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The Evolution of the Master and Mistress of Animals Motif in Iranian Art from Ancient Times to the Seljuk Period

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Abstract

Introduction: In works related to Iranian art, a mythological image featuring three animals arranged in a symmetrical composition—one creature at the center and two on either side—is commonly known as the «Master and Mistress of Animals». In ancient Iran, this configuration sometimes appeared in human-animal form, representing the fusion of human intellect with animal power, and its meaning and significance varied across periods. The two animals flanking the central figure have been interpreted as symbols of nature and the beings of the cosmos. This motif held a prominent place in Iranian art, appearing on ceramic and metalwork objects from the pre-Islamic era through the late Seljuk period. This study seeks to answer the following questions: «What are the causes and functions underlying the emergence of the Master of Animals motif in Iranian art, and how is it connected to mythology, literature, and popular beliefs?» The research aims to identify the trajectory of its evolution, its meanings, the reasons for its depiction, and the factors contributing to the continuity of this motif in Iranian art.

Research Method: This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical, and historical approach. Data have been collected through library and documentary research. The statistical population consists of 21 purposively selected samples, chosen for their distinctive characteristics. The analysis of the works is conducted through comparative examination and by tracing formal and conceptual developments of the motifs within their historical and cultural contexts.

Findings: The earliest appearance of this motif in Iran dates to the 4th millennium B.C.E., and its continuity can be traced up to the Seljuk period. In the early periods, it was depicted as a god, a goddess, or a transcendent being accompanied by animals and engaged in combat with supernatural creatures. During the Islamic period, the motif underwent a transformation, becoming a representation of a terrestrial king battling earthly animals. Sacredness and veneration were among the key factors that contributed to the persistence of this motif into the Islamic era.

Conclusion: The transition from matriarchy to patriarchy resulted in the depiction of the Master of Animals in a masculine form and led to the elimination or reconfiguration of specific motifs. A common characteristic of this figure in most representations is its benevolent aspect, as it combats demonic forces, offers protection, and embodies heroism. The display of royal authority and political power, the religious legitimization of the king, and the presence of mythological and historical figures in literature, such as Keyumars and Bahram Gur, constitute additional shared reasons for the depiction of this motif in both pre-Islamic and Islamic art.

Keywords

Ancient Motifs; Master and Mistress of Animals; Ancient Iranian Art; Islamic Art

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Introduction and Problem Definition

Mythology has been among the most significant factors shaping artistic production in ancient Iran. The mythological motif of the «Master and Mistress of Animals» appears in various forms in Iran from the 4th millennium B.C.E. to the Seljuk period, and has been understood as a symbol of power, dominance over nature, and the human-animal relationship. This motif is not merely a simple artistic schema; rather, it carries profound semantic layers shaped by mythology, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, literature, such as the Shahnameh, and popular beliefs, including the veneration of deities and divine beings. In Iranian art, the central figure sometimes appears as a human, representing a king or a hero; at other times, it manifests as a human-animal hybrid, merging with an animal and presented as a transcendent being or deity; and occasionally, it is depicted solely in human or animal form. In specific historical periods, this motif was influenced by the cultures and civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, undergoing notable transformations. However, its fundamental characteristic, namely, the presence of a central figure with a human form or posture, remained consistent. The persistence of this motif into the Islamic period may be attributed to the continuity of pre-Islamic Iranian myths and their integration with the cultural and religious elements of the Islamic era. During this period, the Master of Animals underwent significant transformations, becoming a regal symbol expressed through historical and mythological figures such as Keyumars and Bahram Gur as narrated in the Shahnameh. These transformations stemmed from shifts in the political and religious structures of society, which altered conceptions of power and political legitimacy. As a result, the motif came to embody both terrestrial and spiritual authority in Islamic-era artworks. Thus, the Master of Animals motif, as an artistic element, consistently reflects the intellectual, religious, and sociopolitical transformations of Iranian society throughout history. This study seeks to address the following questions: «What are the underlying themes, causes, and factors behind the emergence and function of the Master of Animals in Iranian art, and how is it connected to mythology, literature, and popular beliefs?»

Research Method

The present study employs a descriptive-analytical method with a historical approach. Data collection was conducted through library and documentary research, drawing upon written sources, museum images, and archaeological studies. The statistical population comprises 21 samples of Iranian art, dating from the 4th millennium B.C.E. to the 12th century C.E. Sampling was carried out purposively, based on the distinctive formal and conceptual characteristics of the motif, with the aim of selecting works that represent the widest possible range of forms, and to avoid analyzing repetitive examples across different periods. The analysis of the artworks was conducted through the examination of visual signs and a comparative approach across historical periods, to elucidate the formal and conceptual transformations of the motif within its historical, cultural, and religious contexts. The thematic content of the motifs was further interpreted by correlating visual evidence with mythological and literary texts.

