

The Sasanian Simorgh and Its Reflections in Islamic and Byzantine Art

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Abstract

The Simorgh, a prominent composite creature in ancient Iranian mythology and art, achieved its most stylized and symbolic form during the Sasanian period. A mythological hybrid with canine or leonine heads, eagle wings, scaled bodies, and peacock-like tails, it became a key motif in Sasanian luxury arts. This study introduces a new typology of the Sasanian Simorgh based on a comparative formal analysis of its visual variations in silk textiles, silverware, and architectural ornamentation. Four main morphological groups are identified, each defined by distinctive tail structures and compositional elements. Employing Panofsky's iconological method in conjunction with the theories of Hans Belting and Michael Baxandall on visual transmission, the research explores how the Simorgh motif was recontextualized in Islamic and Byzantine art. The findings demonstrate how the proposed typology enhances our understanding of the Simorgh's visual transmission across cultural and temporal boundaries, revealing consistent patterns of adaptation and transformation in Islamic and Byzantine art. This typological framework thus contributes to broader discussions on image circulation, visual hybridity, and cultural exchange in Late Antique and Byzantine visual cultures.

Keywords: Sasanian Simorgh, typology, visual transmission, Islamic art, Byzantine art

Introduction

The art of the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) stands out in the visual culture of Late Antiquity for its courtly luxury and symbolic richness. Among its most compelling elements are mythical hybrid creatures, which conveyed messages of dynastic power, cosmic order, and legitimacy. One of the most distinctive of these beings is the Simorgh, a composite creature that typically features a lion's or dog's head, eagle wings, and a peacock-like tail.

While the Simorgh has been frequently discussed in Persian epic literature, particularly in post-Sasanian narratives, its visual typology within Sasanian art remains insufficiently studied. Despite its recurring presence in Sasanian textiles, silverware, and architectural ornamentation, no systematic classification of its visual variations has yet been established. The differences in tail design and body form across media suggest multiple iconographic types that merit closer analysis. This motif underwent a number of transformations as it traveled beyond Iran through trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange, which shaped its appearance in Islamic, Byzantine, and even Western medieval art.

This study introduces a new typology of the Sasanian Simorgh based on visual analysis of preserved artworks, including textiles, metalwork, and architectural elements. It also investigates the symbolic functions and cross-cultural reconfigurations of the motif, with particular focus on its reception and reinterpretation in Islamic and Byzantine contexts.

By combining formal classification with a study of visual transmission, this research sheds light on hybrid iconography in Late Antique and medieval artistic traditions. It also highlights the Sasanian Empire's mediating role as a cultural bridge between East and West, contributing to broader debates on image circulation and the political significance of hybrid motifs in imperial art.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework that integrates visual typology, iconographic interpretation, and cross-cultural analysis. It aims to examine the Simorgh as both an artistic form and a carrier of cultural meaning.

Comparative visual analysis is used to apply a typological approach to Simorgh representations, which are grouped by recurring formal features, such as tail configuration, wings, and head type, across various media, including textiles, metalwork, and architectural decoration.

The methodology is informed by Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered iconological model: pre-iconographical description, iconographical identification, and iconological interpretation (Panofsky, 1955). This structure

enables the study to move beyond surface analysis and address the symbolic, religious, and political meanings embedded in the Simorgh motif.

To explore the motif's migration beyond Sasanian Iran, the research engages with theories of transcultural visibility and cultural transfer, particularly the perspectives of Hans Belting on image circulation (Belting, 1994), and Michael Baxandall's concept of the period eye and visual culture (Baxandall, 1985).

These approaches help to frame the Simorgh not only as a symbol but also as a visual motif that can be reshaped to suit the artistic styles and cultural values of Islamic, Byzantine, and Christian contexts.

Further, post-structuralist theories of hybridity, particularly those advanced by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994), inform this study's interpretation of the Simorgh as a dynamic hybrid construct integrating mythology, authority, and cultural signification. Its evolving forms across different imperial contexts reflect both its symbolic resilience and its capacity for transformation within courtly, religious, and popular visual cultures.

By combining typological analysis with iconographic and transcultural approaches, this framework enables a comprehensive examination of the Simorgh as both a formal artistic entity and a cross-cultural signifier with a sustained transhistorical presence.

Literature Review

While the Simorgh has been extensively examined in Persian literary and mythological contexts, its role as a visual and iconographic motif in Sasanian art has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Existing studies on Sasanian iconography tend to focus on royal imagery, hunting scenes, and Zoroastrian symbolism, often relegating hybrid creatures like the Simorgh to the realm of decorative or marginal motifs. Nevertheless, several foundational works provide critical groundwork for the present investigation.

One of the earliest systematic contributions to the study of Sasanian visual culture is Kurt Erdmann's analysis of Persian textiles. The author highlighted the continuity of Sasanian motifs, including mythical hybrids, such as the Simorgh, in later Islamic and Byzantine textiles (Erdmann, 1957). His research demonstrated the long-lasting impact of Sasanian imagery through processes of visual transmission.

Similarly, Ernst Herzfeld and Roman Ghirshman made important strides in classifying Sasanian silverware and architectural reliefs. While they acknowledged the presence and artistic value of hybrid creatures, their analyses did not provide detailed typological frameworks (Herzfeld, 1941; Ghirshman, 1962).

