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Strange Animals and Creatures in Islamic Miniatures: Focusing on Miniatures of the Conference of the Birds

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Abstract

Strange animals and creatures have always existed in every mythological culture. In Iran's pre-Islamic and post-Islamic miniatures and reliefs, there are many strange animals and creatures such as dragons and phoenix which were associated with the Iranian culture and civilization. Because of presence of these strange creatures, particularly human life, these creatures are first used in mythological life and then symbolically to express human ideas. However, these animals were present in both mythology and epics and, later in the Islamic era, in the mystical stories, educational stories and admonishing anecdotes like Sanai, Attar, and Rumi. This study tends to investigate genealogy of strange animals and creatures in ancient Iranian reliefs and their continued presence in miniatures of Islamic era as well as presence of these creatures in miniatures which are based on Attar's Conference of the Birds. In fact, this study reviews elements and symbolic concepts of animals, allowing a deeper understanding of function of elements and symbolism in works of Iranian miniaturists. Contemplation of miniatures, icons and the relationship between literature and miniatures will lead to many results in recognition of mystical intellectual foundations. Therefore, this study tends to investigate mysterious and unknown aspects of Iranian miniatures and find their relationship with culture and stories.

Keywords: Miniature, Iranian miniature, Animal, Symbol, The Conference of the Birds.

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Introduction

It can be claimed that the first feature of Iranian miniature is theme, because Iranian miniaturist is mainly inspired by epic and lyrical poems and selects stories which are derived from mythology and ancient history; events happen in the world of fantasy and fairy tales. However, these paintings are not narrative, because the illustrator avoids description of events and only describes content and theme of the story.

An important feature of Iranian miniature is that a full effort is never made to discover and explore the third dimension (depth); in other words, effect of light and shadow is ignored equally. In this case, the painted scene is a step away from the actual image reflected in eyes; this is due to certain idealism, because Iranian painters have never intended to reach realism. In fact, dominant spirit on Iranian painting is artificial expression and realistic intent almost never leads to naturalism in expression (Grabar, 2010).

Undoubtedly, this human presence is associated with an inherent dualism. Iranian miniaturist has always distinguished between the sacred world and the material world. Hence, Iranian miniature is based on separate classification of two-dimensional space, because only in this way, any horizon of two-dimensional surface of the miniature embodies a degree of existence, and, on the other hand, a degree of consciousness. Even in miniatures in which space is uniform and connected, the two-dimensional space of the miniature is completely distinguished from its surrounding three-dimensional space. Therefore, this space represents space of another world which is associated with a type of consciousness other than ordinary human consciousness. Rules of scenery science followed in Persian miniature, prior to its decline by influence of Renaissance art as well as internal factors, are rules of natural scenery science formulated by Euclid and later Islamic mathematicians such as Ibn al-Haytham and Kamaloddin Farsi. Miniature always followed these rules and principles of this science; according to a realism which is a characteristic of Islam, miniature never tended to betray two-dimensional nature on the surface of the paper and reveal it in three dimensions, while artificial scenery science did (Nasr, 2010).

Symbols of Strange Animals and Creatures in the Works of Ancient Persia

By reviewing symbols of ancient Persia briefly, this section presents animal, natural, geometric and combined symbols in this period. In fact, Islamic art is not complete without Achaemenid and Sassanid art.

A) Animal Symbols

Achaemenid animal reliefs are divided into two categories:

- a) Animals which are directed and carried out by people, such as horses, donkey, lion, duck, two humped camels, sheep, giraffes (Okapi), goat, deer and antelope.
- b) Animals which were carved without human presence, such as cow and lion (Dadvar & Mansouri, 2006).

Animals were carved on doorways of Queen Palace, Sad Sotun Palace, and Tachara in Persepolis.

1. Winged Spirit

This figure was first recorded by James Morier and Sir William Ouseley in 1811. This relief exists in Pasargad. The relief shows a man with a thick beard and four wings facing towards the left, i.e. toward the center. This man has a crown connected to a grooved hat which is completely attached to head (Stronach, 2000).

2. Winged Bovine

The winged bovine can be found in the Achaemenid Persepolis, cups and metal plates. One of the most important reliefs discovered in Susa is a winged bovine carved as a relief on rocks.

3. Pegasus

In Sassanid reliefs, only two mythological creatures can be seen, Phoenix and Pegasus. Phoenix is carved on the end wall of the veranda of Taq-e Bostan. A pair of winged horses tied to a chariot which pulls the goddess Mitra is carved on one side of a stone ossuary discovered in Bishapur.