Research Background

Despite the extensive presence of this motif in Iranian art from antiquity to the Islamic period, no comprehensive study of it has been conducted in international scholarship. A collection of articles by «Counts and Arnold» (2010), entitled «The Master of Animals in

the Old World Iconography», is one of the most important sources on this motif worldwide. Within this volume, «Garrison's» (2010) article, entitled «Heroic Encounters in the Visual Arts of Ancient Iraq and Iran, ca. 500-1000 B.C.E», is the only contribution that addresses the geographical domain of Iran explicitly. «Kenoyer» (2010), in «Masters of Animals and Lords of Animals in the Iconography of the Indus Tradition», argues that the Master of Animals in that region functioned as a symbol of power, dominion over nature, and the profound connection between humans and animals. «Dubhros» (2018), in her article entitled «Cultural Translation and the Iconography of the Master and Mistress of Animals», states that this symbol is associated with concepts such as healing, divinity, and social authority, and that it has continually undergone stylistic evolution and reinterpretation, shaped by cultural beliefs and perceptions. «Garfinkel et al.» (2009) maintain that the «Master of Animals», as a religious figure, serves as a protector of animals and oversees their regeneration and their return from the underworld. «Taheri» (2013), in «The Human-Bull and the Master of Animals in Mesopotamia and Iran», highlights the Mesopotamian origins of these zoomorphic figures and argues that the shared characteristic of the human-bull and the Master of Animals in Iran is their upright, bipedal posture; an iconographic feature characteristic of Mesopotamian art that subsequently spread to other regions and transformed in form. «Khani» (2002), in her article entitled «The Mistress of Animals: A Prehistoric Archetype», asserts that the Mistress of Animals appears across nations and ethnic groups as both a huntress and an agrarian figure. The scarcity of comprehensive domestic and international research on the Master and Mistress of Animals motif in Iran, combined with the lack of research grounded in the cultural and civilizational context of Iranian art, underscores the need and significance of the present study.

The Master and Mistress of Animals

In the ancient world, a mythological image depicts three creatures arranged in a symmetrical composition: A central figure flanked by two identical animals. In various scholarly sources, this motif appears under several titles, including «Master of Animals» (Garrison, 2010; Counts & Arnold, 2010; Taheri, 2013; Crowley, 2010; Garfinkel et al., 2009), «Lord and Lady of Animals» (Crowley, 2010; Graham, 2020; Kenoyer, 2010), «Lady of the Animals», «Mistress of Animals», «Potnia Theron», and, in Persian-language studies, terms such as «Sultan of Animals» (Curtis, 1999), «Mistress of Animals», «Goddess of Animals», «Great Mother» (Khani, 2002), and «Master of Animals». In the present study, the expression «Master and Mistress of Animals» has been adopted for its universality, applicability to both genders, and ability to convey the general conceptual scope of the motif. The «Master» or «Mistress of Animals» is depicted in diverse images as a powerful human figure who restrains, battles, or, in some cases, kills various animals (Kenoyer, 2010, 37). «This theme (the Master of Animals) is represented by the image of a man (usually anthropomorphic, sometimes winged, and at times with animal attributes) standing with arms outstretched to either side to grasp or restrain the animals» (Garrison, 2010, 151). In some instances, the central figure appears as a woman associated with distinct symbolic functions, such as protector and creator of creatures, giver of life, or goddess of death (Khani, 2012). The Master of Animals is understood as a religious figure who protects animals. This figure is believed to determine whether animals may be hunted by humans, as hunting was thought to be impossible without the deity's permission (Garfinkel et al., 2009, 1). The motif is also regarded as the principal agent of animal regeneration and plays a crucial role in their return from the underworld to the human realm (Garfinkel et al., 2009). Furthermore, it is closely

connected to notions of divinity and kingship (Dubhros, 2018). From the earliest appearances of the Mistress of Animals in most world civilizations, she has been associated with the archetype of mother goddesses: A concept rooted in the Paleolithic era; however, the peak of its flourishing extends from the beginning of the Neolithic age to the Bronze Age. «In Iran, artifacts depicting a great goddess accompanied by animals have been discovered, which some scholars identify as 'Ashi' or 'Art'» (Khani, 2002). The use of the «triadic» composition of the Master of Animals in Iranian art can be interpreted in relation to symbolic, mythological, and ritual meanings, and traces of the hero's battle with the two flanking animals may be pursued in ancient Iranian legends and folktales. In Iranian tales, the story of three brothers appears in various forms, in which the two elder princes, jealous of their younger brother's favor with their father, cast him into a well. Yet, the younger brother ultimately escapes and attains kingship. This pattern is evident, for example, in the stories of Fereydun and his two brothers, as well as in those of Iraj and his two brothers, Salm and Tur (Farzanehfard & Dehghan, 2020, citing Bahar, 1973, 48). During the Achaemenid period, the concepts reflected in certain works represent Zoroastrian religious thought, with its teachings appearing directly and indirectly in artistic productions. One of these concepts is the sanctity of the number three. «The three Zoroastrian maxims—Good Thoughts (Humata), Good Words (Hukhta), and Good Deeds (Hvarshta)—form the foundational basis of Zoroastrian belief» (Farzanehfard & Dehghan, 2020). «Ahura Mazda has three manifestations: Spenta Mainyu, the first and highest; (Bahaman) Vohu Manah; and Ardibehesht (Aša Vahišta). These three share the essence of Ahura Mazda, who is their father and creator» (Farzanehfard & Dehghan, 2020, citing Bahar, 1973, 27). Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mithra form a powerful triad that safeguards kingship and its symbols (Bahar, 1997, 395). The Master of Animals may also be understood as the First Human in ancient Iranian mythology, created to protect and support humankind. «Keyumars in Zoroastrian myths, Jamshid in Iranian and Indo-Iranian mythology, and Mithra in Mithraism are all presented as primordial human figures» (Bozorg Bigdeli & Fathi, 2017). Symbolic and sacred numbers were widely employed in Islamic-period arts as well. In Sufi texts of the Islamic era, the number three—second only to seven in importance—appears more frequently than any other number (Farzanehfard & Dehghan, 2020). According to Ibn 'Arabi, the creation and the three realms of existence, spiritual, material, and metaphysical, are founded upon a triadic principle, and the entire cosmos revolves around this axis of threeness (Akbari et al., 2010, citing 'Afifi, 2001, 383). «For the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, the number three symbolizes the triangle. It is a sign of the human soul, and the geometric form of the triangle represents the three stages of the human self: The commanding self (ammāra), the reproachful self (lawwāma), and the tranquil self (muṭma'inna). … The number three is also the symbol of creation. The entire world and its beings come into existence through the number three, for beginning, middle, and end constitute the number of the universe as a whole» (Farshchian et al., 2021).