More recently, the exhibition catalog *Les Perses Sassanides* offered a broader art-historical perspective on Sasanian aesthetics and their enduring

legacy (Demange, 2006). By emphasizing luxury objects such as silver plates and silk textiles, the catalog illustrated how Sasanian motifs spread beyond the empire's borders. While it acknowledged the reuse and reinterpretation of such imagery in early Islamic, Armenian, and Byzantine contexts, it did not provide a focused analysis of the Simorgh.

From a theoretical standpoint, Jurgis Baltrušaitis examined the migration of hybrid and monstrous imagery across cultural boundaries, particularly within Western medieval art (Baltrušaitis, 1981). His insights are especially relevant for understanding the absorption and transformation of Sasanian forms in Christian visual traditions. Similarly, Oleg Grabar investigated the adaptation of pre-Islamic motifs in Islamic art, emphasizing the persistence and recontextualization of Iranian elements (Grabar, 1992).

Despite these valuable contributions, a notable gap remains in the literature concerning the morphological classification of the Simorgh within Sasanian art. Although its symbolic associations are often mentioned in mythological discourse, its visual evolution, typological diversity, and transcultural transmission have not been systematically analyzed. This study seeks to address that lacuna by combining a typological investigation of the Simorgh's iconography with a contextual exploration of its dissemination across artistic and cultural boundaries.

Methodology

This study examines Sasanian artworks, including textiles, metalware, and architectural ornaments, that feature the Simorgh motif. Through the identification of recurring morphological elements, particularly in tail design and body composition, the research establishes a four-part typology. A comparative analysis with Byzantine and Islamic visual materials further illuminates patterns of transmission and reinterpretation. By integrating formal typological analysis with iconographic interpretation, the study situates the Simorgh's evolution within a broader transcultural framework, highlighting its shifting symbolic functions across different artistic and cultural systems.

Sasanian motif migration

Numerous objects, textiles, and reliefs depict the Sasanian Simorgh, reflecting its prominent role in the empire's decorative repertoire. Sasanian motifs, particularly those found on textiles, played a crucial role in shaping medieval visual culture. Following the fall of the Sasanian Empire and the rise of the Umayyad Caliphate, many regional workshops continued to employ Sasanian designs under the new Islamic rule. Through extensive trade networks and cultural exchanges between East and West, Sasanian artistic forms exerted lasting influence on contemporary and later civilizations,

including Islamic, Byzantine, and medieval Christian art. These motifs persisted well beyond the empire's collapse, often traveling through intermediary regions such as Armenia, a territory alternately ruled by the Sasanians and Byzantines, which facilitated their transmission into Christian artistic traditions. As noted by Demange, "In a world with close cultural connections from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, Iran served as a key intermediary between the West and Asia, dominating the Far East and the major spice and silk routes." Sasanian silk, in particular, gained considerable international prominence and influence during this period. The imitation and reproduction of Sasanian silverware also continued for at least a century after the empire's demise. (Demange, 2006)

Metalware, especially silver vessels, represents one of the most distinctive and refined expressions of Sasanian art. Lavishly decorated cisterns, vases, and cups exemplify the luxurious aesthetics of the Sasanian court. Among these, silver trays are particularly significant, as they feature the most intricate designs and iconographic content, serving as key artifacts for understanding Sasanian visual culture (Fray, 1996).

Distinguishing between late Sasanian and early Islamic-period vessels is often challenging, as many continued to be used and circulated long after their production. In some cases, these artifacts were exchanged as luxury diplomatic gifts even centuries after their manufacture. During the Crusades (11th–12th centuries CE), significant quantities of Sasanian silk textiles reached Western Europe through the trade in sacred objects.

These richly woven fabrics were often repurposed to enshroud the relics of saints, attesting to their perceived sanctity and value. As noted by Scarce, the prestige of Iranian textiles had already been firmly established during the Sasanian period through long-standing trade relations with Mediterranean polities. (Scarce, 2003).

Although the fall of the Sasanian dynasty brought an end to the large royal ateliers, smaller regional and provincial workshops gradually emerged. These workshops continued to produce silverware that imitated classical Sasanian designs, ensuring the persistence of the visual language well into the Islamic period (Demange, 2006).

During the 12th and 13th centuries, Syrian warehouses served as key redistribution hubs, receiving goods from regional production centers in Baghdad, Mosul, and Nusaybin. These products, including locally manufactured silks, were exported alongside Syrian textiles, facilitating the diffusion of Eastern motifs across the Mediterranean. As Ebersolt observed, *"Islam, which introduced many geometric, heraldic, abstract, and monster motifs into Roman art, left its mark on Western art. The connection between East and West was never broken in the 13th century and beyond"* (Ebersolt, 1929). This sustained interaction between East and West was reinforced

through trade, pilgrimage, and the Crusades, particularly along the coastal regions of the Mediterranean (Baltrušaitis, 1981).

Several major centers of textile production are well documented in historical sources. Mosul, for example, was widely celebrated for its luxurious silk and gold-thread fabrics, which Marco Polo famously praised for their exquisite craftsmanship. In Baghdad, silk textiles were frequently adorned with small sculptural figures and ornamental scenes, and they were reportedly worn by Hulagu Khan and his court after the conquest of Syria. Damascus, meanwhile, gained renown for its production of damask fabrics, which often featured decorative motifs of Persian origin or influence (Demange, 2006).