B) Bird Motifs

1. Eagle or Hawk

For Achaemenids, eagle was as a symbol of strength and ability and a symbol of glory. They considered a flying eagle as a good omen. Achaemenids made a golden flag with an eagle; this flag sparkled in campaigns of Achaemenid kings ahead of the army over a long spear. Like lion which is the strongest and most powerful animal on earth, eagle is the most powerful bird. Herodotus spoke of eagle and significance of this bird for Iranians. In a part of his book, Cyropaedia, as well as Nabasys, Xenophon described campaigns of Cyrus the

Younger and Artaxerxes II and noted the royal flag (golden eagle with opened wings) (Sami, 1969).

The hawk with open wings is a symbol of divine protection; a flying hawk brings all earthly creatures under its influence. Thus, image of this powerful bird is a sign of dominance of universe on the earthy world. In addition to bird reliefs, however, there were combined symbols. For example, consider the winged man with a horned helmet: wing on humans or animals is a divine symbol and a sign of protection (Hall, 2001).

Miniature in the Islamic Era

Iranian-Islamic miniature evidently flourished in the eighth to the eleventh century (AH); however, pictorial works remained of the pre-Islamic era until the Mongol invasion, as well as wall paintings in later centuries are considered as other – but little-known – manifests of Iranian painting (Pakbaz, 2007). In Iranian miniature, objects are scale-free, dark and without weight, volume and shadow. Objects are reflections in a magic mirror which does not reflect things in front of itself, but illuminates them with another light and reflects them elsewhere to represent them as an image of another place. A feature of this manifestation is splendor and its effect and overall tone is excellent.

According to documents, three distinct but linked periods are considered for history of Iranian painting: 1) old traditions, distance from Greece Roman naturalism and a return to old traditions; 2) prosperity of painting; and 3) development of eclectic methods (Pakbaz, 2007).

To describe Persian miniature in the Islamic era, however, one should define the term ‘miniature’ precisely. Theorists have presented different and occasionally similar definitions of miniature; they partially agreed on the term ‘miniature’. However, different dictionaries present different definitions of miniature. For example, Moein dictionary defines miniature as a detailed small picture; a particular oriental painting in which rules of perspective and anatomy are not met, color is a decorative element and details are shown by certain intricacy (Moein, 1978). Amid dictionary defines miniature as a detailed painting which uses lapis lazuli, gold and water on paper or metal, which is more common in the East (Amid, 1984).

Although most theorists believe that it is a French word derived from two words "minimum" (meaning small and micro) and "natural" (meaning nature) which ultimately means "small nature", Will Durant (author of the History of Civilization) defines miniature as a word derived from a Hebrew word, minium, meaning red lead which was imported by Romans from Spain. Red lead is bright purple and it is useful for gilding books. In this case, Tajvidi

defines miniature as a term derived from minium (meaning a certain red color of red lead); western nations decorated books by this color.

Currently, the term miniature is used as a unite and synonym word; a group of theorists suggested the term نگارگری for miniature and emphasized on its application instead of miniature (which refers to a decorated small picture with details. In definition of these two words, it can be considered as a painting with very fine details by using tools such as watercolor or gouache in a very small scale.

Attar's Conference of the Birds

The Conference of the Birds is a famous work of Attar of Nishapur. This Masnavi is written in the sixth century AH. Attar's works are very important in the context of Islamic mysticism. Although few miniatures have remained from the Conference of the Birds, these works are masterpieces of Persian miniature and indicate effect of this literal work on Islamic visual culture (Foruzanfar, 2010).

This is a story of birds which tend to search for the king of the birds, Simorgh, under the guidance and leadership of a hoopoe. Of all the birds which searched for Simorgh, only thirty birds were able to reach the king's palace, where they found that Simorgh is none other than those thirty birds.

This allegorical work is a perfect example of symbolism which quotes very deep and meaningful stories using animals and birds. This allegorical work is a symbol of Sufi's mystic journey to the truth. Hoopoe which is messenger of the King Solomon to the Queen of Sheba is a symbol of Sheikh Sufi whose presence is assumed inevitable in mystic journey to God (Zarinkoob, 2004). In decrypting this allegorical work, it has been told that Attar wrote the Conference of the Birds to express truth in recognition of God and only believed that whoever knows himself, knows God (Servatian, 2002).