The Master of Animals Motif in Ancient Iranian Art

One of the earliest known representations of the «Master and Mistress of Animals» motif in Iran is an object from 3500-4000 B.C.E. discovered at Susa (Fig. 1). The Mistress of Animals is depicted as a bull-man creature holding two serpents in her hands, while two fish appear on either side of her. The central figure represents the fusion of animal strength with human intellect, embodying a feminine character that reflects the sacred status of women in Elam. In Elamite art, the Mistress of Animals may represent a goddess whose

symbols are the serpents and fish; from this perspective, this object constitutes one of the earliest depictions of deities in the artistic heritage of ancient Iran. «Finds from archaeological mounds in Iran depicting figures holding serpents suggest the possibility that this being was a god or goddess who grasped serpents as symbols of immortality or fertility» (Taheri, 2015). «Dubhros» refers to this figure as the «Master of serpents», stating that it first appeared on the seals of Tepe Giyan (Dubhros, 2018). «The use of the 'Master of Serpents' motif on seals, and the large number of such seals, indicates that this symbol, beyond its religious and cultural significance, may have also had an administrative purpose. It may have represented a form of political or socio-economic authority» (Dubhros, 2018). «The serpent, an earthly creature, is the characteristic emblem of all Great Mother goddesses» (Khani, 2012, citing Debokour, 1994, 55). The presence of serpents on 4th millennium B.C.E. goblets from Susa recalls their role as guardians of water (Taheri, 2015). Inshushinak and Napirisha, two prominent Elamite deities, were frequently associated with serpents, emphasizing their roles as gods of fertility and water (Miroschedji, 1981). The visual context and characteristics suggest that the Master of Serpents may have had a religious nature and may represent a priest-king who combined political authority with healing powers. The attribution of divine or curative abilities to rulers is attested in many cultures (Dubhros, 2018). The presence of fish further reinforces the association of this figure with water deities. «Fish, in general, are symbols of fertility and abundance and were originally linked with the Mother-Goddess» (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 63). The necklace on the creature, in addition to its ornamental aspect, may symbolize power and high social status, indicating a connection between this figure and divine beings, royalty, or an elite class.



Fig. 1. The Mistress of Animals motif on a pottery fragment, 3500-4000 B.C.E., Susa. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

The Master of Animals from the 4th millennium B.C.E. in Luristan (Fig. 2) appears as a bull-man holding two serpents in his hands. Some scholars believe that these scenes relate to the epic legend of Gilgamesh, the earliest recorded myth in Mesopotamia, which depicts the struggle between Gods and Demons. In Mesopotamian works, particularly those from Uruk, an artifact exists with a similar composition, depicting a human figure accompanied by two bulls, dating to around 3000 B.C.E. It is identified as Gilgamesh in Mesopotamian art and is chronologically later than the pieces from Susa and Luristan. «The bull-man is an embodiment of the well-known «Gilgamesh» myth, which was widespread in Mesopotamia

and later transmitted to Elam, becoming part of their belief system and subsequently appearing in their artistic works» (Hening, 1934, 41).



Fig. 2. The Master of Animals holding two serpents, Luristan, 3000-4000 B.C.E., white limestone. Luristan, Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

On a pottery vessel from Nahavand (Fig. 3), three consecutive scenes depict a human figure positioned among various animals. The closest parallel to the well-known Master of Animals motif is found in the scene where a human figure stands between two leopards. The hero is regarded as a symbol of a king, priest, or tribal chief, and the animals are interpreted as representations of demonic forces. «Alibeigi and Sadafi» identify the motif on the Nahavand vessel as Gilgamesh, based on the characteristics of the imagery (Alibeigi & Sadafi, 2019). They argue that the images incised on pottery from the 4th to the 6th millennia B.C.E. in Iran likely allude to a narrative of the struggle between the Master of Animals and a divine figure against a leopard-shaped demon; an iconography that later, from the Sumerian period onward, came to be associated with Inanna/Ishtar in the art of the Ancient Near East (Alibeigi & Sadafi, 2019).



Fig. 3. The Master of Animals motif on a ceramic vessel, 3rd millennium B.C.E., Abgineh Museum. Source: Authors.

In Fig. 4, the Master of Animals motif is depicted on a cylinder seal from Susa, showing a bird with a lion's head alongside two deer. This hybrid creature may be regarded as a

manifestation of the fusion of earthly power, symbolized by the lion, and celestial power, represented by the bird. Its placement above the deer can be interpreted as signifying dominion over affairs and sovereignty over the terrestrial realm.



