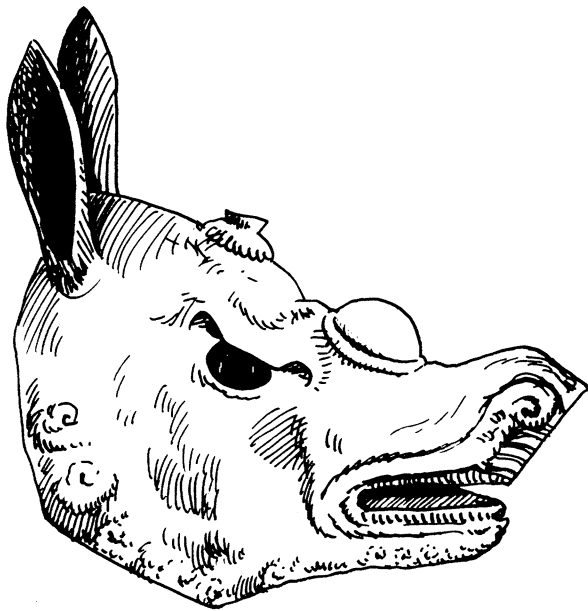


Figure 5. *Draco* head, found in west Siberia. Silver. State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad (drawing after Esin)

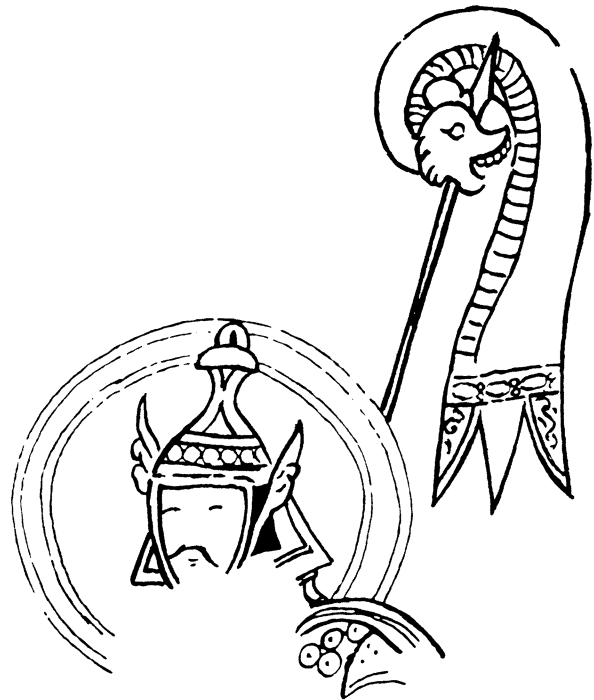


Figure 6. *Draco* standard; detail of a mural at Qyzil, Eastern Turkestan, 7th to 8th century (drawing after Brentjes)



Figure 7. Joshua, the first of the Hebrew Heroes; detail from the Nine Heroes Tapestries. French, late 14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1947, 47.101.1



Figure 8. Silver diptych, St. Margaret and St. Catherine of Alexandria. English, 14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.2097a



Figure 9. Workshop of Michael Pacher (active 1462/63–died 1498), *St. Margaret*. Pine wood, with traces of polychromy. Austrian, South Tyrol, Bruneck, ca. 1470–80. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1963, 63.13.2

NOTES

1. Fong Chow, "Symbolism in Chinese Porcelain," *MMAB* n.s. 21 (1962) pp. 12–24, ill.; Jean Mailey, "Ancestors and Tomb Robes," *MMAB* n.s. 32 (1963) pp. 101–115, illus. For additional information on this problem and advice in the choice of illustrations, I thank James Watt, Brooke Russell Astor Senior Curator of Asian Art.
2. For the specific example of the Han dragon relief with the *pi*-disk I am indebted to Gunnar Freibergs, Los Angeles Valley College, who brought it to my attention in his 1984 paper "T'ai-chi on the Tiber: Some East Asian Cosmological Symbols in a Late Roman Document," fig. 24, after Ch'eng T'ē-K'un, *Archaeological Studies in Szechuan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) pl. 72.3. The paper was read on May 11, 1984, at the annual conference of the Southern California Academy of Sciences, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
3. Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (London, 1956; rev. ed. 1978) pp. 142ff.
4. Stephen V. Grancsay, "Two Chinese swords dating about 600 A.D.," *MMAB* 25 (1930–31) p. 194, figs. 1, 3. Helmut Nickel, "About the Sword of the Huns and the 'Urepos' of the Steppes," *MMJ* 7 (1973) pp. 134–135, fig. 11.
5. Otto Seeck, *Notitia Dignitatum* (Berlin, 1876). Pamela C. Berger, *The Insignia of the Notitia Dignitatum* (New York / London, 1981). G. Freibergs, "T'ai-chi," n. 1. The complete title of the work is *Notitia dignitatum omnium, tam civilium quam militarium*. It is preserved in three 15th- and 16th-century copies (Munich / Paris / Oxford), after the lost 10th-century copy, *Codex Spirensis*, which probably was done after the original. The connection with the Far East of some of these Late Roman shield designs is made quite obvious by the fact that two of them, *Armigeri* (Oc. V, 78) and *Mauriosismiaci* (Oc. V, 118), are unquestionably the East Asian yin-yang diagram.
6. Helmut Nickel, "Wer waren König Artus' Ritter?" *Waffen- und Kostümkunde I* (1975) p. 10, fig. 12.
7. Deborah Schorsch, "The Vermand Treasure: A Testimony to the Presence of the Sarmatians in the Western Roman Empire," *MMJ* 21 (1986) pp. 17–40.
8. In Chinese New Year's celebrations this problem is solved by carrying a globular lampion in front of the dragon borne in procession.
9. Emel Esin, "Tös and Moncuk: Notes on Turkish Flag-Pole Finials," *Central Asiatic Journal* 26, no. 1 (1972) pp. 15–46, pl. IVa, b. G. Freibergs, "T'ai-chi," fig. 20.
10. Albert von Le Coq, *Bilderatlas zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Mittelasiens*, Berlin, 1925, fig. 117. Burchard Brentjes, "Zur Westtrift ost- und zentralasiatischer Motive in skythischer Zeit," *Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients 5: Protokollband der XII. Tagung der Permanent International Altaistic Conference 1969* (Berlin, 1974) pp. 153–159, fig. 12.
11. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Lewis Thorpe, trans. (New York, 1966) pp. viii.14 – viii.17.
12. James J. Rorimer and Margaret B. Freeman, *The Nine Heroes Tapestries at The Cloisters* (New York, 1953).