Attar started the story of birds by this verse:

Hurray! The guided Hoopoe

The messenger of truth to valleys

While narrating the main story, Attar narrates many stories and anecdotes which are narrated through the main story in relation to their respective sections. However, Attar describes seven valleys which are highly important in Islamic philosophy and mysticism. The birds pass through these seven valleys to reach truth; they include:

1. Valley of the Quest, where hundreds of suffering and evil arises at any moment;
2. Valley of Love, where entrants are trapped in fire;
3. Valley of Knowledge, where people choose a path based on their talents;
4. Valley of Detachment, where seven seas are a lagoon and pond, and seven stars are nothing but flare;
5. Valley of Unity, where everything is connected;
6. Valley of Wonderment, where every breath is a blade and every moment is a lamentation;
7. Valley of Poverty and Annihilation, where speaking is not allowed and it is forgetfulness (ibid, 24).

One of stories of the Conference of the Birds is very famous and it has been depicted in illustrated versions of the book more than others; this is the story of Sheikh Sanan which is the longest story narrated in the Conference of the Birds (Satari, 1999).

However, this study focuses on animals, birds and creatures depicted in miniatures of the Conference of the Birds. Hence, this study explains typological features of mythical animals and creatures in Islamic miniature and describes animals, birds and creatures depicted in miniatures of Attar's Conference of the Birds. Pictures of miniatures are presented at the end of the sections.

Symbolism of Mythical and Mythological Creatures in the Conference of the Birds

Symbolism of mythical creatures is the oldest method of expression. Human expressed his first desires and demands in the form of shapes and designs which were result of his imagination by imitating nature and the world around. These designs and shapes found multiple connotations over time and thus act as a symbol and allegory. There are many ways to describe the relationship between animal and human and many factors influence this relationship. For early humans who lived in caves, worship (as imitation) of other animals and communication with them was a way to overcome separation, loneliness, and death. In fact, animals are valuable not only in Iranian myths but also in myths of other countries. Praise of animals spread from totems and prehistoric mythology to religions.

In visual arts, the artist creates his work based on his attitude to a specific subject and complex messages contained in this work lead to a visual connection. It is not merely an imitation of nature, but unique imagination of the artist gives audience a moment chosen from the world in the range of symbolic elements in the form of thinking beyond time and place in

every part of the work. In addition, the myth, as a manifestation of culture, is directly related to ethical creativity. Art and myth, like two sides of a coin, have same origin. These two are different in their presentation; moreover, myth results from collective creativity and expresses ethnic and tribal belief. However, art and myth are both products of society and culture (Yahaghi, 1990).

Plant, geometric, epigraphic, animal and human designs are motifs used in various arts of the Islamic era. However, spirit and nature of Islamic art is reflected in plant and geometric designs, while human and animal motifs were transferred from pre-Islamic art to the Islamic period. Meanwhile, there are motifs which are both animal and human, making a mysterious creature which roots back to ancient civilizations. These are the most mysterious motifs existing in miniatures of the Islamic era (Binyon, et al., 2004).

This section describes mythical animals and creatures depicted in miniatures of Attar's Conference of the Birds. Most of these mythical animals and creatures are selected based on significance of their symbolic role in miniatures.

1. Simurgh

One of the Iranian imaginary animals, which was especially important during the Sassanid era is *sīna-mrū*, or as introduced in Avesta, *simurgh*. *Simurgh* has different natures of lion and eagle or hawk; *simurgh* is visualization of the goddess of heaven and earth waters, *Aredvi Sura*, or *Anahita/Nahid* (Pope, et al., 2001). *Simurgh* is incarnated in body of the Zoroastrian gods and angels. However, incarnation of *Simurgh* as the god of victory – the god of Bahram – is not the only reason for divinity of *Simurgh* (Soltanigard-Faramarzi, 1993).

The word *simurgh* has been mentioned in the Avesta as "*mərəγō Saēnō*" in which the first part means "bird" and the second part is read "Sin" with a slight change in Pahlavi and "Si" in Persian Dari and never represents the number thirty but it means hawk (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009). *Simurgh* nest in the mythical Alborz Mountains and, as noted in Zoroastrian works, on the amazing tree of *Gaokerena* in the middle of *Farakhkart* Sea. *Simurgh* contains seeds of all plants; every time it arises from the tree, thousands of branches grow on the tree and thousands of branches break when it sits over the tree. Different plants grow of these seeds (Hinnells, 2003). *Simurgh* is a symbol of active intellect and the winged angel. It is the mirror of love and manifestation of truth. Undoubtedly, the Avestan *simurgh* is sacred. *Simurgh* is one of the most famous creatures of Avesta. *Simurgh* seems like a great eagle; it is squatting over a tree containing seeds of plants and herbal remedies. In Pahlavi

texts, heavy weight of Simurgh and its wings break branches of this tree, and the winds scatter its seeds across the land.