Iranian artisans were particularly skilled in the manufacture of fine silk textiles. A remarkable example of the Western reception of these luxury fabrics appears in a painting by Broederlam, an artist active in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. In one scene, a figure is depicted wearing a sumptuous Persian textile decorated with Chinese-style phoenix motifs (Baltrušaitis, 1981; Fig. 1).

In terms of silver and gilded vessels, Iran's artistic influence on Western medieval art was more profound than that of Syria, Egypt, or other neighboring cultures (Grabar, 1967). During the early Islamic centuries, numerous Sasanian motifs were absorbed into the emerging Islamic visual language. These included emblematic designs such as the Tree of Life, hybrid and mythical creatures (griffins, dragons, and Simorghs), winged horses, and animal combat scenes within circular pearl borders. Among these motifs, the Simorgh emerged as one of the most iconic and enduring symbols. The Simorgh, also known as Senmurv or Sen Mrū and closely related to Sina Mrū in Pazand, is a legendary and mythological bird whose name is derived from the Avestan term *mərəyō saēnō* "Saena bird". In Sasanian visual culture, the Simorgh appears frequently on silver vessels, bowls, water jugs, cylinder seals, and luxury textiles, as well as in later Byzantine and medieval artworks.

In silk textile decoration, as in many other refined Sasanian artifacts, both real and mythical animals, including the Simorgh, were prominently featured. These often appeared in dynamic compositions alongside creatures such as rams, dragons, ducks bearing royal ribbons (a symbol of sovereignty), winged horses, and roosters (see figs. 1 and 2).

A critical distinction must be drawn between the Simorgh of Sasanian art and the Simorgh of Persian literary tradition, especially as described in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. While the former is often a stylized, heraldic image serving decorative or symbolic functions, the literary Simorgh embodies a deeply mythologized and spiritual character. According to the *Shahnameh*, Avesta, and Pahlavi texts, the Simorgh is a majestic, awe-inspiring creature. Its immense wings resemble a vast cloud heavy with mountain waters; its body features four wings on each side, each richly adorned in vibrant colors. With

eagle-like beaks, human-like faces, and the power to lift even an elephant, it earned the title “King of Birds” (Yahaghi, 1996). (Yahaghi, 1996).

In the narratives of *Shahnameh*, the Simorgh is intimately associated with the legendary hero Rostam, serving as his protector and guardian (see fig. 2). Several ancient sources describe the Simorgh as harboring a profound enmity toward serpents and residing in a paradisiacal place rich in water. Its feathers are said to shimmer with a copper-like hue. Simorgh is considered a benevolent creature by nature and is believed to possess healing powers. Its wings are said to be capable of healing wounds and illnesses. This mythical bird is described as so ancient that it has witnessed the world’s destruction and rebirth three times. For these vast ages, the Simorgh is believed to have acquired deep wisdom and universal knowledge (Simpson, 2011). When the Simorgh takes flight, the leaves of the Tree of Life are said to tremble, causing the seeds of its fruits to fall and scatter across the world. These seeds are believed to give rise to previously unknown plant species with healing properties capable of alleviating human suffering. The Simorgh is also associated with the Tree of Knowledge and Awareness, where it is said to nest. By flapping its wings, the bird spreads seeds from this sacred tree throughout the earth. In certain traditions, the Simorgh even acts as an aide to divine messengers, further emphasizing its spiritual role.

In the celebrated Sufi allegory *Mantiq al-Tayr* (The Conference of the Birds) by Attar of Neyshabur, the Simorgh is portrayed as the sovereign of all birds. According to one legend, the Simorgh lived within fire for 1,700 years before undergoing self-immolation. In other accounts, it is described as both immortal and eternal, residing in the Tree of Knowledge. This connection to rebirth and transcendence parallels the qualities often attributed to the phoenix (Talbot Rice, 2007).

As a result of their shared symbolic associations, the Simorgh and the phoenix are often identified with one another. Many Iranian paintings, especially from the post-Mongol period, depict the Simorgh in the form of the Chinese phoenix. Following the Mongol invasion and the subsequent influx of Chinese artistic influence into Iran, the iconography of the Simorgh increasingly adopted the aesthetic features of the *Fenghuang*, the mythical bird of Chinese tradition (see fig. 3). The phoenix is a radiant, mythical creature known for its long, colorful plumage and its cycle of death and rebirth. According to legend, after living for centuries, it builds a pyre, self-immolates, and is reborn from its ashes. In Chinese cosmology, the *Fenghuang* is considered the second among the four sacred creatures and symbolizes the harmonious balance between yin and yang (Julien, 1989).

The dissemination of Chinese visual forms and motifs across Asia and Europe intensified during the mid-13th century. In 1265, Hulagu Khan famously transported several Chinese artists and engineers to Iran, which

facilitated the transmission of Chinese artistic models into the Persian visual tradition (Bushell, 1910). This influence is particularly evident in the adoption of sophisticated painting techniques such as rich chiaroscuro, as well as in the increased representation of fantastical creatures like the classical dragon and phoenix (Baltrušaitis, 1981).

