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An Iconological Approach to Mythical Birds of the Sasanian Period: A Case Study of the Simurgh

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Abstract

Simurgh is a prominent mythical figure of Iran that has appeared in diverse visual and literary forms in Iranian art and culture from antiquity to the contemporary era. Erwin Panofsky introduced iconology as an approach to art-historical analysis, systematically progressing from the description of artistic phenomena to the interpretation of their underlying meanings. This method operates through three interconnected levels of meaning, corresponding to motif, theme, and intrinsic meaning. Accordingly, this article examines and interprets the symbolic meanings of Simurgh as a prominent figure in Iranian art through an iconological analysis of different historical periods, with particular attention to transformations in its form, iconographic attributes, and cultural significance, including the Sasanian and broader pre-Islamic eras, as well as the Ilkhanid and Safavid periods of Islamic Iran. The principal research question is as follows: How did the Simurgh motif change formally and semantically within the artistic and literary traditions of pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, and to what extent was its development influenced by neighbouring civilizations? The corpus comprises selected artworks and material objects, including textiles, paintings, metalwork, leatherwork, and ceramics from Iran, ancient China, and ancient Egypt. Within this historical framework, the analysis considers pre-Islamic religious texts, mythological literature, particularly Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, and mystical writings, especially Suhrawardi's the Red Intellect, alongside the mythological traditions of ancient China and Egypt, thereby situating the material evidence within broader comparative religious, literary, and cultural contexts. The results indicate that, before the rise of Islam, Simurgh was conceived as a bird possessing supernatural powers, whose imagery signified the supremacy and dominion of cosmic forces over the terrestrial world. For instance, depictions of Simurgh on the garments of Sasanian rulers functioned as symbols of divine protection, conferred political and religious legitimacy upon the ruler, bestowed farr (royal glory), and, more broadly, embodied and transmitted royal authority.

Keywords: Iconology, Mythology, Simurgh, China, Egypt.

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Introduction

Iconology and iconography are methodological approaches in art history used to examine the content of images and their semiotic significance. Iconography involves the systematic collection, classification, and interpretation of information derived from individual works of art. Building on the findings of iconographic research; iconology investigates the broader systems of ideas and cultural values underlying images. Iconographic research in art history examines the references embedded in images, because images and visual symbols, like literary concepts, form part of a society's shared cultural framework. Interpreting images requires identifying the beliefs that generated particular discursive systems through which meanings were expressed in ancient societies. In mythological studies, iconography facilitates understanding of the relationship between word and image within the context of specific mythological beliefs. Accordingly, ancient literary sources associated with motifs represented in artworks acquire particular interpretive significance (Mokhtarian, 2012: 1). Symbolic concepts may appear within verbal, visual, or behavioral systems of symbolic communication. Although iconology primarily focuses on the content of images, its principal aim is to investigate the relationships among these elements within the broader symbolic system of culture (Rafi'far & Malek, 2013: 7). Drawing on this understanding of iconology, the present study examines the iconographic representation of the Simurgh in artworks produced during the Islamic period.

Research Questions and Hypotheses: The central research question of this paper can be framed as follows: How did the Simurgh motif change in formal and semantic terms across the art and literature of ancient and post-Islamic Iran, and to what degree was its development influenced by contact with other civilizations?

Accordingly, the main aim of this research is to identify and examine the shared characteristics of the Simurgh motif in Iranian art and mythology and, using an iconological framework, to compare them with similar symbolic representations of the same general type in neighbouring civilizations. Another objective is to understand why the Simurgh was chosen as a symbolic bird in Iranian mythology and to explain its wider semantic significance. The problem considered here involves tracing the origins of this visual conception of a supernatural creature and clarifying how it relates to other religious and artistic traditions. The research also seeks to explore the process by which the Simurgh symbol changed during the Sasanian Empire and was later transmitted into the Islamic period. Given the long history of the motif, its origins, classification, and historical

development must be traced carefully through literary and comparative research.

Moreover, because the visual features of the Simurgh theme in the Islamic era may have been drawn from the cultures of neighbouring regions, the comparative investigation is not geographically limited to Iran. The study therefore begins by considering the mythical creature known as the Simurgh through the myths and artistic traditions associated with this bird in Iran, Ancient China, and Ancient Egypt, together with its role in Islamic mythology and mysticism.

Research Method: This study takes a historical perspective and uses a descriptive-analytical method. The necessary body of data was gathered through documentary research and the careful examination of relevant library sources. The deeper meanings expressed by the images, at both formal and symbolic levels, were explored through Erwin Panofsky's iconological method, which moves through three stages: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation.

The research samples comprise artistic productions, including textiles, paintings, metalwork, leather objects, and ceramics from Iran, ancient China, ancient Egypt, and post-Islamic Iran, selected for their representation of mythical birds. The historical analysis also draws on pre-Islamic religious texts, mythological literature, particularly Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, mystical writings, especially Suhrawardi's The Red Intellect, as well as the mythological traditions of China and ancient Egypt.

Among the surviving artworks, those whose compositions include a representation of the Simurgh were selected for this study. Accordingly, 19 works, including textiles, paintings, metal objects, leather bookbindings, and ceramics from Iran and China, were examined through an iconological reading of the Simurgh figure. These include five examples of Chinese ceramic art, one Egyptian painting, and 13 Iranian works covering ceramics, metalwork, textiles, leather bookbindings, and miniature paintings. Finally, all the visual, formal, and mythological characteristics identified across these artworks were carefully brought together and presented in a comparative table.

Literature Review

A considerable and diverse body of scholarship has explored the Simurgh myth and its imagery in literature and the visual arts. In his study Yashts (Pourdavoud: 1377/1998), Ebrahim Pourdavoud was the first scholar to examine the etymology of the term "Simurgh," connecting it with such terms as Saēna, Sanskrit, and Sīrang, while also relating it to the deity

Rashn, the Harvisptokhm Tree (Tree of All Seeds), and Mount Alborz, traditionally regarded as the dwelling place of the Simurgh. Drawing on evidence from Pahlavi texts such as the Bundahishn and Mēnōg ī Khrad, he also investigated the bird's close connection with medicine and healing (Pourdavoud, 1998: 573–577). In their study "A Symbolic Study of the Simurgh Image with Emphasis on Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and Attar's Mantiq al Tayr," Mohammad Khazaei and Farinaz Farbod (2003) presented a symbolic analysis of the Simurgh as perceived and depicted in art. By closely and systematically examining representations of the Simurgh in paintings and other surviving artworks, they concluded that, before the advent of Islam, the creature appeared chiefly in an abstract form. Using surviving Sasanian representations on metal objects, textiles, and rock reliefs, they compared the Simurgh with the Anqāʾ and then examined the similarities between the Anqāʾ and the Humā bird. Fariba Fouladianpour (2018), in her study Investigating the Evolution of the Simurgh with Reference to Sasanian and Safavid Decorative Arts, considered the Simurgh motif in decorative arts belonging to the Sasanian and Safavid periods. She concluded that the motif continued to exist in Sasanian mythological, epic, and religious texts, as well as in the long tradition of Islamic mysticism. In The Influence of the Islamic Simurgh on Islamic, Byzantine, and Christian Art, Alireza Taheri (2017) discussed the influence of the Sasanian Simurgh motif on both Islamic and Western artistic traditions. In his account, the motif began to circulate in the Sasanian period and continued after the empire's fall through cultural interaction, commercial contact, and exchanges of gifts with neighboring peoples and more distant countries.