The Sassanid Simurgh is a popular motif composed of animal and bird which was often shown on silk fabrics, silverware and moldings. Simurgh is incarnated in Zoroastrian deities; however, incarnation of Simurgh as the god of victory – the god of Bahram – is not the only reason for divinity of Simurgh. Simurgh is also referred to as an angel; an example of female angel can be seen in reliefs of Taq-e Bostan.

Simurgh is a big bird with broad wings and great power. Although Avesta less talks about Simurgh (saeno), Yasht XII explains that Simurgh resides at the top of a large tree called ‘vispo-bish’ (healing all) in the middle of the ‘Farakhkart’ sea. Seeds of all plants are deposited in this tree (Razi, 1992). Therefore, Simurgh resides on top of this tree. Moreover, another tree called gaokerena grew to protect harvisp tokhma. According to Pahlavi stories, whoever eats of its leaves finds eternal life. Later, because gaokerena was in the middle of sea, its leaves became water, known as water of life (ibid: 687).

In the Wonders of Creation, Simurgh is a strong bird which can easily grab a whale and eat animals such as lion, dragon and rhino (Tousi, 1966).

However, Simurgh is a mysterious, sacred bird associated with the world beyond and it is never polluted by material world. Outer characteristics of Simurgh are similar to characteristics of Gabriel, an Islamic Archangel (Pournamdarian, 2003).



Figure 1: Miniature of Simurgh in Attar's Conference of the Birds

2. Bovine

The root of the word گاو in Avesta is gow and the word ‘gava’ means bull; moreover, qavadaenus is used exclusively to designate cow (Razi, 1992). In addition to its ordinary meaning

in current Farsi, the word گاو has a very extensive meaning in Avesta and it is applied to all useful animals (Pourdavood, 2001).

Bovine is an animal symbolized in most lands and most of these symbols are common. In fact, bovine was so useful and beneficial in people's lives that it became sacred and often linked to creation and blessing. In many cultures, bovine is known as a sacrificial animal; it is one of few animals toward which attitudes are positive. In fact, bovine is a sacred creature, a symbol of being and life in ancient civilizations. Aryans did not eat beef and did not sacrifice bovine. Avesta also prohibited killing of bovine, while bovine was sacrificed in Mithraism. In Mithraism pictures, the god of Mithra is depicted while sacrificing a bovine. This led to prosperity (Razi, 1992).

According to Zoroastrian mythology, bovine is the first creation of Ahura Mazda. Ahriman sent the demon of greed and suffering and hunger to kill the bovine. When the bovine died, grains and plants arose from its body (Hinnells, 2003).

In Zoroastrianism, those who harm animals (particularly bovine) – especially followers of the religion before Zoroastrianism who allowed sacrifice of bovine – are damned.

Ahriman attacks the bovine by hunger, greed and need. Before the Ahriman comes to the bovine, Ohrmazd gives bang to the bovine to reduce suffering of the disease. Ahriman's attack weakens the bovine and the bovine dies on its right side. Various grains and herbs grow out of the bovine's body. Meanwhile, geush urvan, the soul of livestock, addressed the Ohrmazd that who is the leader of creatures on the earth? The bovine's sperm is sent to the moon and entrusted in the god of moon. The sperm is refined in the moon, it is conceived and then two bovines are born in Airyanem Vaejah (Amouzegar, 1995).

Zoroaster has banned sacrifice of bovine; in Shahnameh, Bahram'gur set rules to uphold the sanctity of bovine (ibid: 869). The gods sometimes appeared in the form of bovine: Ahura-created Bahram well appeared in the body of a beautiful bull by golden horns at the top of his horns (Pourdavood, 2001). Sanctity of bovine is associated with herding and nomadic life of Iranians. In the land of the Medes and Persians, life was simple: The most important economic activity was to graze great herds of sheep and goats in mountain valleys and herding cattle was sacred (Ravandi, 1978).

Bovine is a symbol of universe and creation of water and soil and its nature is cold and wet and damp. Hence, it is linked to the moon and represents "workable forces". In some Mithraism epigraphs, a lion paws on the rump of a bovine and kills it (Kazazi, 1989). In Iran, bovine symbolizes animal life and prosperity on Earth. In the columns of Persepolis, which are the symbol of prosperity, there are reliefs of bovine head.

Bovine is also a symbol of the moon; in ancient relics, its horns are depicted in the form of crescent. This assimilation is very old (in addition to India and Iran) and it is also certified in Egypt and Babylon. However, varza belongs to Mitra, the god of sun, which is a symbol of the god of death and new life, though it keeps the angle of death (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009). Farmers and villagers sacrificed bovine for blessing of the crop, farm and their life; they believed that their farm and life would be unblessed if sacrifice was not done. Thus, bovine was a symbol of sacrifice and fertility and its value increased with its sacrifice. Its freedom is a sign of fertility. Continnence and modesty, without which fertility is impossible in the same order and at the same level, will promote its lifeblood; this leads to its fertility of another type; spiritual fertility (ibid: 690).