Fig. 4. The Master of Animals with an eagle-headed human figure, 2400-2600 B.C.E., Susa, Elamite Period, Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

In Jiroft artworks, the Master of Animals is shown taming a leopard and a scorpion, grasping a serpent[1], and protecting or caressing a water buffalo. He is depicted in three forms: human, human-animal hybrid, and animal, and appears in both male and female forms. On one side of a weight (Fig. 5), a mythological scene depicts a figure with the upper body of a man and the legs of a bull, holding the tails of two leopards. The leopards stand upright on their forelegs and look toward him. Some scholars believe that the image of the Master of Animals alludes to the story of Gilgamesh of Mesopotamian origin; however, recent discoveries at Jiroft strengthen the possibility that this myth was connected to Jiroft or that a similar narrative existed there. «Archaeologists speculate that parts of the tale of Gilgamesh took place in Jiroft and that Jiroft may even have been its place of origin» (Covington, 2007). «One of the most significant structural similarities among the findings of Mesopotamia, Luristan, and the Halil River region is the emphasis on bilateral symmetry. In each of the ancient mythological depictions of Gilgamesh (in the Sumerian version, and an uncertain Iranian version), he stands at the center of the composition with outstretched arms, grasping the heads of wild animals, most commonly bulls and serpents, on either side» (Yousfian Kenari & Tavousi, 2009).



Fig. 5. A depiction of a semi-human, semi-bull hero on a stone object from Jiroft art, 2500 B.C.E., National Museum of Tehran. Source: National Museum of Iran, 2023.

Fig 6 shows a golden vessel from the Marlik cemetery, associated with burial rites and the cult of the dead. The central motif is a hybrid creature that begins with two leopard heads, continues with a human torso in the middle section, features a serpentine lower body, and finally ends in bird-like claws, likely those of an eagle, while holding two inverted gazelles. «The intertwined form of the legs stylistically resembles characteristics of Mesopotamian art» (Taheri, 2013). The creature is depicted with wings, indicating the religious and ceremonial significance of this motif. A similar composition, dating to the same period, appears on an engraved plaque on a quiver from Luristan, demonstrating the reciprocal artistic influence between the peoples of northern Iran and those of Luristan.



Fig. 6. The Master of Animals depicted on a golden vessel from Marlik, 1100-1400 B.C.E., Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

Fig 7 presents a hybrid creature depicted on a cylinder seal from the Middle Elamite period, with its tongue protruding, or possibly with flames emerging from its mouth. «The transformation of a flame into an elongated tongue hanging outside the mouth of a monstrous being occurs only in Elam» (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 109). This creature possesses a demonic origin (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 108-109). The winged demon, with a lion's head and predatory claws, stands upon two animals while grasping two others by their tails. The animals subdued by the master are wild goats, which are sacred and beneficial quadrupeds in Iranian culture. The wild goat symbolizes life force, fertility, fecundity, and reproduction, as well as being the creator of energy, the guardian of the Tree of Life, and the God of Rain (Cooper, 2000, 218).



Fig. 7. Winged demon with a lion's head and predatory claws, Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat, Middle Elamite period, 1200-1300 B.C.E., Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

The bronze works of Luristan in ancient Iranian art are unique in terms of both the number and variety of depictions of the Master of Animals. In Fig. 8, the Master of Animals is depicted with horns and a beard, symbols commonly associated with deities and kings, and is wearing a belt while grasping two serpents by their necks. «A man with a long beard is a wise, sagacious, divine, and godly figure. In antiquity, the long beard symbolized wisdom, maturity, intellect, and a connection with the higher realm and the gods; for this reason, most deities, especially in Mesopotamia, were depicted with long beards. Moreover, the long beard regularly appears on the faces of ancient kings, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Iran» (Lia & Dadvar, 2019, citing Kangarani, 2009, 168). The composition and the form of the figure recall the Elamite example (Fig. 1), with the difference that here the Master of Animals is male. From this period onward, the Master of Animals is predominantly depicted in masculine form. «This artifact likely belonged to the deity of the inhabitants of this ancient region (Luristan), who, under the influence of the Elamites (their neighbors), represented their gods holding serpents as symbols of fertility in opposition to demonic forces» (Shamekhi Amiri & Maqooli, 2021).



Fig. 8. Master of Animals holding two serpents, hairpin, Luristan, 1150-1450 B.C.E., National Museum of Iran. Source: Authors.

Fig 9 depicts a bronze artifact from the 1st millennium B.C.E. in Luristan, showing the Master of Animals with horns positioned between two hybrid creatures-griffins. The influence of the Gilgamesh motif in Luristan art is also widespread. «In Luristan, Gilgamesh is generally represented as a man with two horns on his head. It should be noted that horns among the inhabitants of the Mesopotamian plain were a special emblem of the gods. Gilgamesh was the protector of animals and flocks of goats and sheep; since most people in Luristan were herders, they developed a strong devotion to this deity and depicted him in images and sculptures as a human figure seizing two lions with both hands and strangling them» (Behnam, 1941, 15-16). «Gilgamesh, the epic symbol and mythological hero of Mesopotamia, regarded in Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria as one of the demigods, became a deity in Luristan and was worshiped there more extensively than elsewhere» (Mansourzadeh, 2018). Luristan bronzes were typically buried with the dead, reflecting beliefs in protection, talismanic power, and faith in blessings and fertility. «The image of Gilgamesh, appearing on women's necklaces, chariot fittings, dagger handles, and so forth, was found both among the living and inside graves, and it indicates that he was not regarded as a god but rather as a talisman against illness and the evil eye, which over time was

transferred from his own figure to the forms of predatory animals believed to have been associated with him» (Izadpanah, 1971, 364-365; Masoumi, 2005).