In Hejazi's paper, The Mythological Recreation of the Simurgh and the Phoenix (2005), the Simurgh is presented as an embodiment of fire in Chinese mythology and as a figure with distinctly feminine attributes. Behjat Hejazi, in A Comparative Study of Mythical Birds in Iran and Neighboring Civilizations (Hejazi,2009: 125), maintains that before Islam the Simurgh held a prominent position in Iranian culture and featured in numerous myths. Parisa Alikhani maintain that Iranian mythology portrays the Simurgh as the king of birds, a being who has seen the world come to an end three times and possesses knowledge of all the sciences of his age. The Simurgh may therefore be understood as an embodiment of God (Alikhani, 2018: 61). A review of earlier relevant body of research indicates that most studies dealing with the concept of the Simurgh have followed either a comparative or a semiotic approach. In contrast, this paper uses an iconological approach to examine the symbolic Simurgh motif in

artistic and literary works, with particular attention to its religious and cultural dimensions. Finally, by interpreting the Simurgh iconologically and considering the cumulative effects of its cultural borrowings and transformations, this study aims to provide a renewed understanding of this mythical bird.

1. Iconology According to Erwin Panofsky

Iconology is a discipline that seeks to explain both the formal content of an image and the cultural meanings embedded within it through description, analysis, and interpretation, while likewise examining the artistic subject represented in the work by means of the same procedures. Aby Warburg pioneered iconology and first applied it to the study of nonreligious paintings (Nasri, 1391/2012: 10). His students later extended the range of his research, giving rise to what came to be known as the Warburg School. Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), a German art historian and one of Warburg's students, applied iconology to the study of Renaissance and Christian art (Nasri, 1391/2012: 10). His method advanced from the description of artistic phenomena to their interpretation. In seeking to uncover hidden meanings, he considered the circumstances in which artworks were produced, including their historical, social, cultural, and political conditions, together with the religion, philosophy, and intellectual tendencies characteristic of a particular period, nation, or society. Panofsky understood images as symbolic structures in which visible forms are linked to the mental content they express. He described this relationship between visible form and intellectual meaning as a profound connection (Avazpour, 2016: 20). To disclose such hidden meanings, Panofsky proposed a three-stage method of analysis (Mirzaie& Kateb, 1404: 26).

A. Pre-iconographical Description

Pre-iconographical description forms the first stage, in which the image is described alongside its visible patterns and principal formal qualities. At this stage, the observer must examine the image carefully and divide it into the individual elements that constitute its composition. Panofsky designated these constituent elements as artistic motifs.

B. Iconographical Analysis

The second stage is iconographical analysis, which considers not only individual motifs but also images, stories, allegories, and broader themes. This level depends on prior knowledge of particular subjects and ideas

conveyed through written literature or maintained in oral tradition (Panofsky, 2017: 44). Its purpose is to recognize and comprehend the secondary, conventional meaning underlying an image through literary knowledge and established visual types.

C. Iconological Interpretation

The third and final stage comprises iconological interpretation, which Panofsky regarded as the central and actual purpose of iconology. Iconology is concerned with symbolism, especially the universal symbols found within images that collectively shape the culture and intellectual outlook of a country. It holds that meaning operates across several interconnected levels rather than occupying a single isolated layer (Ghani & Mehrabi, 2018: 7).

At this final stage, synthetic intuition and interpretive knowledge become especially important. This mode of interpretation demands knowledge of the fundamental intellectual dispositions that shape human thought, including the worldview of a particular society, as articulated through the relationship between artwork and culture. Only at this stage can the researcher achieve a high level of understanding of the image under consideration. Such understanding becomes possible only through historical research, when the researcher reconstructs the context in which the image was created and endowed with meaning. Accordingly, pre-iconography involves the visual examination of images and patterns in order to identify pure forms, including line, surface, volume, colour, and other natural forms. By contrast, iconography investigates visual representations produced within the culture from which the art object originated and analyzes their connections with concepts and themes conveyed through oral tradition and literature. Iconology, finally, interprets the symbolic meanings embedded in the art object and reveals the artwork's underlying significance.

This true meaning of the artwork can be grasped only through knowledge of the intellectual, philosophical, and religious structures of the nation that produced it. Recognizing these symbolic meanings represents the ultimate objective of iconological analysis (Taheri, 2017: 24).

2. The Simurgh in the Sasanian Period

2.1. The Ancient Origins of the Simurgh in Sasanian Iran

The Simurgh is an imaginary being that has held an enduring place in Iranian folklore since antiquity, and it appears in the Avesta as well as other religious writings dating from before Islam. The earliest surviving

Tab. 1: The list of common illustrations of Simurgh (Authors, 2023). ▼

Ancient Iran	Ancient China	Early Islamic Period	Islamic Painting (Miniature Tradition)
Gilt silver plate depicting the Simurgh, Sasanian period (2021, URL1).	Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh, China, Ming dynasty, 14th to 17th century CE, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accession No. 102-1899 (2021, URL2).	Silk textile from Rayy, 5th century CE, Iran Museum of Archaeology and Islamic Art, Accession No. 22598 (Authors, 2025).	Leather binding of Navāī's *Dīvān*, decorated with the Simurgh, Herat School, 16th century CE, 10th century AH, Chester Beatty Collection, Accession No. MSS 948 (2021, URL8).
Copper plate depicting the Simurgh, Sasanian period, 3rd century CE (Dadvar & Barazandeh, 2012: 475).	Ceramic bowl depicting the Simurgh and a dragon, China, Ming dynasty, 14th to 17th century CE, Cleveland Museum of Art (2021, URL3).	Ceramic plate depicting a gazelle and the Simurgh, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE, 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 1970.27 (2025, URL6).	Depiction of the Simurgh, Safavid period, 16th century CE, 10th century AH, Arthur M. Sackler Collection, Accession No. 1986.196.1S (2021, URL10).
Brass tray depicting the Simurgh and the goddess Anahita, Sasanian period, 3rd century CE, Hermitage Museum, Accession No. S-217 (URL11).	Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh, China, Ming dynasty, 14th to 17th century CE, National Museum of Iran (Nafisi, 2005: 46).	Eight-pointed star tile depicting the Simurgh, Takht-e Soleyman, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE, 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Collection, Accession No. 1997.114.S (1404, URL5).	Simurgh and Zāl, from the *Shāhnāmeh* of Shah Tahmasp, Safavid School, 17th century CE, 11th century AH (Cary welch, 1967: 48).
Bronze plate depicting the Simurgh, 3rd century CE (Dadvar & Barazandeh, 2012: 474).	Ceramic plate depicting a gazelle, the Simurgh, and lotus blossoms, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE, 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art (2021, URL4).	Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh and a dragon, China, Ming dynasty, 14th to 17th century CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 1981.368.2 (2025, URL9).	Simurgh and the Birth of Rustam, 17th century CE, 11th century AH, Chester Beatty Collection, Accession No. Per 277.3 (2025, URL11).
Illustration from the *Baysunghur Shāhnāmeh*, Golestan Palace Library, 16th century CE, 10th century AH (Authors, 2025).	Safavid blue and white ceramic plate, 17th century CE, 11th century AH, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accession No. 1876-2897 (2021, URL7).	Depiction of the Bennu bird, Ancient Egypt (Evans, 1996: 199).	—