Over time, the Simorgh evolved to symbolize divinity and transcendence within Iranian culture. In later Persian literature, the bird is sometimes referred to as the Homa, a creature associated with divine favor and kingship. It is known in Arab traditions under the name Rukh, a colossal bird with two horns and four ridges along its back that is said to live in India (Mode, 1977). These overlapping representations underscore the fluidity of the Simorgh's identity and its adaptability across cultural and religious boundaries.

On the other hand, the Simorgh shares significant similarities with the Anqa of Arab folk literature. The Anqa is described as a colossal bird that existed prior to the creation of humankind and is often regarded as an analogue to the Simorgh (ibid.). In Persian representations, the Anqa is often depicted as a man with a human face (Stephenson, 1928). These comparative examples suggest that the Simorgh, as depicted in Persian mythology and popular literature, bears a greater resemblance to the Chinese Phoenix, the Rokh, and the Anqa than to the Sasanian version of the creature.

The Sasanian Simorgh

In Sasanian art, the Simorgh is represented as a composite mythical creature, typically combining anatomical elements from multiple animals. It is most commonly described as possessing the body and head of a dog, the forelegs of a lion, and the tail of a peacock. According to Mode, "the Simorgh that scatters seeds is a giant mythical Iranian bird symbolizing the unity of earth, air (sky), and water" (Mode, 1977).

This triadic symbolism is reflected in the creature's hybrid form: the dog-like head and body signify its terrestrial nature; the leonine (or occasionally amphibian) forelegs further emphasize its earthly association; the feathered wings embody the element of air; and the fish-like scales that cover parts of its body represent water. Thus, the Sasanian Simorgh visually encapsulates a cosmological harmony among the fundamental elements (Fig.7).

The Composition of the Sasanian Simorgh

As previously noted, the Sasanian Simorgh typically features a dog-like head, the forelegs of a lion, a body covered with fish-like scales, bird-like wings, and a peacock's tail. In Sasanian decorative arts, this fantastical hybrid motif is found frequently in textiles, metalwork, and architectural

ornamentation, such as in the sculptural reliefs at Taq-e Bostan in western Iran (Fig. 8), and even on the walls of a church in Armenia (Fig. 10).

From an alternative interpretive perspective, the Sasanian Simorgh may also be viewed as a stylized peacock with the head and forelimbs of a dog or lion. In certain historical sources, it is referred to as the “Simorgh-Peacock,” a term that aptly captures the visual characteristics of the Sasanian representation. Among its anatomical features, the peacock tail stands out as particularly distinctive and symbolically potent, carrying broad significance across numerous artistic traditions. (Talbot Rice, 2007).

Across numerous cultures, the peacock serves as a potent symbol of paradise, immortality, and the soul's eternal journey. Its vibrant, iridescent feathers are frequently interpreted as metaphors for the richness, diversity, and unity of creation. In Islamic visual culture, the expansive and radiant peacock tail evokes notions of cosmic order and mirrors the immensity of the galaxy, thus rendering the bird an emblem of celestial harmony and spiritual beauty. Similarly, in Christian iconography, the peacock is associated with the starry heavens and the incorruptibility of the soul. The peacock, often depicted with a tail containing a hundred eyes, is commonly depicted standing beside the Tree of Life. In this context, the creature symbolizes the duality of human nature: the earthly and the spiritual, the visible and the hidden. It reflects the soul's awareness and its transcendental potential.

The Simorgh, closely related to the iconography of the peacock, is frequently placed within a circular decorative frame composed of various ornamental motifs (Fig. 7). These repeated geometric or floral elements reinforce the sense of cyclical movement and visual dynamism, symbolizing concepts such as the cosmos, the rhythm of life, vitality, and eternal recurrence. In certain depictions, the body or wings of the Simorgh extend slightly beyond the confines of the circular frame while remaining enclosed within it (Fig. 8). The slight compositional break enhances the tension between containment and transcendence, echoing the creature's liminal nature between earthly and celestial.

Such representations function as allegories of divinity and celestial forces, underscoring the profound symbolic association between the Simorgh and the sacred geometry of the circle. As previously noted, the Sasanian Simorgh is typically rendered as a composite creature, combining elements of a dog, a lion, and a bird. Among these features, particular emphasis is placed on the varying shapes and configurations of its peacock-like tail, which carries rich symbolic significance across cultural and artistic traditions.

Results

The visual analysis of Sasanian artworks featuring the Simorgh motif has resulted in the identification of four principal morphological types. These

types are categorized based on tail structure, anatomical composition, and the medium in which they appear, namely, textiles, silverware, and architectural reliefs. This classification reveals discernible patterns of symbolic emphasis and regional variation, offering a more nuanced understanding of the Simorgh's role within the courtly visual language and its subsequent transcultural reinterpretations.

Group I: Peacock Tail with Geometric Motifs

This type is characterized by a voluminous, upward-curving peacock tail adorned with repeating geometric patterns. The Simorgh is typically depicted with the head of a lion or dog, eagle-like wings, and a compact, circular body composition. Examples of this type appear in Sasanian silk textiles (Fig. 4), Byzantine adaptations (Fig. 5), and silver ewers (Fig. 7). Notably, this morphological variant exerted widespread influence on both Christian and Islamic visual traditions.