Fig. 9. A horned human figure, possibly a deity, between two hybrid creatures, Luristan, 650-1000 B.C.E., bronze, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), 2023.

In some Luristan bronzes, such as Fig. 10, animals emerge from the shoulders of the Master of Animals. In this type of bronze object, the central human figure is sometimes shown battling and strangling demonic creatures, while in other cases, he appears to be protecting them. The human figures in these works may be compared with mythological Iranian kings in the Shahnameh. Tajvidi identifies the Master of Animals in this image as Keyumars (Tajvidi, 1978). «In the Shahnameh, Keyumars is described as possessing farr (divine glory), and it is by virtue of this farr that he is revered and honored by all animals» (Modarresi, 2005). Keyumars is descended from the gods and is considered a semi-divine, semi-human being (Vafaei & Esmaeilpour, 2016, 314). The Master of Animals may also be associated with Tahmuras in the Shahnameh. «Tahmuras is famously known as Div-kosh (the demon-subduer), and it is said that he was the first to capture the demons and learn writing from them, making him the inventor of the art of writing» (Ashrafzadeh & Barati, 2011, 127). Graham argues that works similar to Fig. 10 share stylistic characteristics with Scythian art, attributing this to the Scythian occupation of Luristan in the 8th-7th centuries B.C.E. (Graham, 2020). He states that these motifs in Luristan art functioned as practical tools for communicating with supernatural and healing forces, and that they manifested divine and animal figures in protective roles or in opposition to natural threats (Graham, 2020).



Fig. 10. Bronze standard finial, Luristan, 1st millennium B.C.E., National Museum of Iran. Source: Authors.

Fig 11 depicts the Master of Animals riding upon two animals, likely horses, while holding their manes, thereby conveying a sense of dominance, power, and the taming of beasts. The central figure is a bearded man wearing a necklace, which identifies him as a member of the upper social class and possibly a deity or a king. This image may be compared with Tahmuras and his appeal for assistance to the deity Vayu in the Avesta[2]. «According to the Ram Yasht, many kings and heroes of Iran sought help from Vayu in order to achieve victory over their enemies, and he granted their prayers» (Teimuriyan & Behnamfar, 2021). «The Ram Yasht states that he (Tahmuras) implored Vayu to aid him in defeating Ahriman and to enable him to mount and overpower him as one would a horse» (Dadvar & Ruzbehani, 2018, 168). The presence of two horses may correspond to concepts associated with this deity. Vayu encompasses two aspects: The beneficent Vayu (Vayu-Vanhu) and the malevolent Vayu (Vayu-Astuuwihad) (Teimuriyan & Behnamfar, 2021). He is both the bringer of death and the giver of life; he is benevolent yet destructive (Hinnells, 2012, 36). His character in Iranian tradition is enigmatic and mysterious, so exalted that both Ahura Mazda and Ahriman appeal to him (Teyimuriyan & Behnamfar, 2021). On this basis, the central figure may be understood as seeking assistance from this deity.



Fig. 11. A human figure between two horse torsos, bridle ornament, 1000-1300 B.C.E., Luristan, Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

Fig 12 depicts a mythical hero with three heads, one human head at the center flanked by two lion heads, engraved on a bronze quiver from Luristan. This image may be associated with ancient Iranian religions and mythologies, such as Zurvanism. «The depiction of a man with a pair of animal or human heads emerging from his shoulders is, according to Iranian mythology, identified with Zurvan, who brought forth the two great deities, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman» (Ferrier, 1995, 24). In this scene, the lions appear alongside the Master of Animals in combat against two creatures, functioning as divine helpers and embodying benevolent qualities. The motif may also be interpreted as symbolizing judgment. In Middle Persian texts, Zurvan is described as the judge of the battle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman (Dadvar & Rouzbehani, 2018, 161). «Zurvan, as a neutral being, is androgynous in nature» (Hinnells, 2012, 113).



Fig. 12. Engraved plaque on a quiver, Luristan, bronze, ca. 650-1000 B.C.E., Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), 2023.

Fig 13 depicts the motif on a vessel from Marlik. On this vessel, the two flanking creatures are sphinxes, a form not previously attested in Iranian art. The Master of Animals is shown as a human figure with two feline heads, likely those of lions, and wings resembling those of birds, probably eagles.



Fig. 13. The role of the lord of animals between two winged sphinxes, silver ewer, Marlik, 12th-11th century BC, National Museum of Iran. Source: Vahdati & Kenard Piller, 2019, 82."

In Fig. 14, a Median period cylinder seal depicts a hero standing between two sphinxes. The form and headdress of the king resemble those seen in most Median artworks. The animals are similar to motifs in Assyrian art; however, in this example, the hero is shown engaged in combat with the creatures. The presence of sphinxes also reflects the continuation of ancient religious concepts. «The sphinx motif (a lion's body combined with a human head) in the art of Iran and India symbolizes vigilance and the safeguarding of religious themes and temples (in India) and palaces (in Iran) against evil spirits and malevolent forces» (Mobini, 2010).