Iranian records to mention the Simurgh derive from the Zoroastrian religious tradition. In the Avesta, the creature is known as Mərəγō Saēna (Mərəγō Saēnō), while Middle Persian (Pahlavi) sources call it Sēnmurw (Sēnmurv), terms signifying "the chief and lord of birds" and "the first created being" (Pourdavoud, 1998: 575–577).

Several scholars hold that the first element of Mərəγō Saēna means simply bird, whereas the second, after undergoing a series of phonetic changes in Pahlavi, developed into Sīn in Persian usage. The name should not be understood as thirty (si), but as a reference to the falcon (Chevalier, 2009: 710). Ancient Iranians believed that the material world emerged when the spiritual realm assumed physical form, with everything existing spiritually thereby acquiring a visible and material manifestation. In this religious conception, the Simurgh formed the material representation of Mithra (Mihr). The Simurgh can thus be read as the mythological and symbolic expression of this belief, while the falcon conveys the same idea concretely through a creature of the natural world. Carnoy considers the falcon to have been Mithra's sacred bird, noting its frequent appearance in surviving rock images of Mithra (Carnoy, 2004: 10). The bird was also closely connected with the sun. As king of all birds, it represented one of the major Ahuric deities, specifically the Sun or Heavenly Fire (Chevalier, 2009: 682). In classical times, this immortal mythological bird acted as an image of the sun and likewise appeared as a solar symbol in the Rig Veda. Birds similarly represented celestial objects in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Archaeological evidence also shows that birds were associated with the sun throughout the Neolithic East (Golan, 1991: 99).

The Avestan and Pahlavi sources therefore allow the Simurgh to be understood as a representation of the sun and a symbol of khvarenah (farr[1], divine glory) within Zoroastrian tradition, whose ancient roots extend to Mithra and the religion of Mithraism[2].

2.2. The Representation of the Simurgh in Sasanian Art

Sasanian art reflects the religious philosophy of the Zoroastrian faith, within which supernatural powers consistently assume a prominent and recognizable place in visual representation. In this artistic tradition, the Simurgh appears as a mythical creature composed of the physical features of several different animals. It is commonly represented with the head and body of a dog, the claws of a lion, wolf, or dog, and the tail of a peacock (Taheri, 2009: 18). In certain examples, the Simurgh assumes the form of a dragon and peacock hybrid, with fire clearly emerging from its mouth.

▲ Fig. 1: Gilt silver plate depicting the Simurgh, Sasanian period, 3rd century CE, British Museum, Accession No. 124095 (2021, URL1).

▲ Fig. 2: Copper plate depicting the Simurgh, Sasanian period, 3rd century CE (Dadvar & Barazandeh, 2012: 475).

▲ Fig. 3: Brass tray depicting the Simurgh and the goddess Anahita, Sasanian period, 3rd century CE, State Hermitage Museum (URL11).

The motif appeared widely and repeatedly in Sasanian metalwork and textile production (Ghirshman, 1995: 219). Its earliest known depiction as a composite of lion and bird occurs in the rock carvings at Taq e Bostan (Hall, 2004: 145).

The eagle, distinguished particularly by its strength, symbolized Ahura Mazda, the Sun, and other celestial deities. Circular arrangements featuring birds occur frequently in several forms of Sasanian art. During the Sasanian period, the falcon was regarded as a divine being and depicted in a range of visual forms. It also occupied an important religious position within Zoroastrian belief. Although the Simurgh is absent from known examples of Sasanian pottery, it appears extensively in other artistic media, including metal vessels, textiles, and architectural decoration. Some studies have even proposed that the creature served as the emblem of the Sasanian Empire (Hosseini, 2014: 25). The earliest depiction of the Simurgh on coinage appears on coins issued during the reign of Bahram II (Riazi, 2002: 187). One of the best-preserved surviving examples of the Simurgh motif is a Sasanian bronze plaque carrying a distinct image of the creature (Fig. 1). Wings attached to a human or animal body conveyed divinity and protection bestowed by supernatural beings. This imagery derived from ancient Near Eastern representations of predatory birds, especially the falcon and the eagle (Hall, 2004: 30). Another important archaeological example is a bronze plate dating to the third century CE and displaying a prominent image of the Simurgh (Fig. 2).

Besides the Simurgh itself, another notable avian motif occurs on a brass tray now preserved in the Hermitage Museum. At the center of the tray, a large eagle-like bird stands with its wings fully spread, clasping the goddess Anahita in its claws (Fig. 3). A second object from the same period is a bronze plate that depicts the Simurgh in profile, with one foot set slightly in front of the other (Fig. 4).

The overall symbolic form of the Simurgh brings together the fundamental elements of the universe in both its conception and visual expression: its canine or leonine head and body signify the earth, its bird-like wings represent the sky, its scales evoke water, and, in some depictions, flames issue from its mouth. This purposeful combination of animal features thus seems to hold specific significance in relation to the classical elements of fire, air, water, and earth (Taheri, 2009: 18–19).

The visual study of Sasanian artworks suggests that the Simurgh held a distinctive position in Iranian society before the arrival of Islam. It was usually rendered abstractly as a mythical composite being assembled from

the features of several animals. In Zoroastrian belief, birds were intimately connected with Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity and manifestation of beneficent power. Birds likewise served as symbols of good fortune in Iranian culture before Islam. In the Avesta, farr, or the divine glory, is invariably represented as the Varəγna bird (Soltani Gard, 1993: 101).

Seen in this light, the Simurgh portrayed in the art of Iran before Islam was a composite creature placed within a circle, which signifies divine light or splendor and serves as an image of the sun. Often shown beside the lotus flower, the foremost vegetal symbol of Sasanian farr, the Simurgh also frequently occurs with circular motifs used to ornament royal garments, palace walls, and Sasanian jewelry.