Group II: Tail with Vegetal and Abstract Motifs

This group is distinguished by a peacock-like tail embellished with vegetal forms, floral buds, and abstract spiral patterns. The overall composition often includes ornamental extensions along the wings and torso, contributing to a more organic and fluid visual language. This style emphasizes decorative elegance and symbolic growth, as seen in a silver-gilt tray dated to the 7th century CE, which serves as a representative example (Fig. 18).

Group III: Bird-like Simorgh with Spiral Beak

This type presents the Simorgh fully as a bird, resembling an eagle. It includes a rounded, spiral-shaped beak and a tail that mimics a crest. The decorations harmonize across the head, wings, and tail. The design often appears in ivory or reliefs (Fig. 19).

Group IV: Feather-Shaped Tail Motifs

The most stylized group, featuring a tail made of repeated feather-like flames, sometimes combined with fish scales. The Simorgh is a hybrid creature that combines the characteristics of a lion, a dog, an eagle, and a peacock. It appears on late silver vessels and even Chinese Sui dynasty art (Figs. 20–22).

Table 1: Typology of the Sasanian Simorgh

Group	Tail Type	Body & Head	Medium	Period / Location	Example (Fig.)
I	Peacock tail with geometric patterns	Dog/lion body, eagle wings, dog/lion head	Silk textile, silver	6th–7th c. CE / Iran, Byzantium	Fig. 4, 5, 7
II	Tail with vegetal and spiral motifs	Lion body, decorated with plant elements	Gilded tray	7th c. CE / Iran	Fig. 18
III	Spiral/crest-like bird tail	Fully avian, eagle beak	Ivory, relief carvings	Late Sasanian / Central Asia	Fig. 19
IV	Flame-like feather tail	Hybrid: fish scales, eagle wings, dog/camel head	Silver vessel, Chinese ceramics	7th–8th c. CE / Iran, China	Fig. 20–22

Typological classification of the Sasanian Simorgh based on morphological features, artistic medium, and geographical context

Typology of the Sasanian Simorgh: Detailed Analysis

The First Group: The Peacock Tail

Simorgh peacock tails appear in a variety of designs, each serving as a prototype and source of inspiration for subsequent generations of artists. Due to this diversity in tail depictions, the Sasanian Simorgh can be categorized into several primary groups. One prominent example is the peacock tail embroidered on Sasanian silk fabric (Fig. 4).

This motif traditionally combines the head of a dog, the body and paws of a lion, eagle-like wings, and a voluminous peacock tail. The tail is depicted as a rounded form richly adorned with geometric patterns, expanding upward to form a semicircular shape. Its surface is intricately covered with repeated geometric motifs. Notably, this particular depiction was faithfully replicated during the Byzantine period and appears embroidered on a Byzantine textile produced three centuries after its original creation in the Sasanian royal workshops (Fig. 5). This piece serves as a significant testament to the influence of Sasanian artistic conventions on Byzantine and Christian visual traditions. Additionally, this tail model recurs frequently in Sasanian Simorgh representations. For instance, a partially gilded silver abdani presents the Simorgh enclosed within a circular frame (Fig. 7), further illustrating the motif's continued popularity and symbolic resonance.

A notable feature in the design of this Simorgh is that its external form is not entirely circular, despite being placed within a circle. The end of its body, where the tail is located, is slightly elongated. However, the design of its tail follows the conventions of the first group. This characteristic can also be observed in several other representations of the Simorgh, where the peacock's tail deviates from the circular form. The influence of this group of Simorgh depictions was widespread, as it can be found across much of the civilized world of the time and beyond, including in Christian art.

As a mural motif for its interior walls, the Armenian Church adopted the Sasanian Simorgh motif, depicting four Simorghs each enclosed within a decorative circular frame (Figure 9). These Simorghs are arranged in pairs, positioned opposite one another, and stacked vertically. Although each Simorgh is depicted individually, together they form a cohesive, repeating pattern. Christian artists, particularly those involved in illustrating religious manuscripts and paintings, frequently incorporated Oriental motifs into their work. In some instances, these motifs were adopted in their original form, while in others, they were adapted to align with the artists' stylistic preferences or the thematic content of the religious texts.

For example, two scenes are presented: one shows an eagle hunting and lifting a gazelle, while the other depicts a Sasanian Simorgh (Fig. 10). This Simorgh is a highly faithful rendition of the original Sasanian motif, closely resembling those illustrated in Figures 7 and 8.

The imagery of the Sasanian Simorgh had a profound influence on Western religious art, particularly its distinctive upward-curving peacock-like tail, which extended its reach as far west as Spain. In this process of cultural transmission, Sasanian textiles played a pivotal role. Notably, several folios from the renowned religious manuscript collection *Beatus of Liébana* include a symbolic peacock motif. (Fig. 11).

Christian symbolism and allegory depict the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, culminating in God's victory over Satan at the end of time. This theme is frequently depicted in Christian art. Within this visual narrative, the peacock symbolizes Christ, who is destined to conquer the serpent, a representation of Satan and malevolence. The bird featured in the *Beatus* manuscript closely resembles a peacock, with its tail elegantly curled upward in a manner reminiscent of Sasanian gold and silver work as well as silk textiles. This visual style subsequently gained popularity in Islamic art as well. A notable example is a decorative frame housed in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, which depicts two peacocks facing each other amid an elaborate arrangement of floral motifs. The design of their tails distinctly reflects the influence of the Sasanian aesthetic tradition (Fig. 12).