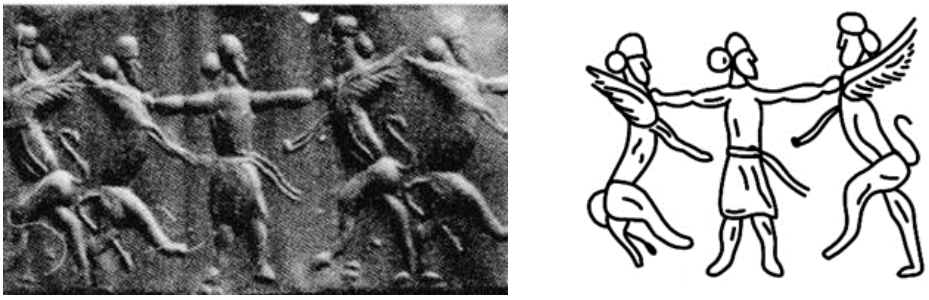


Fig. 14. A hero between two hybrid creatures on a cylinder seal, Median period. Source: Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 179.

In certain pre-Islamic periods, such as the Achaemenid era, the Master of Animals served as a representation of royal power, portraying the king as a superhuman figure, a benevolent force battling enemies, and was often employed for political display (Fig. 15). «Prada» argues that the probable meaning of such a motif is the strengthening of the king's political position or a visual instrument for asserting authority (Prada et al., 1978, 253). «In the imagery of the reign of Darius I, the king fights giants and thereby appears as a figure endowed with superhuman power» (Ettinghausen, 2000, 98). «In these artworks, the king assumes a role similar to that of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamian mythology, fighting evil and malevolent beings as the Master of Animals» (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 196). The Achaemenid king is depicted standing between two Lamassu. During the Achaemenid period, particularly at the entrance to Persepolis, the Lamassu served not as guardians of a physical space but as protectors of blessings and prosperity (Farzanfar, 2013). The hero placed between them, grasping the horns on their heads, displays no aggressive posture, suggesting a protective rather than combative role consistent with the symbolic function of the Lamassu. «The bull represents abundance and blessing, the eagle's wings signify power, and the human intellect provides discernment for protection» (Farzanfar, 2013). In the Achaemenid period, the Master of Animals also appears alongside the winged ring. «Pope and Ackerman» identify the winged ring as the symbol of the Farvahar (Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 410). In this context, the Farvahar, as a divine emblem, may be interpreted as conferring divine sanction upon the king within the scene. This motif explicitly represents Ahura Mazda's religious support for the king as the embodiment of good and may be understood as a symbol of protection and blessing during the Achaemenid period.

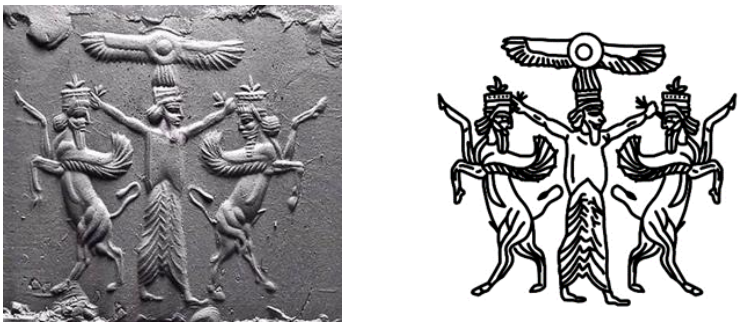


Fig. 15. Achaemenid-period relief depicting the Master of Animals and two Lamassu. Source: Fine Art America, 2025.

Fig 16 shows the Master of Animals motif on an Achaemenid-period earring depicting Bes, the Egyptian God, grasping the heads of two wild goats. Bes was a protective deity in ancient Egypt who safeguarded women and children, particularly during childbirth and while they slept. He symbolized joy and served as a patron of music, dance, and the arts, including sexuality. He was typically depicted as a dwarf with hybrid human-animal traits, such as a lion's mane and a feathered crown. His symbols were engraved on various objects—jewelry, vessels, and amulets—and were used for protection and good fortune (El-Kilany, 2017). It is likely that the Achaemenids incorporated the image of this God into their artworks due to its widespread popularity. In this depiction, fully harmonized with Eastern artistic conventions, Bes appears in the same guise as the Iranian and Mesopotamian

ideal hero or champion; that is, as the animal-tamer or Master of Animals (Asadi & Darvishi, 2019). In this context, Bes can be interpreted as a symbol of his dominion over the animal world and his protective power against natural and supernatural threats.



Fig. 16. The Master of Animals motif on an Achaemenid-period earring, discovered in Syria, Louvre Museum. Source: Louvre Museum, 2023.

In the Sasanian period, the Master of Animals typically depicts kings hunting or overpowering wild beasts. Figure 17 depicts the Master of Animals wearing a royal crown and ceremonial attire, representing a king who is slaying two lions while standing on the back of another lion. This motif can be correlated with the story of the beginning of Bahram Gur's reign in the Shahnameh. «Bahram's battle with the lions in the Shahnameh is consistent with accounts found in historical sources. Bahram himself proposes to the Iranians that they place the crown and throne between two fierce lions, and he declares that whoever seizes them shall be king, and the people shall obey him; otherwise, they must prepare for war against him and the warriors of Monzar» (Jalilian et al., 2018, citing Ferdowsi, 2014, vol. 6, 404-405). On Sasanian coins discovered, he is also portrayed with similar iconographic features[3].



Fig. 17. The Master of Animals killing two lions, silver bowl, Sasanian period, British Museum, diameter 24.1 cm. Source: Britannica, 2023.