▲ Fig. 4: Bronze plate depicting the Simurgh, 3rd century CE (Dadvar & Barazandeh, 2012: 474).

3. The Simurgh in Ancient China

3.1. The Fenghuang in Ancient Chinese Mythological Texts

Within the mythological traditions of China, the Fenghuang, or Chinese Phoenix, may be seen as the single creature most closely comparable to the Iranian Simurgh. It is recognized as one of the Four Sacred Creatures of Chinese mythology, alongside the dragon, qilin, and tortoise. In Chinese tradition, the Fenghuang is a sacred fire bird associated with immortality, prosperity, virtue, harmony, peace, righteousness, and imperial power. Unlike the phoenix of Western mythology, whose symbolism rests on death and rebirth through fire, the Fenghuang is chiefly associated with harmony. Ancient Chinese writings relate that the Fenghuang appeared in times of earthly prosperity, signifying that a virtuous and righteous ruler held authority over the realm. The Fenghuang represents the Empress, while the Dragon signifies the emperor, together embodying the cosmic principles of Yin and Yang, the complementary forces of heaven and earth (Daneshparvar, 1997: 691). In traditional Chinese belief, the Fenghuang could descend to earth only when the world was ruled with virtue. It may consequently be interpreted as a divine messenger from heaven.

▲ Fig. 5: Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh, China, Ming Dynasty (14th–17th century CE), Victoria and Albert Museum, Accession No. 1899-102 (2021, URL2).

3.2. Representation of the Fenghuang in Chinese Art

In ancient Chinese art, the Simurgh is shown as a bird with a powerful body, a strong beak, and widely spread wings and tail, and it is usually depicted without legs. Its head is commonly rendered in the form of a pheasant or peacock. This iconography evolved over time and reached a more accomplished and mature form during the Ming dynasty, from 1368 to 1644 CE (Fig. 5). In this period, the Simurgh gradually relinquished much of its mythical grandeur and took on a more naturalistic appearance. One

▲ Fig. 6: Ceramic bowl depicting the Simurgh and a dragon, China, Ming Dynasty (14th–17th century CE), Cleveland Museum of Art (2021, URL3).

▲ Fig. 7: Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh, China, Ming Dynasty (14th–17th century CE), National Museum of Iran (Nafisi, 2005: 46).

▲ Fig. 8: Ceramic plate depicting gazelles, the Simurgh, and lotus blossoms, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE / 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art (2021, URL4).

notable example within Chinese ceramic production is a bowl decorated with the Simurgh and a dragon, made in China by Chinese artisans (Fig. 6).

Among the objects preserved in Iran that carry representations of the Simurgh but were fashioned by Chinese craftsmen, the motif occurs on a group of Chinese porcelains belonging to the Safavid period. Made in China, these vessels were presented to Iran as diplomatic gifts by the emperors of the Ming dynasty. Their clearly Chinese stylistic qualities, together with their design and production by Chinese artisans, distinguish them from contemporary objects made in Iran.

One representative example is a ceramic plate with a scalloped rim, currently preserved in the National Museum of Iran. Its interior shows the Simurgh flying toward the heavens against a field of lotus leaves and other floral motifs (Fig. 7). Another significant example is a ceramic plate with a central medallion containing two gazelles amid abundant blossoms, while four Simurghs circle the central composition along the vessel's rim. This arrangement illustrates a distinctive feature of Simurgh imagery in Iranian ceramic decoration.

4. The Bennu Bird: The Mythological Proto-type of the Simurgh in Ancient Egypt

4.1. Bennu in Ancient Egyptian Texts

Another prominent mythical bird is the Bennu, a sacred being that was worshipped and held in profound reverence in ancient Egypt. Mythical birds with closely comparable qualities appeared in several ancient civilizations under different names, including the Bennu of the Egyptians, the Fenghuang of the Chinese, and the Phoenix of the Greeks and Christians (Rahmani Mofrad, 2011: 139).

According to numerous historians, the Phoenix myth initially arose in ancient Egypt and subsequently passed into Greek, Roman, and later Christian civilizations. In Egyptian mythology, the Bennu bird signified both the rising sun and the first rays of sunlight striking the sacred pillar devoted to the sun. The bird consequently became one of the principals and most readily identifiable solar symbols within Egyptian religion. According to the Greek historian Herodotus3, the Bennu (Phoenix) appeared at the temple once every five hundred years and was then reborn from an egg produced from its own dead body (Evans, 1996: 199). Because the heron was understood as the earthly manifestation of the Bennu, the Egyptians revered this bird so deeply that historical accounts preserve an unusual military episode during the Persian invasion of Egypt under Cambyses. The

Persians reportedly positioned living herons before their advancing army. Reluctant to shoot at these sacred birds, the Egyptians thereby helped the Persians to secure military victory. For the Egyptians, the Bennu was thus a truly sacred and exceptionally rare bird. Only a very limited number of representations of the Bennu have survived. These images suggest that the wings and feathers of the Bennu were thought to be partly red and partly golden yellow in colour.

4.2. Representation of the Bennu in Ancient Egyptian Art

The Bennu was understood as the sacred fire bird of ancient Egypt. It was believed periodically to burn itself, experience rebirth, and then fly to the sacred city of Heliopolis, where it marked the beginning of a new year and a new cosmic period. This recurring process of regeneration first demanded the complete ending of its former existence. In this understanding, the Bennu simultaneously became its own child, parent, successor, nurse, and descendant.

Although it remained the same mythical being, destruction renewed its youth and vitality. It could therefore attain immortality through the repeated processes of self-destruction and ensuing renewal. One ancient Egyptian inscription states: "I am the Bennu, who makes myself exist, and burns incense for the goddess of resurrection." The Bennu was fundamentally a solar mythological figure in ancient Egyptian thought. In contrast to the conceptualized and composite Simurgh of Sasanian art, Egyptian artists portrayed the Bennu wholly naturalistically in the form of a blue heron (Fig. 9). The bird bore symbolic associations with absolute power, supremacy, victory, glory, nobility, and beauty. For this reason, the Egyptians did not associate the Bennu with small and insignificant birds such as sparrows and partridges, since these species functioned as prey rather than symbols of power.

Accordingly, in the surviving examples of ancient Egyptian painting, the Bennu appears as a realistically depicted heron standing majestically on its long legs and distinguished by its extended beak. This naturalistic portrayal differs sharply from the highly abstract and composite creature identified as the Simurgh in Sasanian painting (Fig. 9).