The motif of two peacocks facing one another, their tails raised and arranged in a semicircular form, reappears on a silk textile from the Almoravid period, dating to the first half of the 12th century (Al-Andalus, Spain). This textile, unearthed at the site of *Late San Geronás*, provides compelling evidence for the transmission of the Sasanian Simorgh's tail motif into Islamic visual culture and its subsequent diffusion into southwestern Europe, particularly the Iberian Peninsula.

In southern Italy, a carved horn-shaped object made from elephant ivory presents a similarly rich decorative program. The surface is densely adorned with vegetal scrolls and animal motifs, among which a peacock with

an upward-curving tail stands out, remarkably reminiscent of the tail form seen in Sasanian representations of the Simorgh.

Further east, a textile fragment discovered in Astana (Kazakhstan) displays a pair of peacocks facing each other within a circular medallion framed by abstract ornamentation. The stylized treatment of the peacocks' tails and the compositional format strongly reflect Sasanian artistic conventions and their wide-reaching influence (Fig. 14).

In Iran, during the post-Sasanian period, particularly in the early Islamic centuries, a remarkable example of the continuity and adaptation of the Simorgh motif appears on a gilded silver octagonal tray dated to the 10th century (Fig. 15). There is a large Simorgh depiction prominently displayed in the tray's central field, which is considerably larger in scale than comparable representations on other objects, immediately catching the viewer's attention. The Simorgh is set within a circular medallion, itself surrounded by smaller circular motifs, in accordance with traditional Sasanian compositional schemes.

The surrounding area is filled with native plant designs, which frame the mythical bird in a lush, ornamental context. The tail of the Simorgh closely resembles that of a peacock: the feathers are layered in tiers, each adorned with stylized, feather-like decorations that culminate in a sharp, arrow-shaped tip. Notably, the tray presents two distinct images of the Simorgh. The primary, central figure appears within a fully circular composition and corresponds to the first morphological type (Group I), characterized by geometric organization and peacock-like tails. In contrast, the second, smaller depiction of the Simorgh, possibly a secondary decorative element, reveals a tail with feather-like ornamentation, indicating either a stylized variant or a transitional type between established morphological groups.

In Islamic literature and art, the peacock, especially its tail, has both aesthetic and symbolic significance. As a result, it frequently appears across various media, including manuscript illustrations, scientific, literary, and religious texts, as well as paintings from different periods. One notable example can be found in an illustration from the manuscript 'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt wa Gharā'ib al-Mawjūdāt, which depicts a legendary creature (harpy) with the body of a bird, a human head, and a peacock's tail (Fig. 16). The design of this tail closely resembles that of the Sasanian Simorgh in certain motifs from the same period (see fig. 8).

Furthermore, in Islamic painting, the Prophet Muhammad's celestial steed, Buraq, is frequently portrayed with a tail inspired by the stylized peacock tail of the Sasanian Simorgh (Fig. 17; Ettinghausen et al., 2001).

In Islamic belief, Buraq is the celestial creature that transported the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during the Mi'rāj—his ascension to heaven. While the Bible contains no reference to such a creature, Islamic tradition

gradually developed a more detailed image of Buraq over time. To explain the miraculous speed with which the Prophet traveled from Earth to the heavens, Ibn al-Ash‘ath (or Ibn al-Ashqāb) described Buraq as an animal with winged legs. In contrast, al-Ṭabarī, in his compilation of ḥadīths, refers to Buraq more simply as a horse. Other sources offer more elaborate depictions, describing Buraq as a luminous white creature, part donkey and part mule, with the face of a beautiful young woman, long ears, a thick mane, and a saddle and bridle embellished with precious stones and metals (Berti, 2000).

The Second Group: Peacock Tail with Vegetal and Abstract Motifs

The second typological variant of the Simorgh closely resembles the first in overall composition; however, it is distinguished by the incorporation of vegetal and abstract decorative elements, particularly on its peacock-like tail. A silver-gilt tray dated to the 7th century CE presents one of the most imaginative and refined examples of this category (Fig. 18). The creature’s tail is adorned with two bud-shaped vegetal motifs, each connected to the body through circular, spiral lines that terminate in additional floral elements. These ornamental features show a striking affinity with motifs found in Basque decorative traditions. Furthermore, similar vegetal designs appear across the wings and torso of the Simorgh, establishing a strong stylistic coherence throughout the composition. Additional embellishments are placed beneath the tail and along the lower body, contributing to the overall visual unity and ornamental sophistication of the design.

The Third Group: Bird-like Simorgh with Spiral Beak and Harmonious Tail

The third typological group of the Simorgh diverges notably from the previous types by presenting the creature in a fully avian form. Initially, this version appears similar to an eagle. The head is embellished with curving motifs that extend into rounded, spiral-shaped beaks, reminiscent of a peacock's crest. These decorative patterns are distributed across three principal areas: the head, wings, and tail. A particular highlight is its tail, which is highly intricate and aesthetically refined. It maintains a stylistic coherence with the rest of the body, reinforcing the unity and elegance of the overall composition (Fig. 19).

