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Study and Analysis of Animal Motifs in Sassanian Art

Setareh Entezar Shabestari^{1,*}, Mohammadreza Firoozhei²

¹ Department of Painting, Tehran Central Branch, Azad University, Tehran, Iran; Setarehentezar@gmail.com.

² Department of Painting, Tehran Azad University, Center, Tehran, Iran; Moh.reza@ctb.iau.ir.

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Abstract

The art of the Sasanian era in Iran contains numerous examples of animals, mythical creatures, various elements of nature, and symbolic motifs. This art represents a millennia-long artistic process with open doors to all foreign cultures. According to the tradition of the land that nurtured it, it has been transformed and adapted over time. It is an art whose radiant brilliance extends to the world's furthest corners through architecture, reliefs, and small, functional objects. Sasanian art is adorned with various plant and animal motifs imbued with symbolic meanings and profound concepts, depicted on palace walls, silver vessels, engraved stone seals, and silk fabrics. The repetition of these visual elements was primarily connected to political purposes and religious propagation. They bear an explicit or sometimes ambiguous expression rooted in the specific beliefs of that era. This research seeks to answer the question: which fundamental beliefs of the Sasanian period are reflected in these symbolic and mythical motifs? Evidence indicates that many of the ideas and beliefs manifest in the art of this period were drawn from the millennia-old heritage of the Iranian people. The present research has been conducted using the historical method. Information has been collected through available library resources and the visual study of examples of artistic works housed in domestic and international collections. The research focuses on the motifs used in Sasanian art, specifically examining those influenced by the artistic traditions of ancient Iran. The methodology employed in this study is descriptive-analytical and historical, based on historical documents and evidence.

Keywords: Iconography, Sassanids, Animal motifs, Symbolism, Sassanian art.

1 | Introduction

The study and investigation of Iranian art across different periods hold special importance. Beyond unveiling these artworks' obscure and hidden mysteries, such research can familiarize us with their creators' capabilities and creativity. Additionally, examining the continuity and persistence of this art in subsequent eras allows us to appreciate its values and recognize it as a source of diverse forms and expressions, which continues to inspire contemporary art. The necessity of this research lies in its focus on understanding the mythical motifs of the Sasanian period. By analyzing the visual aspects of these motifs, we gain insight into their underlying

 Corresponding Author: Setarehentezar@gmail.com



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beliefs, rituals, and mythological backgrounds. One of the main objectives of this research is to reinterpret and gain a deeper understanding of the decorative and conceptual motifs in Sasanian art. This is because Sasanian art serves as one of the most significant visual sources for subsequent artistic traditions, especially Islamic art. Understanding the meanings and functions of these motifs can reveal both the profound overt and hidden meanings of this art and its mythological roots.

2 | Research Background

Regarding previous studies in this field, it should be noted that most of the research conducted has been published in books and articles. Some books and articles have explored various arts, while others have focused on specific animals. However, a comprehensive and systematic study on the current topic has not yet been conducted.

In this dissertation, animal motifs are categorized into four groups: quadrupeds, birds, aquatic animals, and hybrid/mythical creatures. Alongside introducing each animal motif, the associated symbolism is also examined. It is worth mentioning that the study of certain symbols requires a specific type of design, which is why the motif and symbolism of each animal are analyzed simultaneously.

3 | Relevant Sources

Elham Vosough Babaei and Reza Mehrazin have investigated the theme of hunting during the Sasanian era in their paper [1]. Alireza Taheri has analyzed how animal and plant designs in Sasanian art have influenced Islamic and Romanesque art in France [2]. Moreover, Hossein Mehrpooya, Zahra Deghani, and Hamid Alinejad have looked into how animal motifs found in Sasanian textiles have affected the patterns in Central Asian fabrics [3].

4 | Sasanian Empire

The Sasanian Empire (220–609 CE) was the last great Iranian dynasty before Islam, lasting over four centuries. This glorious, powerful, and historically significant reign left a profound mark with its outstanding cultural manifestations and has remained vividly remembered. The Sasanian period was an era of cultural dynamism, political progress, and economic revival in Iran. Like the Achaemenids a thousand years earlier, the Sasanians expanded their rule over a vast territory, stretching from the Caucasus to India, encompassing Central and Western Asia. Five and a half centuries after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire, the Persians once again united all Iranian peoples under their power. They established a new east and west empire rivaling the Roman Empire. Although the Sasanian civilization followed the Parthian civilization, it was its complement [4].