▲ **Fig. 9: Depiction of the Bennu bird, Ancient Egypt (Evans, 1996: 199).**

5. The Simurgh in the Islamic Period

5.1. The Simurgh in Mythological Texts of the Islamic Period (with Emphasis on Ferdowsi's Shahnameh)

Among the numerous myths associated with the Simurgh, Ferdowsi's

Shahnameh may confidently be considered one of the most important literary traditions. In this narrative, the Simurgh is a celestial bird whose nest lies on Mount Alborz. The bird rears an abandoned child named Zāl and becomes his protector. Across the entire heroic age, from the earliest episodes to the final events, the Simurgh functioned as a symbol of victory and success for Zāl and Rustam alike. For this reason, many scholars interpret the Simurgh as the totem of the Sakas and of the house of Rustam (Yahaghi, 1990: 211–213).

As the earlier analysis suggests, Rustam followed Mithraism, a religious tradition that predated Zoroastrianism, whereas Esfandiyār adhered to the Zoroastrian faith. The religious conflict between the heroes in the Shahnameh thus reflects the historical struggle between these two traditions. To understand the symbolic significance of the Simurgh in the Shahnameh, one must therefore consider the wider religious setting of the myth. The epic, in fact, presents two distinct manifestations of the Simurgh. The first is the benevolent (Ahuric) Simurgh, who saves and protects Zāl and supports Rustam throughout the full course of his life.

The second occurs in the seven exploits (Haft Khān) of Esfandiyār, where the Simurgh takes on a hostile role and becomes a demonic (Ahrimanic) creature. The contrasting religious identities of the two heroes may explain this apparent contradiction. Esfandiyār represents Zoroastrianism, whereas Rustam embodies an older Mithraic cult. As a result, divine beings that existed before the rise of Zoroastrianism came to be viewed as demons following the establishment of that religion. The Simurgh, understood in ancient Iranian religions as an incarnation of the sun god, accordingly, becomes a demonic creature in the legend of Esfandiyār.

5.2. Philosophical and Mystical Texts on the Simurgh in the Islamic Period (With Particular Emphasis on Suhrawardi's Aql-i Surkh or The Red Intellect)

In the sixth century AH, Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, in his treatise Aql-i Surkh (The Red Intellect), presents the Simurgh as a symbol of the sun in the sensible world (Pournamdarian, 1996: 201). Its true origin, however, does not lie within the sensible world. Rather, it rises from the supreme Orient of the divine realm (mashriq al-lahut5), the highest level of the divine world and the most elevated degree of light. Within this framework, the Simurgh may be understood as a symbol of the Active Intellect (al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl6) and Gabriel (Jibril), who, in Peripatetic philosophy, function as intermediaries between the divine realm and humanity.

The nature of the Simurgh is light, while fire constitutes its nourishment. Fire, regarded as sacred in ancient Iranian belief, is transformed into pure light in Suhrawardi's Illuminationist philosophy (hikmat al-ishraq), which is founded upon the concept of light (nur). From this perspective, the sensible world (ʿalam al-hiss) and sensory pleasures are merely shadows of higher pleasures that transcend the senses, while these exalted pleasures themselves arise from their ultimate source: supreme light and beauty.

▲ **Fig. 10: Silk textile from Rayy, National Museum of Iran, 5th century CE (Authors, 2025).**

Within the luminous imaginal world (ʿalam al-mithal), extraordinary melodies and sounds arise that the ordinary imaginative faculty (quwwat al-khayal) cannot reproduce or imitate. A person freed from material attachments can hear and perceive these sounds and comes to recognize that the imaginative faculty has acquired the capacity to apprehend such realities. If individuals strengthen and discipline their souls through divinely-guided spiritual practices, they may follow the arc of ascent (qaws al-suʿud) and attain higher spiritual stations (Eskandar Pourkhorami & Shafiei, 2011: 23).

Like the human being, the Simurgh has appeared in different forms and manifestations over time, eventually combining avian and human attributes within its nature. It soars to great heights like a luminous winged bird, devises solutions with the wisdom of a learned person, and possesses a power exceeding ordinary human capacity, comparable to the deities of the Zoroastrian tradition (mazdayasna).

This mysterious being is both the focal point and embodiment of a range of spiritual powers. Nevertheless, it has no external or objective existence. For this reason, Sufi thought (tasawwuf) regards it as one of the most fitting symbols through which to express absolute Reality (al-haqiqa al-mutlaqa) and the Divine Essence (dhat al-ilahiyya). It may also elucidate the doctrine of the Unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud), one of the principal doctrines within certain traditions of Islamic mysticism, particularly theoretical mysticism (al-ʿirfan al-nazari), (Farnbagh Dadagi, 1990: 122).

Al-Hallaj's Kitab al-Tawasin also occupies a distinctive position in this context. On the one hand, it is regarded as one of the foundational texts of a form of mysticism cantered on the relationship between the human and the divine in the Islamic world (Vakili, 2023: 161). On the other hand, its symbolic system rests substantially upon avian imagery and meaning. In Kitab al-Tawasin, the Simurgh signifies the mysterious, hidden, and esoteric dimension of the sacred (al-batin).

Sanai of Ghazna was among the earliest poets to employ the Simurgh

▲ Fig. 11: Eight-pointed star tile depicting the Simurgh, Takht-e Soleyman, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE / 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Collection, Accession No. S1997.114 (2025, URL5).

▲ Fig. 12: Ceramic plate depicting a gazelle and the Simurgh, Ilkhanid period, 13th century CE / 7th century AH, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 1970.27 (2025, URL6).

▲ Fig. 13: Safavid blue-and-white ceramic plate, 17th century CE / 11th century AH, Victoria and Albert Museum, Accession No. 1876-2897 (2021, URL7).

as a mystical symbol. He also played a foundational role in establishing a network of mystical signs and symbols within the poetic language of Persian Dari (Farsi-ye Dari). In several of his poems, Sanai places the Simurgh alongside the philosopher's stone (al-iksir), presenting both as metaphors for an absent object of desire, an unattainable end, and a lost ideal in an age of decline.

The most important Persian text devoted to the Simurgh is Attar's Mantiq al-Tayr (The Conference of the Birds). This work initiated an extensive body of similar texts concerning the mystical journey of birds in search of the Simurgh. In this beautiful and contemplative poem, Attar presents the Simurgh as a symbol of God (Allah) and, at the same time, as a manifestation of divine love (ishq ilahi). At the end of the journey, it becomes clear that the Simurgh is not separate from the birds but is revealed through their unity and through fana', the annihilation of the self in love (Ibid: 11).

In sum, within the symbolic system of Iranian mysticism, both in ancient periods and after the advent of Islam, the Simurgh embodies wisdom, perfection, spiritual illumination, and the ultimate destination of the mystical path (tariqah), (Alamdari, 2008: 369).