The Fourth Group: Feather-Shaped Tail Motifs

The fourth typological model is distinguished by a peacock-like tail composed of densely packed, feather-shaped motifs executed with remarkable delicacy. These motifs are rhythmically repeated, filling the tail’s surface and evoking the visual effect of flickering flames or stylized fire (Fig. 20).

This feather-like pattern is arranged in a semi-circular form near the upper part of the creature's leg, precisely at the juncture where the mane meets the leg, and is further ornamented in that region. The Simorgh in this representation appears as a fully composite creature, integrating a dog's head, a lion's body and paws, eagle-like wings, a peacock's tail, and a surface patterned with fish-scale designs.

There is a similar treatment of the Simorgh's tail on an *abdani* (ritual vessel) from the seventh century CE, which is distinguished by its elongated peacock feathers (Fig. 21). In this version, the camel's head replaces the more typical dog's head, while the overall composition retains a circular structure. As in the preceding example, the feather-like motifs continue along the lower part of the mane and merge fluidly with the tail, reinforcing the harmonious integration of the design elements.

The motif of the Sasanian Simorgh also extended eastward, becoming assimilated into the artistic traditions of distant cultures. While local adaptations introduced distinct stylistic features, several Chinese artworks reflect the visual legacy of the Sasanian Simorgh.

A Sui dynasty pilgrimage bottle features a striking relief of the Simorgh. The creature stands (or walks) on two legs while holding a plant stem in its beak. The overall appearance of this animal is that of a bird, in particular, resembling an eagle, despite having two dog-like legs (Fig. 22). The design of its tail aligns it with this subgroup. Similarly, a depiction of the Simorgh engraved on a marble plaque from the Byzantine period also reflects characteristics consistent with this subgroup (Fig. 23).

Conclusion

This study has introduced a new typological framework for the Sasanian Simorgh, grounded in formal visual analysis and iconological methodology. Identifying four distinct morphological groups, distinguished primarily by differences in tail configuration, anatomical hybridity, and material context, the study contributes to our understanding of the Simorgh's iconography and its transcultural dissemination.

Beyond its role as a mythical hybrid creature, the Simorgh emerges as a cultural and symbolic agent, reflecting ideas of royal power, cosmic order, and visual hybridity. The motif's adaptation in Islamic and Byzantine art highlights the enduring visual memory and courtly exchanges that traversed imperial and religious boundaries, especially along the Silk Roads. This study thus contributes to broader scholarly debates surrounding the mobility of images, the visual grammar of hybridity, and the cross-cultural dynamics of Late Antiquity and the early medieval period.

Future research might expand this typological framework by conducting comparative studies of other composite creatures across cultures or examining the reception of the Simorgh in post-Islamic literary and artistic traditions. The approach proposed here invites further exploration into how visual forms convey meaning across religious, geographical, and temporal divides.

Fig. 1: A Sasanian textile featuring a Chinese phoenix motif, attributed to Melchior Broederlam, 1398 AD, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



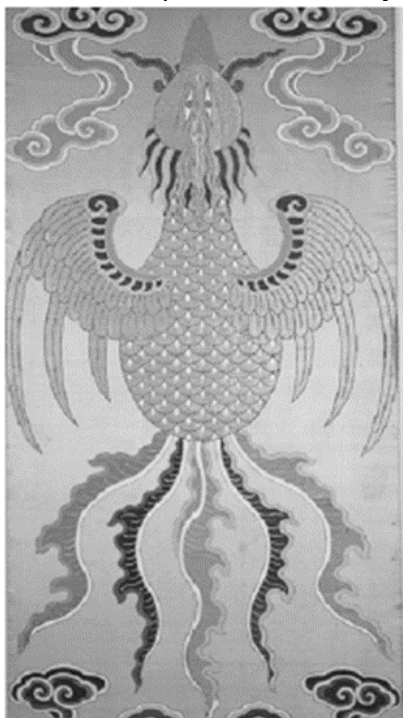
Source: (Baltrušaitis, 1981).

Fig. 2: Simorgh and Zal, a Safavid miniature illustration from the Shahnameh.



Source: (Ebersolt, 1929).

Fig. 3: A Chinese phoenix, 17th century AD.



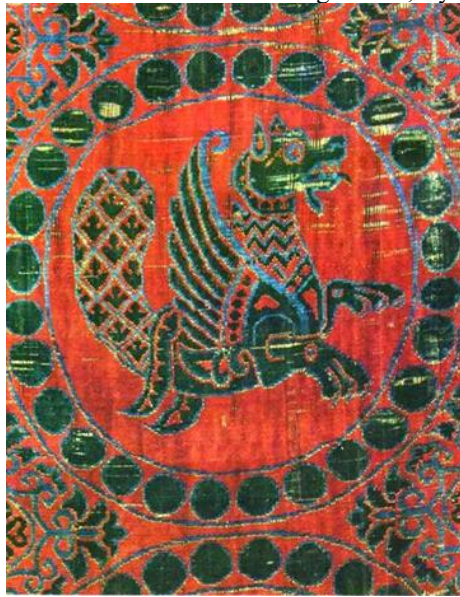
Source: (Bushell, 1910).

Fig. 4: Left side, silk textile featuring a Sasanian Simorgh motif, 6th-7th century CE.



Source: (Canepa, 2009).