The Sasanian civilization reached unparalleled grandeur during its time, significantly influencing the culture and civilization of other nations, including Rome, India, China, Western Europe, and Africa. The Sasanians were prominent in shaping Asian and European art during the medieval period. The valuable elements of Sasanian art and civilization were transmitted to the Islamic world, contributing to Islamic civilization's splendor and growing richness. For the first time since the Achaemenids, the Sasanian kings unified the country of Iran (referred to in Middle Persian inscriptions as Ayranshtry), ending the era of fragmented rule by regional kingdoms and bringing the nation under the authority of a single imperial government.

Ardashir i (ardashir babakan) established this unified and powerful monarchy. the powerful sasanian kings expanded persian dominance from the persian gulf to the Aral sea and from the Mediterranean coasts of Syria to Afghanistan, covering thousands of kilometers. The eastern borders of Sasanian Iran extended to the Indus Valley and Peshawar and, at times, reached Kashgar in the northeast. To the northwest, the borders stretched to the Caucasus Mountains and Derbent on the Caspian Sea coast, sometimes even reaching the Black Sea. In the west, the Euphrates River marked the boundary with the Roman Empire, although, at times, this border extended significantly beyond the Euphrates.

The visual art of Iran during the Sasanian period can be divided into two main branches: the western branch, which had a direct connection with Byzantine (Eastern Roman) art and influenced and was influenced by it; the other is the artistic tradition of Iran's eastern regions, which had been prevalent in this area since ancient times [5].

The artists of the Sasanian era, following the tradition of their predecessors, preferred abstraction and symbolism over realism. Many motifs used in their art (such as plant forms, rams facing a tree, pregnant cows, lions and bulls, falcons attacking animals, etc.) originated in ancient Western Asian art. However, some elements, such as vine motifs, grape-picking scenes, and representations of victorious figures, were newly adopted from Roman sources. Towards the end of the Sasanian period, the influence of India and Central Asia grew. These regions may have been a source for depicting narrative scenes and everyday life in some later Sasanian artworks. It is also likely that many Greek-Roman designs were transmitted through Eastern sources and found their way to the Sasanians [6].

During this period, art reached its peak of flourishing in various forms and branches, supported by the rich heritage of ancient Iran, the remarkable innovations of Sasanian artists, and influences from both Eastern and Western art. For over 400 years of Sasanian rule, the art of this era was unified, purposeful, and systematic, always aiming for further refinement and development. The art of the Sasanian era had a significant influence on the art of other countries and Iranian art after the advent of Islam. The world owes much to it.

Just as this art, with its grandeur and magnificence, spread across other regions and played a key role in global art, it also drew inspiration from the art of different countries. What is particularly important is that the independent identity of Sasanian art was always preserved, and a clear coherence and unity can be observed in all works from this period.

5 | The Motifs of the Sasanian Period

The rich and magnificent art of the Sasanians encompasses all aspects of human life and various elements of nature. The motifs used in Sasanian art are derived from the physical and symbolic characteristics of humans, animals, and plants. The religious beliefs and worldview of the Iranians of that time inspired the artists in various fields of art during this era. In essence, art had a close connection with human beliefs, and artists consistently sought to depict the prevailing ideas of their time. Moreover, the myths and legends that formed the foundation of ancient human societies are frequently found in the art of this period. For this reason, many of the artistic motifs from this era carry symbolic meanings and profound significance.

The motifs used in various branches of Sasanian art include Human, Animal, and Plant motifs.

6 | Animal Motifs

Animal motifs from the Sasanian period are numerous and highly diverse. Throughout different eras, depictions of animals served as symbols of nature, human traits, divinity, and more in the art of the time. Artists continuously sought to capture the beauty of nature and its elements in their creations. From an aesthetic perspective, these motifs carry a wide range of meanings and hold significant places in the visual and religious domains, reflecting beliefs in the qualities and attributes of animals.

The primary reason for incorporating various animals in Sasanian motifs was to convey specific messages and express their mythical and symbolic functions. With great care and attention to detail, these animals' mythological and symbolic characteristics were represented, and these images reflect the religious views of the Sasanians and the mythological foundations of Iranian beliefs.