5.3. Representation of the Simurgh in the Art of the Islamic Period

The Simurgh occupies a distinctive place in Islamic culture and mysticism and, within the doctrine of the unity of being (Waḥdat al Wujūd), is regarded as a symbol of Absolute Being. Following the conversion of the Iranians to Islam, many motifs inherited from the period before Islam continued to appear in Persian art and literature, either retaining their earlier meanings or acquiring new interpretations. Before the advent of Islam, Iranians were already familiar with spiritual and mystical concepts rooted in Zoroastrianism and earlier religious beliefs, and they did not abandon this intellectual and cultural heritage after embracing Islam. Iranian Islam consequently acquired a mystical, spiritual, and symbolic character in many of its expressions (Kiaei, 2002: 13).

During the early Ilkhanid period, representations of the Simurgh continued to resemble Sasanian examples closely. In these works, the Simurgh is portrayed as a composite creature with a doglike head and claws resembling those of a lion (Fig. 10). After the Ilkhanid period, however, the appearance of the Simurgh underwent significant changes in both form and colouring. Warm hues and intense shades of red became increasingly common in its representation, while its form grew

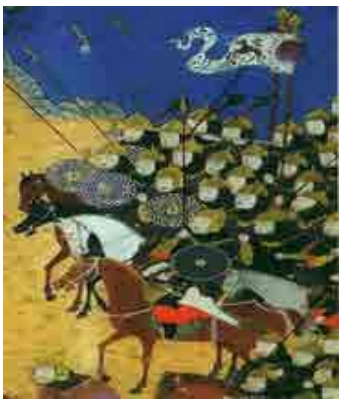
closer to Chinese models, particularly the Chinese dragon-phoenix (Fenghuang).

One of the most notable artistic examples from this period is an eight-pointed tile depicting the Simurgh, discovered during excavations at Takht-e Soleyman and now preserved in the Sackler Gallery of Art. The surface of the tile is decorated with underglaze painting and gilding (Fig. 11). Its background is azure blue, a colour that symbolizes purity and spiritual refinement in mystical thought and was also among the most highly valued colours in the design and execution of decorative motifs. The figure of the Simurgh is rendered in gilded golden yellow, a colour symbolizing light and expressing the exalted status of the Simurgh as the sovereign of all beings.

The tile's background is painted in lapis lazuli blue, a colour associated with purity in mystical thought and, in practical terms, counted among the most expensive pigments available to artists. The Simurgh is itself gilded, a treatment signifying light, royal majesty, and its elevated position as sovereign of all creatures. Another artistic group from the early Islamic period comprises Ilkhanid ceramic vessels bearing images of the Simurgh (Fig. 12).

After the Ilkhanid era, however, the Simurgh gradually receded from the decorative arts of Iran, for reasons that remain uncertain. Artists increasingly preferred floral and vegetal motifs, which were regarded as more closely aligned with the aesthetics of Islamic art (Ājand, 2001: 25). During the Safavid period, the Simurgh retained only a limited presence in the decorative arts. The motif occurs on a small group of blue and white porcelain objects, including pieces held by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. These ceramics feature fantastic creatures, such as the Qilin6 and the Simurgh, accompanied by Chinese cloud motifs. Safavid representations of the Simurgh are distinguished by a tail divided into three branches. Several of the finest examples of this motif belong to the 10th and 11th centuries AH (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE). In the 12th century AH, the Simurgh motif began to fade from use (Dimand, 2004: 198), (Fig. 13).

Although the Simurgh is an ancient mythical being, it appeared in the tradition of Persian miniature painting only at a comparatively late date. Depictions of the Simurgh in illuminated manuscripts begin around the first half of the 9th century AH (fifteenth century CE). One prominent example appears in the celebrated Baysunghur Shāhnāmeh, where the Simurgh is represented on one of the battle standards (Fig. 14). Since artists



▲ **Fig. 14: Illustration from the Baysunghur Shāhnāmeh, Golestan Palace Library, 16th century CE / 10th century AH (Authors, 2025).**

▲ **Fig. 15: The Simurgh and Zāl, Shāhnāmeh of Shah Tahmasp, Safavid School, 17th century CE / 11th century AH (Cary welch ,1967: 48).**

▲ **Fig. 16: Leather binding of Navā'ī's Dīvān decorated with the Simurgh, Herat School, 16th century CE / 10th century AH, Chester Beatty Collection, Accession No. MSS 948 (2021, URL8).**

▲ Fig. 17: Ceramic plate depicting the Simurgh and a dragon, China, Ming Dynasty, 14th–17th century CE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 1981.368.2 (2025, URL9).

▲ Fig. 18: Simurgh motif, Safavid period, 16th century CE / 10th century AH, Arthur M. Sackler Collection, Accession No. 1986.S.196.1 (2021, URL10).

▲ Fig. 19: The Simurgh and the Birth of Rustam, 17th century CE / 11th century AH, Chester Beatty Collection, Accession No. Per 277.3 (2025, URL11).

generally worked within established traditional iconography, the basic form of the Simurgh changes little throughout Persian miniature painting. Variations among manuscripts concern mainly the refinement of details, style, colouring, and execution, rather than the creature's fundamental appearance (Fig. 15).

6. Representation of the Simurgh in the Islamic Period: Emphasis on the Influence of China and Ancient Iran

At the outset of the Islamic period, depictions of the Simurgh remained rooted in artistic traditions inherited from the Sasanian era. Over time, however, especially from the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods onward, East Asian artistic influences entering Iran altered the creature's appearance and brought it progressively closer to the Chinese Fenghuang. Thereafter, the Simurgh was commonly depicted in the manner of a Chinese bird and, at times, as a dragon-like avian being (Taheri, 2009: 19–23), (Fig. 16). Comparison between Iranian representations and imported Chinese examples reveals the absence of legs as a distinctive feature. This detail may indicate that the bird was conceived as continually flying through the heavens. Visible legs appear only in Iranian representations from periods preceding and following the Ilkhanid era. In contrast, the Simurgh of pre-Islamic Iran bears eagle's talons. This evidence suggests that the legless form of the Simurgh derived from Chinese artistic models (Fig. 17).

The bird's head may be classified into several types based on actual birds, among them ducks, geese, pheasants, eagles, and parrots. The influence of the Chinese Fenghuang becomes especially clear in the form of the head when it is compared with examples from Iranian art before Islam. In Islamic art, the tail assumes particular importance within the image. Its wide and open structure symbolizes the universe and the cosmos. When set beside the Sasanian and Chinese versions of the bird, the tail of the Islamic Simurgh appears markedly Chinese in character. Symbolically, the Simurgh expresses the ideas of incorruptibility, immortality, and the dual spiritual nature of humankind. It is frequently shown within one or more decorative circles (Fig. 18). This circular arrangement signifies the universe, life, eternity, and the continuity of the cosmos. In this way, the Simurgh placed within a circle becomes an allegory of divinity and celestial power (Taheri, 2009: 19–23). Of all the media of Islamic art, Persian manuscript painting presents the greatest variety in images of the Simurgh. Miniature painters used a rich palette while depicting increasingly intricate anatomical forms of the bird. Persian miniature painting may therefore be considered the