Fig. 5: Right side, silk textile with a Sasanian Simorgh motif, Byzantine, 10th century CE.



Source: (Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York).

Fig. 6: Relief carving, marble, peacocks symbolizing eternity and life, Hagia Sophia, 4th century CE, Iznik Museum.



Source: (Berti, 2000).

Fig. 7: Sasanian Simorgh, silver ewer with gold overlay, Sasanian, 6th century CE, height 32 cm, The State Hermitage Museum.



Source: (Mode, 1977).

Fig. 8: Sasanian royal attire with Simorgh motif, relief carving, Taq-e Bostan, 6th century CE.



Source: (Pop, 1959).

Fig. 9: Wall painting with Sasanian Simorgh imagery, Ani Tigran Honents Church.



Source: (Ghirshman, 1954).

Fig. 10: Sasanian Simorgh and an eagle hunting a gazelle, illustration from a Christian manuscript.



Source: (Baltrušaitis, 1981).

Fig. 11: Illustration, Beatus of Liébana, Beatus of Saint-Sever, 1060 CE.



Source: (Baltrušaitis, 1981).

Fig. 12: Panel with confronted peacocks, marble, Western Palace, Egypt, 10th-11th century CE, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo.



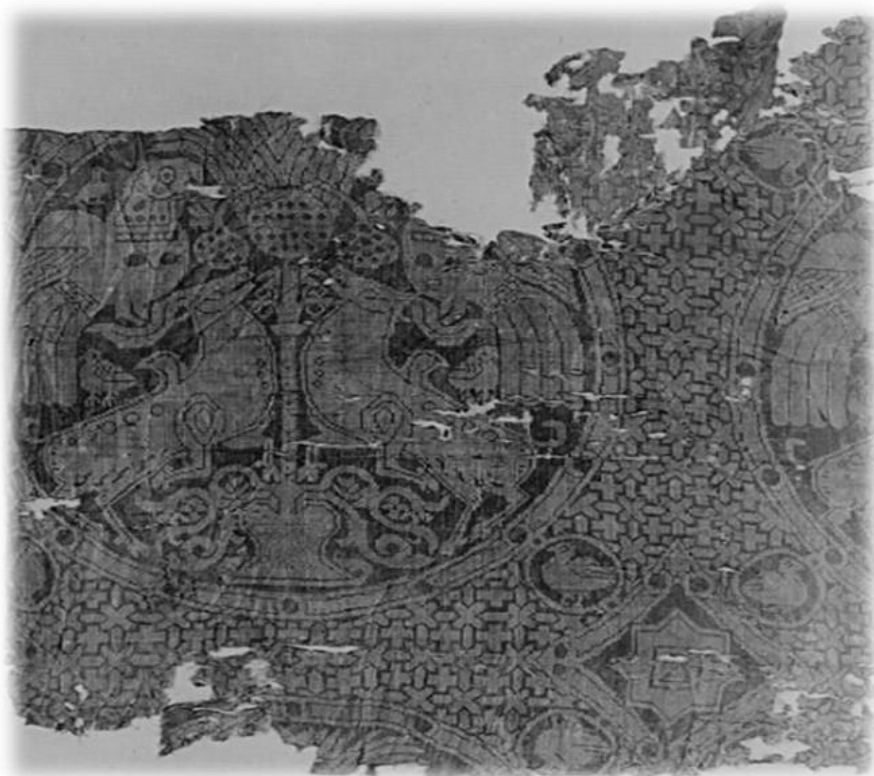
Source: (Cassous, 1977).

Fig. 13: Silk textile with confronted peacock motif, Al-Andalus, Spain, Almoravid period, first half of the 12th century CE.



Source: (Cassous, 1977; Hillenbrand, 1999).

Fig. 14: Silk textile with confronted Simorgh-peacock motifs within a decorative roundel, Astana, Kazakhstan, Sasanian copy.



Source: (Bier, 2008).

Fig. 15: Octagonal silver-gilt dish with Simorgh motif, Northwestern Iran, 10th century CE, Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin.



Source: (Pop, 1959).

Fig. 16: Eight celestial spheres, copy of "'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt" (The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence) by al-Qazwīnī (1238 CE), Mongol period, 17th century CE.



Source: (Talbot Rice, 2007)



Fig. 17: The Mi'raj (Ascension) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Buraq with a peacock tail, Iranian miniature, 14th century CE, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Fig. 18: Silver-gilt flat dish with a Sasanian Simorgh motif, 7th century CE, British Museum, London.



Source: (Grabar, 1980).

Fig. 19: Silver dish with a Sasanian Simorgh motif, 5th century CE, Reza Abbasid Museum.



Source: (Harper, 1978).

Fig. 20: Silver-gilt dish with a Simorgh motif, 8th century CE, The State Hermitage Museum.



Source: (Grabar, 1967).

Fig. 21: Bianhu-type pilgrim flask, China, Sui Dynasty, 6th-7th century CE, Berlin Museum.



Source: (Bushell, 1910).

Fig. 22: Silver-gilt ewer with a Simorgh motif and camel head, 7th-8th century CE, The State Hermitage Museum.



Source: (Pop, 1959).

Fig. 23: Plaque with a Sasanian Simorgh motif, 11th century CE, Constantinople, Musée du Moyen Âge, Paris.



Source: (Canepa, 2010).

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