In depicting these animals, their ferocity and wildness are emphasized as if to convey their otherworldly nature. The imaginative, composite, and mythical forms of animals in many of the motifs reflect society's desire to recreate legends and depict supernatural creatures. The creation of animal imagery during this period displayed numerous innovations. Sometimes, an animal is described by combining the forms of several animals or birds or by merging animal and plant motifs. The artists succeeded in creating fantastical or

composite animals. A notable point is that most animal depictions are shown in profile. Sasanian animal motifs can be divided into four categories: composite, quadrupeds, birds, and aquatic creatures. All of these motifs carry specific meanings, with most of them having symbolic and mythological connotations. Some of the mythical and composite animals in Sasanian motifs include Pregnant horses, simurghs (a mythical bird), and Gyphons. Some quadrupeds featured in Sasanian motifs include horses, tigers, leopards, panthers, lions, rabbits, foxes, dogs, camels, bulls, wild boars, wolves, and deer. Some birds depicted include ducks, falcons, herons, cranes, owls, eagles, peacocks, geese, partridges, doves, and swans. Some aquatic creatures depicted include Fish and waterfowl, such as ducks, herons, geese, and swans.

In the creation of animal imagery in ancient Iran, two main approaches existed:

- I. Realistic representation of animals.
- II. An abstract and imaginative depiction.

In abstract depiction, artists utilized mythical and legendary animals' functions and symbolic meanings. They often combined various animal forms or mixed animals with plant motifs, creating new and surreal compositions. This allowed for expressing deeper meanings and blending different symbolic elements to craft unique, imaginative scenes.

Among the quadruped motifs, animals such as the horse, lion, bull, ram, and wild boar are more commonly depicted than others. These animals, in addition to their mythological meanings, were symbols of royal power and strength, playing a crucial role in the lives of the nobility. Kings favored lions, bulls, rams, and wild boars, and they were abundantly found in the Iranian lands. Horses also symbolized the court's life and were associated with the elite.

The eagle (or falcon) is more prominent among the birds than other species. This bird symbolized power and was associated with sky gods. It also played a central role in royal hunting. The partridge and peacock motifs, considered heavenly birds in Sasanian symbolism, were also common, as these birds were beautiful and represented significant symbolic values. Here, we will examine a few examples.

Horse

The horse is a symbol of earthly power. In mythological and tribal beliefs, the horse represents the messengers of the gods, clouds, the shining light of the sun, the symbol of a noble family, and readiness for service in both times of war and peace [7]. In Zoroastrian zoology, the horse is classified among the hoofed animals or odd-toed ungulates and is considered part of the herbivorous family. The horse appears frequently in art, especially in battle poetry, and is highly revered. In Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh," several heroic horses, such as Rakhsh, Shabdeez, Shebrang, Behzad, and Golgoon, are named. In Iranian art, the depiction of horses, similar to cows, is widespread. From the earliest Iranian civilizations, horses were viewed as divine and celestial. In the Avesta, the horse is linked to the "sun" and the god "Yim Nabat," and horse motifs are associated with the sun. Additionally, the horse represents the third form of the embodiment of the god Tishtriya (Bahrām), which appears as a beautiful horse adorned with golden armor [8]. In mythological and tribal beliefs, the horse symbolizes the messengers of the gods, clouds, rays of light, noble family, and readiness for service in both times of war and peace [9].

Goat

The goat sometimes symbolizes agility, and at other times, it represents defiance and obstinacy. It is a symbol of life force, rebellious energy, and the guardian of the tree of life, making it a popular subject for artists [10]. The depictions of goats, whether simple or pregnant, peaked in the art of the bronze artisans of Lorestan and during the Achaemenid period, showcasing various forms. In desert-dwelling societies of Iran, the goat was considered a symbol of life force and energy, the guardian of the tree of life, and a representation of the Sumerian god Gilgamesh, whose branches were associated with power and strength. During the Sassanian period, the image of the goat appeared in various artistic works [11]. Though little has been discussed about

the zoology of this animal, the representation of a male war goat was likely more common. This depiction was probably due to its economic importance, especially its appearance on seals [12].