Feature	Ancient Iran (Sasanian)		Ancient China (Fenghuang)		Islamic Iran		Ancient Egypt (Bennu)	
Tail		Long, peacocklike tail that broadens towards the tip		Four large ornamental feathers curving either upwards or downwards		Three to five large branches composed of numerous feathers		Naturalistically rendered heron tail
Head		Wolf or doglike head, elongated neck, and protruding tongue		Two hornlike feathers, a beard beneath the neck, and manelike plumage		Highly detailed head with an eaglelike beak, resembling that of a duck, goose, pheasant, eagle, or parrot		Long beak with two feathers extending behind the head
Body & Wings		Eaglelike wings		Scalelike plumage combining avian and draconic features		Large wings combining features of a dragon and a peacock		Wings folded naturally, as in waterbirds
Feet		Lionlike claws		No visible legs		Eagle or falcon talons		Long heron legs
Color		Bronze and copper tones		Red and golden dragon-like body		Wide range of warm and cool colours, with yellow and red predominating		Red and gold plumage
Composition		Usually enclosed within circular motifs		One or two birds surrounded by flowers and mythical creatures		Multiple flying Simurghs arranged around vessel rims or manuscript margins		Shown in profile, standing in a natural posture

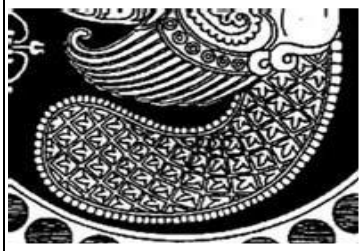
◀Table 2: Pre-iconographical description. (Authors, 2025).

Category	Ancient Iran	Ancient China	Islamic Iran	Ancient Egypt
Name	Saēna, Sēnmurv	Fenghuang	Simurgh	Bennu
Representative Birds	Falcon, eagle	Red bird, swan	Falcon, eagle, Simurgh	Swan, heron
Dwelling Place	Tree of All Seeds; Mount Alborz	Remote celestial realms	Mount Alborz; Mount *Qāf* in mystical literature	The sacred tree at Heliopolis
Birth	Lays an egg every 300 years	Reborn after one thousand years	Reborn from its own ashes	Lives for one thousand years before self-immolation
Death	Self-immolation; immortality	Self-immolation	Self-immolation	Voluntary self-immolation
Visual Form	Composite mythical creature	Rooster's beak, swallow's face, snake's neck, fish's tail, and goose's breast	Eagle's beak, peacock's tail, and dragon's body	Naturalistic heron with red and golden wings
Mythological Meaning	Solar symbol; divine messenger; bearer of Farr	Sacred fire bird; immortality; harmony of Yin and Yang	Healing; wisdom; Gabriel; the Active Intellect; the Perfect Human; Divine Truth	Rising sun; rebirth; resurrection
Lifespan	Witnesses the destruction of the world three times	Sometimes immortal; sometimes said to live for 1,000 years	Lives for 1,700 years before self-immolation	1,000 years

◀Table 3: Iconographical Analysis (Authors, 2025).

Table 4: Iconological Interpretation (Authors, 2025). ▼

Formal Characteristics

	Neck	Wings, Tail	Claws	Head	
Sasanian Simurgh					Divine glory, abstract image, Mithra, Good fortune, representing the earthly manifestation of Mthra and sun.
Islamic Simurgh					Ahuric (divine) being, Realistic representation, Embodiment of the Perfect Human, Symbol of Gabriel (the Archangel), The Supreme Truth of God's Essence, The Active Intellect.

most sophisticated artistic medium for representing the Simurgh in the Islamic period (Fig. 19).

Conclusion

Iconological Interpretation: In the art of Iran before Islam, the Simurgh appears as a mythical composite creature whose visual form combines anatomical features taken from several different animals. Its upraised wings, comparable to those of an eagle, express power, dignity, and singularity. Every surviving example examined in this study represents the Simurgh with two legs. The foreleg is extended horizontally and shown without movement, whereas the rear leg is raised slightly. Vegetal elements invariably accompany the Simurgh, most commonly the lotus, one of the most widely-used emblems of Sasanian khvarenah (divine glory) and an important sacred symbol of Mithraism before Zoroastrianism.

In addition, a further prominent feature is the circular frame that encloses the bird. The circle provides the underlying structural and compositional foundation of the motif and constitutes the visual element that first and most immediately captures the viewer's attention. Its presence reflects the relationship between the Simurgh and khvarenah, symbolised through the sun. Repeated representations of the Simurgh on royal clothing, palace ornament, and Sasanian jewellery further reinforce its association with divinity, royal authority, and sacred kingship. In Sasanian art, the Simurgh became a visual symbol of both the king's supremacy and the belief that the monarch exercised power under the protection and blessing of Ahura Mazda.

The first research question concerned visual correspondences between the Simurgh and mythological birds from neighbouring civilisations. The comparative analysis shows that the artistic representation of the Egyptian Bennu, in both form and overall appearance, differs completely from the representation of the Iranian Simurgh. Egyptian pictorial art renders the Bennu in a naturalistic manner. It possesses a long beak and legs, two feathers projecting behind the head, and the wings and body of a heron, which ancient Egyptians regarded as sacred. Its principal distinguishing feature is its colouration, dominated by red and golden yellow. In mythology, the Bennu is identified as the solar bird of the Egyptians. The Iranian Simurgh may accordingly be described as an entirely mythological creation, while the Egyptian Bennu assumes the form of a naturalistically-rendered bird. Nevertheless, despite these

formal differences, comparative mythology attributes nearly identical symbolic roles to both creatures. Each represents the sun, light, fire, divine life, and cosmic renewal.

The study also shows that the visual character of the Simurgh in Islamic art derives far more extensively from the Chinese Fenghuang than from its earlier Sasanian antecedent. Chinese art exerted a profound influence on the appearance of this mythical bird after the Mongol invasion, particularly during Ilkhanid rule. The eagle shaped Simurgh of Sasanian art gradually gave way to a form closely comparable to the Chinese Fenghuang. However, Iranian artists did not simply imitate or reproduce the Chinese model. They retained the mythical bird's general form while introducing several innovations drawn from Iranian artistic traditions and Islam. Among these were more detailed renderings of the head and face, greater diversity in the shapes of heads and tails, the placement of several Simurghs on a single vessel, and new arrangements, particularly birds shown flying around the rim of a ceramic plate.

As the motif continued to develop during the later Islamic centuries, representations of the bird acquired increasingly elaborate and carefully articulated anatomical details. The snake like tail associated with the Chinese Fenghuang was gradually replaced by a magnificent peacock tail spread widely open. This peacock tail signifies the vault of heaven. In addition, eye like markings on the feathers imply that the mythical bird possesses the ability to observe the entire universe and every event occurring within it. The authors understand this feature as an echo of Mithra in the Mihr Yasht, the deity with a thousand eyes and the eternal guardian of the Aryan land. Iranian paintings also gave the originally legless Chinese bird eagle talons or lion claws, both of which carry symbolic significance, since eagles govern the sky and lions rule the earth. The combination of eagle wings and lion claws thus expresses the Simurgh's sovereignty over the spiritual and terrestrial realms alike.