The Master of Animals Motif in Early Islamic Iranian Art

With the advent of Islam in Iran, particularly during the Seljuk period, Iranian art came under the influence of Islamic themes and Turko-Iranian cultural elements. During this era,

the Master of Animals motif underwent several transformations and gradually became integrated with Islamic concepts, epic and mythological narratives such as those in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, and newly emerging symbols. It subsequently appeared on ceramic and metal vessels. Figure 18 shows an image of a seated woman, accompanied by two birds on either side, on a Samanid-period ceramic piece. The presence of the «Mistress of Animals» and birds, especially doves, is seen across numerous ancient civilizations worldwide, including goddesses such as «Lilith» in Mesopotamia, «Athena» in Greece, and «Anahita in Iran» (Khani, 2002). This work reflects the continuity of pre-Islamic Iranian myths and goddesses, particularly Anahita. Doves and peacocks were among the birds associated with Anahita, appearing on various artifacts from the Achaemenid through the Sasanian periods. The dove has also been interpreted as a symbol of love and as a divine patron (Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 987, 911). The woman's hair in this image resembles two serpents, indicating a renewed transformation in which the Master of Animals returns from a masculine to a feminine form. In the woman's hands are an object resembling a cup, ewer, or barsam, and in the other hand, a form similar to a plant branch. The birds, as on specific Sasanian seals and dishes, hold a leaf in their beaks[4], which may carry connotations of life, growth, and blessing.



Fig. 18. Seated woman with cup, Nishapur, Samanid period, 10th century C.E. Source: Flickr, 2023.

Some motifs from the Islamic period depict the Master of Animals wearing royal garments and a crown, continuing pre-Islamic artistic traditions. The closest such composition appears on a silver vessel from the Buyid period (Fig. 19). The hero, similar to the Sasanian example, is dressed in royal attire and holds two lions with his hands. The rim of the vessel is encircled by a foliated Kufic inscription referring to the honor and good fortune of Amir Sayf al-Din. The Buyids consistently traced their lineage back to the Sasanians to secure national legitimacy, in addition to the religious legitimacy granted by the caliph. The Buyid dynasty claimed descent from the Sasanian kings (Busse, 1984, 4-237). The presence of an Islamic-period ruler depicted as a hero combating a demonic creature serves as a political-religious sign, affirming his authority in both pre-Islamic and Islamic contexts. The aim of such imagery can thus be understood as the government's effort to establish national legitimacy among the populace. Comparable compositions also appear on metal and ceramic vessels from the Seljuk period.



Fig. 19. Silver vessel depicting a ruler grasping two lions, Buyid period. Source: Reza Abbasi Museum.

Fig 20 shows a lamp dating to the 5th-6th century A.H., contemporaneous with the Seljuk period (Fig. 23). The form at the top of the lamp closely resembles the Master of Animals motif known from Luristan (Fig.11). This similarity reflects the influence of pre-Islamic works, particularly those of the Luristan cultures, on the artists of the Seljuk era. The presence of the Master of Animals and the horse may be correlated with Iranian kings in literary texts such as the Shahnameh and the symbolic concepts associated with them. «According to Iranian traditions, a number of kings and celebrated figures, such as Hushang, Jamshid, Zahhak, Fereydun, and many others, offered horses and other quadrupeds as sacrifices to Anahid and prayed for success» (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 55). The names of many Iranian heroes and kings are also linked with the horse, including Garshasp, Arjasp, and Lohrasp (Dadvar & Mobini, 2009, 55). In Islamic culture, the horse symbolizes joy and well-being (Cooper, 2000, 116).



Fig. 20. Master of Animals with two horses, lamp, Seljuk period, 5th or 6th century A.H., Louvre Museum. Source: Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 1287.

Fig 21 is a work from the Seljuk period depicting a woman positioned between two serpents or dragons with open mouths, in an enraged, aggressive posture. The presence of serpents on objects with dragon motifs is also attested in pre-Islamic Iranian art. Taheri considers the dragon in Iranian painting to be influenced by its Chinese counterpart, although he also notes examples shaped by Western models, particularly from the Safavid period (Taheri, 2009). In classifications of dragon types, the serpent-like nature is a common characteristic

shared by all (Taheri, 2009). In mysticism, the Nafs (soul/lower self) is often depicted as feminine, and the serpent is likewise associated with femininity, symbolizing the earth, which is maternal and life-giving (Debokour, 1994, 43-55). «In Iranian mythology, the dragon is a demonic symbol and a sign of drought, calamity, and disease». In Islamic narratives, however, the dragon has two contrasting faces: at times it is an enemy of humankind, and at other times it is a divine being. «In Sufi thought, the dragon, in its negative form, represents the Nafs (lower soul), and in its positive form, it appears as a manifestation of obedience and divine power» (Kalantar et al., 2019). «Rumi», in Book Four of the Mathnawi, in reference to the story of Moses, conveys a concept related to the nafs: he states that nurturing the nafs empowers it, and that the soul, initially a small and insignificant worm, becomes a terrifying and deadly dragon when its desires are fulfilled. In the ensuing verse, he mentions two serpents, which «Kalantar et al.» (2019) interpret as an allusion to the myth of Zahhak Mar-dush, the serpent-shouldered tyrant who is a demonic symbol. Based on these verses and related concepts, the narrative of this vessel may be associated with the story of Zahhak. Likewise, the central figure may be interpreted as an embodiment of the Nafs al-mutmaʾinnah (the «tranquil soul»), engaged in a continual struggle with the two flanking creatures, symbols of the Nafs Ammarah and Nafs Lawwamah.