Dog

The image of the dog appears sporadically in Sassanian art. In its earliest form, the dog was always a companion to humans and was considered one of the first creatures created by Ahura Mazda. Heavenly dogs were associated with the mythology of the divine realm. According to the Bundahishn, dogs were created in ten categories, four of which are house dogs, herd dogs, hunting dogs, and water dogs. The Bundahishn also categorizes foxes, weasels, and hedgehogs as types of dogs. In Zoroastrianism, dogs are considered equal to humans, and the characteristics and rulings associated with dogs mirror those attributed to humans. The dog is seen as a hybrid creature, partly animal and partly human, and in the Gathas (the sacred hymns of Zoroastrianism), it is said that the dog is a reflection of humanity. For this reason, it was named "dog." The shared relationship between humans and dogs is seen in the etymology of the word "dog" (k-se, meaning one-third of man). Ancient Iranians believed that "the dog, along with the rooster, helps spirits and wizards to move away from the earth at night, aiding the divine messengers. The dog is an enemy of the demon and, by barking, it dispels pain, suffering, and disobedience".

Lion

In the art and culture of many nations, the lion has been recognized as a symbol of fire, piety, the sun's rays, victory, strength, life force, fierceness, sovereignty, courage, wisdom, pride, divine power, mental strength, care, and protection [7]. In Assyrian mythology, the image of the pregnant cow symbolizes the moon and the earth, while the lion represents the sun [13]. The lion as a symbol of power has been used since prehistorical times and continues to be employed throughout history to depict the strength and bravery of kings. As a result, the depiction of lion hunting became an emblem of the power and courage of kings, and we observe this representation in the art of this period. The combination of the lion and serpent recalls the imagery of a lion and serpent accompanying a warrior on horseback in several bas-reliefs. This imagery often portrays the lion hunting [14]. The scene of a lion attacking a bull should not be interpreted merely as a naturalistic image. It also represents symbolic associations with the sun and the moon. In Zoroastrianism, like the wolf, the lion is also considered one of the creatures of Angra Mainyu (the evil spirit) and condemned. However, this characteristic does not contradict the royal and heroic qualities of the lion. Hunting, especially lion hunting, was a significant royal activity for many Iranian kings, notably the Sassanian kings. During this period, hunting and fighting lions became an important emblem of royal power. Therefore, using the lion's image in Sassanian art was widespread and highly symbolic.

Cow

In Iranian mythology, the cow symbolizes rain, storms, strength, wealth, fertility, and creation [15]. In a more negative sense, it represents indifference, carelessness, foolishness, and arrogance. Its positive interpretation signifies fertility, stability, wealth, and abundance. According to the creation myth, the first terrestrial animal, "the single-cow creation," was white and shone like the moon [15]. In Mithraism, the cow is symbolized as the earth, and it is slaughtered by Mithras, the sun deity, in the summer, which causes plants to grow in abundance. The cow has two key traits: the bull (male cow), symbolizing masculine origin and solar generative forces, is considered sacred to the sky gods. It is a symbol of fertility, male protective power, and sovereignty.

Furthermore, it represents the earth and the moist forces of nature. In ancient Iranian culture, the cow was considered the most important of the quadrupeds. The bull, which was responsible for plowing and agricultural work, was crucial to the agricultural life of that time [16]. The frequent depiction of the cow in Sassanian art, especially the bull (mountain bull), highlights its importance in central Iran's economy, mythology, and rituals. Bulls played a role in agriculture alongside humans. Urine from cows was used in purification rituals, and there was particular attention in the Avesta to the prosperity and health of herds. Proper behavior and ritual offerings were believed to bring divine rewards, and the god Bahman (Good

Thought) would bring happiness to those performing the correct rituals. In Mithraism, the god Mithras slays the bull, and the slaughter of the bull is often interpreted as a creative act. The blood and life force of the cow are considered the origin of life, and life flourishes from the bull's sacrifice (the dying and reborn cycle). The cow is also considered the first animal created by Ahura Mazda. In ancient texts like the Bundahishn, Angra Mainyu (the evil spirit) thoroughly explains the bull's death and how plants and the first animals emerged from its sacrifice. The cow, often depicted alongside the moon, represents a link between the bull and the moon. The wild mountain cow, an element in the royal hunting scenes, also appears in Sassanian art. The cow is depicted with additional symbolism and given a cosmic and celestial dimension.