The palette used in depictions of the Simurgh also changed markedly throughout this extended process of visual and iconographic transformation. Artists replaced the bronze and copper tones typical of Sasanian painting with the yellow and red associated with the Chinese Fenghuang. As time passed, however, representations of the Islamic Simurgh employed an increasingly varied range of colours. European influence became especially apparent in the late Safavid period, when painters combined yellow and red with other colours, including green and blue.

Before Islam, the Simurgh embodied the sacred forces of Mithraism and the religious symbolism of traditions preceding Zoroastrianism. After the emergence of Islam, particularly in Suhrawardi's Philosophy of Illumination, it became the bird that abandons its earthly nest and flies towards Mount Qāf, the highest point of spiritual attainment. There it confronts the blazing sun and willingly accepts death, reduction to ashes, and eventual emergence from them. In ancient Iranian religion, turning towards the sun signified truth and righteousness. The Simurgh's immolation, its descent into the ashes, interpreted as the lowest point of the underworld, and its subsequent ascent signify the soul's movement towards spiritual perfection.

The second research question considered the influence of Islamic mystical literature, especially Suhrawardi's The Red Intellect, upon the semantic dimensions of Simurgh symbolism. The analysis shows that Suhrawardi's Philosophy of Illumination transforms the sacred fire of ancient Iranian religion into pure light. The Simurgh therefore emerges not as a material creature, but as a being composed entirely of light. In every historical period, whether before or after Islam, the Simurgh symbolises light, truth, love, fanāʾ, and the unity of the Creator with His creation.

In addition, the Avesta describes the Simurgh as a sacred creature blessed by Ahura Mazda, which bestows divine splendour (farr), prosperity, and the legitimacy of rule and authority upon monarchs and ordinary people alike. It is also presented as the guardian of concealed knowledge. Across every stage of Iranian civilisation, the Simurgh consequently remains a symbol of power, fertility, prosperity, kingship, sovereignty, divine protection, fidelity, guardianship, justice, eternity, wisdom, beauty, and victory.

Finally, the circle enclosing the Simurgh, among the most widely used compositional devices in Iranian art, embodies the perfect geometric form and recalls ideas of sanctity, divinity, immortality, eternity, and cosmic perfection. The placement of the Simurgh within a circular frame thus accentuates the creature's divine and auspicious nature. Its significance consequently exceeds the limits of pictorial symbolism, presenting the Simurgh as one of the most ancient mythological symbols of Iranian civilisation.

Endnotes

1. A divine gift in Iranian mythology acquired through the fulfilment of one's sacred duty (khwishkārī) and the attainment of spiritual perfection. See Bahar (2005).

2. The Iranian cult predating Zoroastrianism, centred on the worship of Mithra, the deity associated with the sun and covenant. See Razi (1964).

3. The earliest Greek historian, who lived during the fifth century BCE.

4. Lāhūt: the divine and spiritual realm, as opposed to Nāsūt, the earthly and material world. The Supreme Orient of Lāhūt metaphorically denotes illumination by the Light of Lights.

5. The tenth intellect within the hierarchy of emanated intellects in Islamic philosophy. It mediates the transmission of divine grace to created beings and brings human intellects and souls from potentiality into actuality. For a detailed discussion, see Sajjadi (2000, Vol. 1: 339 ff.).

6. The Qilin (Kylin), a mythical creature in Chinese mythology regarded as an auspicious omen. It is traditionally portrayed with a lion-like head and a single horn rising from its forehead (Mohammad Hassan, 2005: 64).

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رویکرد شمایل‌شناسی به پرندگان اساطیری ساسانی

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چکیده

یکی از نمونه‌های نقشمایه‌های اسطوره‌ای ایران، که پیشینهٔ حضور آن در هنر و تمدن ایرانی از دوران باستان تاکنون جلوه‌های گوناگونی داشته، پرندهٔ سیمرغ است. «اروین پانوفسکی» روش شمایل شناسی را در مطالعات هنری به‌کار گرفته و از توصیف پدیده‌های هنری به تفسیر روشمند آن‌ها می‌پردازد. این تفسیر از سه سطح دلالت‌پردازانهٔ نقشمایه، ماهیت و محتوا گذر می‌کند. بر این‌اساس این پژوهش بر آن است تا با روش شمایل‌شناسی به درک معنایی نقش نمادین سیمرغ در آثار هنری ایران در ادوار مختلف تاریخی؛ ساسانی، پیش از اسلام و ایلخانی و صفوی در دوران اسلامی، بپردازد. پرسش اصلی پژوهش در این گزاره خلاصه می‌شود که، نقشمایهٔ سیمرغ در متون مختلف هنری و ادبی ایران در ادوار مختلف ایران باستان و پس از اسلام چه دگردیسی‌های شکلی و معنایی داشته و میزان تأثیرپذیری آن از تمدن‌های همجوار چه میزان بوده است؟ پژوهش حاضر نگاهی تاریخی دارد و به شیوهٔ توصیفی-تحلیلی انجام شده است. جامعهٔ آماری تعدادی از آثار هنری (پارچه، نگاره، فلزکاری، چرم و سفال) ایران، چین باستان، مصر باستان می‌باشد؛ در خوانش تاریخی نیز متون دینی پیش از اسلام و متون اساطیری (شاهنامهٔ فردوسی) و عرفانی (عقل سرخ سهروردی)، در ایران دورهٔ اسلامی و اساطیر چین و مصر باستان موردنظر بوده‌اند. نتایج پژوهش آشکار می‌سازد؛ که تا قبل از ظهور اسلام سیمرغ پرنده‌ای است، دارای قدرت‌های مافوق طبیعی و تصویرش نشان اقتدار نیروهای کیهانی برامور دنیای خاکی است؛ به‌عنوان نمونه، بازنمود آن در لباس شاه ساسانی نشان‌دهندهٔ حمایت خدا از او و مشروعیت سیاسی و دینی وی، اعطای فر و به‌نوعی نمایش انتقال نمادین قدرت است. در دوران اسلامی سیمرغ راه‌یافته به آثار هنری و عرفانی فارسی؛ ازنظر بصری و فرمی با تأثیرپذیری از همتای چینی‌اش به سیمرغ چینی نزدیک می‌شود، از نظر اسطوره‌شناسی مانند سیمرغ اوستایی و بنو مصری نمایندهٔ خورشید، نور و حقیقت می‌گردد.

کلیدواژگان: شمایل‌شناسی، اسطوره، سیمرغ، چین، مصر.

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