Fig. 21. Woman with two serpents or dragons, Iran, ceramic, Seljuk period, 12th-13th century C.E. Source: Ashmolean Museum, 2025.

Discussion

The findings have been gathered based on the selected case studies, and it is evident that the inclusion of additional examples would undoubtedly yield more comprehensive and refined results (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors Influencing the Depiction of the Master of Animals in Iranian Art from the Pre-Islamic to the Seljuk Period. Source: Authors.

Factors	Pre-Islamic Period	Islamic Period
Mythology	Often depicted in the role of a mythic or legendary king as a symbol of the gods, or as their successor or representative, and accompanied by the presence of the three forms of farr, the horns upon the head, and the necklace worn by the central figure, all functioning as sacred emblems.	Decline from the status of a deity and reappearance as an earthly king, yet still the divine representative on earth; continuity of the hero-king motif with two lions in the artworks of the Buyid and Seljuk periods.

Factors	Pre-Islamic Period	Islamic Period
Religion	Formation of related concepts and beliefs concerning sacred numbers, and the symbolic presence of elements from pre-Islamic religions such as Zurvanism and Zoroastrianism.	Influence of pre-Islamic goddesses such as Anahita, along with their associated motifs; connection with Islamic religious concepts such as the threefold levels of the human soul and the creation of the three cosmic realms.
	Associated with burial practices and rituals concerning the afterlife; the animals are typically protected and regarded as sacred.	The calm and seated posture of the central figure may be associated with the depiction of symbolic and sacred personages linked to religious narratives.
Popular Beliefs and Traditions	Belief in the God and the king as protectors of humankind; talismanic functions and opposition to disease; the protection and safeguarding of benevolent beings, and the struggle and combat against demonic forces.	Belief in the caliph and the king as representatives of God on earth, and the continuation of pre-Islamic protective characteristics.
Literature	No direct evidence was found linking these tripartite motifs to pre-Islamic written literature.	Correspondence with characters in literary texts such as Bahram Gur, Tahmuras, and Hushang in the Shahnameh.
Other Ethnic Groups and Civilizations	Influence from the art of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece.	Influence from East Asian and Abbasid art.
Politics and Governance	The use of kings depicting themselves as gods or as divine representatives in order to display political power, assert religious legitimacy, and emphasize their protective role.	The use by kings and rulers to project political legitimacy and to foster a sense of national identity among the people.

In pre-Islamic art, the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, along with changes in metalworking technologies, led to the transformation of the Mistress of Animals into the Master of Animals and altered the flanking creatures accordingly. Certain pre-Islamic motifs, such as the Master of Animals accompanied by non-hybrid animals, survived after the advent of Islam because they posed no threat to the doctrine of monotheism. Some animal motifs, such as the serpent, shifted from sacred symbolism to representations of demonic force, while feline figures, including lions and leopards, persisted continuously from the 3rd millennium B.C.E. through the Islamic period.

Conclusion

The Master and Mistress of Animals motif in Iranian art underwent significant transformations from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic periods, influenced by cultural, political, and religious factors. In the pre-Islamic era, the motif was depicted as a supernatural or divine being engaged in combat with hybrid and otherworldly creatures, symbolizing superior power, protection, and victory over demonic forces. The thematic functions of this motif included combat, taming, conflict prevention, guardianship, protection, killing (such as strangling), and even caressing animals. It was also regarded as a ritual element with

talismanic properties and used for protection against illness. The presence of horns and necklaces in some works indicates an association of the motif with the class of kings and gods. In the Islamic era, the motif underwent a metamorphosis, embodying concepts of earthly power and serving as a symbol of political authority and religious legitimacy. It appeared in the form of mythological and historical personages in literature and art. The shared characteristics of the motif in both periods include its benevolent aspect, mastery over creatures, subjugation of animals by a heroic human figure, and the representation of national power, royal authority, religious endorsement, and governmental legitimacy. In Iranian mythology, the motif is aligned with characters from the Shahnameh and functions as a symbol of protection and heroism. The Master and Mistress of Animals are intertwined with popular beliefs and cultural traditions, appearing in artistic forms through symbols such as lions, dragons, and sacred birds. The persistence of this motif throughout history demonstrates its adaptability and capacity to integrate with diverse value systems, manifesting uniquely in each period.

Author Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's thesis entitled «Retrieval of the roots of pottery and metalwork motifs of the early Islamic period in Iran: Samanid, Buyids, Seljuk», supervised by the second and third authors in the Faculty of Art at Shahed University.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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Appendix

1. In Jiroft art, the hero derives sacred power or capability (Spenta force) from these animals (Taheri, 2015).
2. Vayu (or the dual Vayu, also called the daeva Vayu or Vaybod) is one of the very ancient Iranian deities and the personification of wind.
3. The image on the coins of Bahram V (Bahram Gur) shows him wearing a crenellated crown adorned with a globe and crescent. His hair is styled in thick locks gathered at the back of the neck. A single-row pearl necklace is also depicted hanging around his neck. Source: https://sekeha.com
4. Examples of birds holding leaves in their beaks from the Sasanian period can be seen on a vessel housed in the Hermitage Museum, Russia.

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