Bovine as a symbol of prosperity and a sacred animal was a respected animal in Indian and Iranian mythology. In miniatures of the Conference of the Birds, presence of bovine is depicted as a part of land fertility:



Figure 2: The Conference of the Birds; King Hussein Bāyqarā era, Herat school, attributed to Behzad, the Metropolitan Museum. A: Woodcutter; B: Sheikh Mehneh and villager

3. Peacock

Peacock in the middle of the sun with the Tree of Life is important in the art of Iran. In Zoroastrianism, peacock was considered as a sacred bird. In ancient times, it was believed that peacock became immortal by drinking water of life. Therefore, peacock is considerably associated with eternal life. Furthermore, peacock is associated with the Tree of Life, particularly in the Sassanid era. Widespread presence of this tree is remarkable in artistic works of Iran. In many works of Sassanid era, there is a peacock in decorations or on either side of the Tree of Life. For example, peacock can be seen reliefs of Taq-e Bostan, fabrics or Sassanid Ctesiphon tables (Khazaei, 2007). In an illustrated version of the Conference of the Birds, peacock and hoopoe are seen together:



Figure 3: Miniature of peacock in the Conference of the Birds

4. Capra

Capra is a female sheep. According to Moein dictionary, some breeds of male sheep have diagonal and circular horns. In this case, they are called rams. However, female sheep of every race is generally called Capra (Moein, 1978).

In Avesta, the term Maesa means Capra, ram and the male sheep (Razi, 1992). In Avesta, Khvarenah sometimes appeared on kings in the form of this animal. Angel of Bahram was revealed to the Aryan prophet Zoroaster for the eighth time in the body of a Capra with entwined and beautiful horns (Kazazi, 1989). When the kingdom shifts from the fifth Ardavān to Ardashir Babakan, Khvarenah in the body of a large ram jumps on Ardashir's horse and joins him (Kazazi, 1989).

This animal has been depicted frequently in Islamic paintings and miniatures. In versions of the Conference of the Birds, there is a white Capra on top of the mountain and peacock and other birds and animals under the mountain.



Figure 4: A version of the Conference of the Birds, extensions of Isfahan School, Metropolitan Museum, Sheikh Sanan story

5. Hoopoe

In the ancient religious and mythological texts, hoopoe is not mentioned; however, this study describes this bird symbolically due to its very important presence in the Conference of the Birds.

Hoopoe is an Arabic word and refers to a bird. Different manifestations of hoopoe appear in superstitions and legends made in public mind. These stories and folk beliefs which are often far from reality are not only common in Iranian culture, but also in Arabian, Christian and Greek mythologies. For example, hoopoe is a newly-wed bride which has a comb on her head in front of a mirror; her father in law arrives and she flies with the comb on her head (Hedayat, 1977).

In literature, hoopoe sometimes is introduced only as a messenger without other elements of the story of Solomon and it loses its symbolic and mystical role. Often, these examples can be found in works of poets whose poetic approach is manifestation of nature.

Various features of hoopoe are well presented in poetic descriptions and similes and metaphors in the form of literary expressions, commentary or interpretations. However, the contemporary literature rarely mentions hoopoe, while other symbolic birds such as Simurgh are more reflected. Among birds, hoopoe is more prominent in Persian literature because of its key role in a Quranic story. In addition to characteristics such as crown and colorful plumage color, it has become a religious myth. In the magnificent work of Attar, this bird is a leader and director.



Figure 5: Miniature of hoopoe and peacock in an illustrated version of the Conference of the Birds

Conclusion

In summary, although the number of the illustrated versions of the Conference of the Birds is not comparable to works such as Shahnameh Tahmasebi and Khamse; however, available works emphasize the role of the Conference of the Birds in Iranian mystical literature and Persian miniature since its formation.

It is noteworthy that the Herat miniaturist, Behzad, found the anecdotes and stories of the Conference of the Birds an excellent opportunity for creative realism and created masterpieces of Persian miniature. Symbolic expression in mystical literature in which the Conference of the Birds is linked with visual language of miniature.

This study tended to introduce Persian miniature (Islamic and pre-Islamic) and summarize images of animal reliefs in Achaemenid and Sassanid era. By introducing the Conference of the Birds, this study described strange animals and creatures shown in miniatures of this mystical and poetic work. In the illustrated versions of this work, particularly in miniatures of Behzad, these miniatures were symbolic, creative, and artistic.

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