Birds

In Zoroastrianism, birds are considered the first family of animals. According to the Bundahishn, the hawk and raven are the most intelligent. Like all of Ahura Mazda's creations, the actions of birds are in opposition to demons and the evil ones created by Angra Mainyu (the evil spirit). According to the Bundahishn, there are 110 species of birds categorized into eight groups. Many Sassanian textiles feature bird motifs, and birds are depicted as aesthetically beautiful in the sacred texts. The birds are often enclosed in circular frames [17]. Some of the birds featured in Sassanian motifs include duck, falcon, cormorant, crane, owl, rooster, hawk, peacock, eagle, goose, partridge, pigeon, raven, and duck.

7 | Aquatic Creatures

In Iranian beliefs, any bird associated with water is considered a symbol of Anahita or Nahid [18]. Anahita, the goddess of waters, is revered by all the deities, as she brings prosperity and fertility to the earth and its creatures [19]. Sassanian art popularly depicts aquatic birds such as ducks, cormorants, geese, and wild ducks. Bird imagery is quite frequent among animal motifs in this period.

The fish symbolizes water, rain, freshness, and vitality. It also embodies the sea and signifies fertility. In a general sense, the fish motif has a symbolic presence, and how its body is depicted evokes the movement of a creature in water. The fish motif is not as commonly used, but it does appear in Sassanian rock carvings at Taq-e Bostan and on Sassanian seals, where the fish is often depicted with two pelvic fins and two dorsal fins.

8 | Conclusion

The Sassanian Empire (220 to 609 AD) was the last great Iranian dynasty before Islam, lasting over four centuries. The Sassanids were the first to unify Iran after the Achaemenids. The capital of this dynasty was the city of Ctesiphon, near Baghdad. The Sassanian government was hierarchical, with a society structured into four main classes, the clergy (mobads), warriors, scribes, and artisans. After the fall of the Parthians, the Sassanids made Zoroastrianism the state religion of Iran and adopted a policy of integrating religion and governance. During this period, alongside Zoroastrianism, various other religions thrived, with followers of different beliefs often living peacefully or sometimes in tension with the central government. Trade growth also marked the Sassanian era. Iran, strategically positioned as a gateway to the Silk Road, connected the West to China and the Far East. This resulted in significant imports and exports, cultural exchange, and mixing ethnicities and political collaborations. The glorious art of the Sassanian period flourished in various forms. It reflected a blend of inherited traditions, religious beliefs, myths, and cultural exchanges. This art was inspired by nature and grounded in religious views, appearing in diverse artistic fields. Sassanian art was a continuation of ancient Iranian art and incorporated elements from other cultures, influencing art worldwide.

The motifs used in Sassanian art were based on the physical and symbolic representations of humans, animals, and plants. The ancient Iranians' religious beliefs and unique worldviews were significant sources of inspiration for artists during this period. Additionally, the myths and legends that formed the foundation of ancient Iranian society are prominently featured in this era's art. As such, many of the artistic motifs of the Sassanian period were symbolic, drawing heavily from religious and mythological themes. These motifs included human, animal, and plant representations. The animal motifs of the Sassanian period are numerous

and diverse. Animal imagery during this time served as symbols of nature, social status, and divine power, among other things, in an artistic context. Artists consistently sought to incorporate the beauty of nature and its elements into their creative works. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these motifs held extensive meanings and found special significance in elites' and ordinary people's religious and cultural beliefs. The main reason for the creation of various animal motifs in Sassanian art was to convey specific messages and represent these animals' mythological and symbolic functions.

The animal motifs of the Sassanian period can be categorized into combinations of horse motifs, quadrupeds, birds, and aquatic creatures. These motifs carry distinct meanings, symbolic and rooted in religious and mythological beliefs. A key shared characteristic of all these artistic motifs is their abstract, decorative nature, which is best represented in every piece and, mainly, in the ornamental details inseparable from the motifs. In this context, the portrayal of living creatures continues the ancient artistic traditions of Iran. In conclusion, animals' beliefs and symbolism were so significant that they were frequently displayed and extensively used in art. Therefore, the use of animal motifs in Sassanian art was not just decorative but also carried deep symbolic meaning. This research and the introduction of the works of artists from previous centuries will be a step towards a deeper understanding of the art and civilization of Iran, as well as the beliefs of our ancestors. It is also hoped that it will serve as a guiding light for today's and future artists in this land, to immortalize the brilliance that is the result of the efforts of our forefathers over centuries and millennia.

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