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Motifs on the Laver at the Shrine of Shah Seyed Ali in Isfahan with Emphasis on Concepts and Structure in Iranian Art

Alireza Mohammadi Milasi*

Assistant Professor, Isfahan Sepehr College, Iran.

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Abstract

Laver is a huge laver made of stone that was set in the yard and entrance of holy and public sites and used for quenching the thirst. Laver making reached its climax at the Safavid era and is closely related to Shia thinking and the sanctity of water by Iranians. The emergence of the Safavid government led to a revolution in the social and cultural structure of Iran. In this era, the political and religious worldview of Iran underwent a fundamental change and national state was established based on Shia thoughts because of which national-religious art emerged. Many of ancient Persian symbols were used based on a new idea. The Motifs and ornaments of works made in the Safavid era were created under the influence of such a thought. The current study has been conducted based on data collected through fieldwork and library documents via a descriptive-analytic method. It deals with the place of water in Iranian culture and introduces the laver of Imam Zadeh Shah Seyed Ali of Isfahan. In this essay, the author struggles to assay the roots of Motifs used in the decoration of this laver in view of concept and structure in Iranian art. The symbols used in this laver convey the highest national and religious messages. Symbolic use of the concept of water, lion and Sun motif and sacred tree (between two animals standing before each other) reveal the continuation of tradition of Iranian Motifs before Safavid era particularly pre-Islamic Iranian art. That is expressed through new concepts under the influence of Shia Islam in the best form that has not been repeated in any other laver or work in such a beautiful form. This research is fundamental and developmental in view of its goal. It is analytic-descriptive in view of its method. Having conducted a field study of the laver, we use library sources including articles and documents in order to assay the continuation of Motifs and their symbolic root.

Keywords: *laver, Ornaments, Shia, Safavid Era, Iranian Art.*

Introduction

The tradition of laver building in the Safavid era underwent extensive development due to religious reasons and usually, they were used at the gates of religious monuments and routes taken by caravans. The Motifs used in the lavers, can reflect ancient Persian attitudes. The interest in the ideas of Ancient Persia probably first was seen in the ideas of Sohrewardi. He believed that the “spiritual and intelligible culture of Ancient Persia should not be forgotten” (Memarian, 2011, 51). Mystical works of Sohrewardi and even his secret doctrine had their origin in Sufism (Zarinkoob, 2000, 485). After his death, Sohrewardi’s illuminative ideas first influenced Iranian and Shia Sufism and later through dark and secret channels it even made its way into Iran’s modern culture after their interesting renaissance in the eleventh century of Hijra and led to a revolution in Iranian art and culture.

Therefore, the notions of the symbolic Motifs of laver of Shah Seyyed Ali have and the way of continuing life by Motifs in Iranian art seems to be a significant issue in the current essay.

Powerful ornaments based on Iranian-Islamic culture and art were a key feature of Safavid art. This tradition was also observed regarding the lavers that made many Europeans travelogue writers praise them (Chardin, 2000, 36). Laver of Shah Seyed Ali, which is introduced for the first time, includes such Motifs as Lion and Sun on two sides of Sacred Tree. This refers to the ancient Persian motifs. Moreover, the use of sacred tree bespeaks of full consciousness of value and sanctity of this tree in the ancient Persian culture. In this era, under the influence of culture and literature, new meanings were defined for these motifs based on the new religion.

Research Background

Our review of the literature shows that the existing books and laverarticles, which have been published on the stone-troughLavers of Isfahan, so far just

focus on the epigraphs.

Kasrawi in his book (1978) and Qaem Maqami (1969) in a study of the development of the Lion and Sun sign has investigated the role of Lion and Sun. Yahaqi in his Dictionary of Myths and Stories in the Persian Language (2015) which is a study in Iranian myths and symbols and Neyyer Nuri (1965) in History of Flag and Lion and Sun have discussed this issue. Javadi and Nikoei (2015) in “Myth of the Sun in India and Iran” published in the Journal of Oriental Art and Civilization has studied the place of the myth of Sun in the thoughts of Iranian and Indian as two Aryan tribes. In addition, the Sun as a symbol has been investigated in their texts in a comparative context. Avarzamani (2018) in “Sun Religion in Myth and History and Its Course of Evolution in East and West” published in Journal of Oriental Art and Civilization has studied the evolution of Mehrism (Sun Religion) in Iranian lands (before and after Islam) and Indian lands and Christian Eastern Roman Empire.

Honarfar (1975) in his book entitled “Isfahan Treasury of Historical Works” has examined the details of historical epigraphs of Isfahan in all monuments and sites as well as the epigraphs of all lavers. Moreover, Honarfar (1975) in an essay entitled “Historical lavers of Isfahan in Safavid Era” published in the Journal of Art and People just has studied the epigraphs of lavers of Isfahan. Afzal Tusi and Mani (2013) in an article entitled “Safavid lavers and Shia Sacred Art” published in Journal of Garden Perspective have studied the epigraphs and 54 renowned lavers of Isfahan in view of Shia Islam. Dadmehr (1999) in his book entitled “Water Fountains and Lavers of Isfahan” has just assayed the epigraphs of Lavers of Isfahan. Mirshokraei (2003) in his article published in Month Book of Art concerning “Culture of Water” has conducted a study in this regard and Javadi (2013) in Journal of Oriental Art and Civilization has published an article entitled “Revisiting Ancient Story of Water

and Tree in Islamic Era” that deals with this issue.

Water in Iranian Culture

Iran is a land with numerous deserts. In most parts of the Iranian plateau rainfall is very small (Lambton, 1966, 32). Then, taking care of water has turned it into a sacred affair. In order to control water on the surface and under the ground, Iranians have made numerous efforts (Fischer, 2007, 235).

Water was considered to be a constitutive, creative, life-giving, sacred and divine element. It has received much attention in the beliefs and culture of people (Darabi Purshirazi, 2000, 22). Water is the symbol of life and death and works as a bridge between the earthly world and the metaphysical world; it washes the human spirit and body and leaves him as a new and free creature so that he can reach perfection in peace (Alam Al Hoda, 2003, 85).

In the Achaemenid and Parthian eras, the goddess Anahita had a high status and had her own ceremony. This ritual in some aspects was under the influence of the Elamite Peyniker goddess. “Sassanid dynasty who were clerics of Anahita Temple” (Christiansen, 1996, 145), declared Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the country and made numerous efforts to glorify Anahita. They have proven their respect and care in Motifs and coins and they always built their temples alongside water. The Moghs due to the importance that two gods of Ancient Persia, i.e. Anahita and Mehr, had in people’s minds, made magnificent hymns in praise of these two goddesses which are included in Yashtha. Yasht Five of Avistā Avistāthat is one of the most beautiful of the Yashtha belongs to Anahita and she is presented as the heavenly and earthly embodiments of the Zoroastrian worldview (Avistā, 2004, 601-4; cf. Moradi Ghyathabadi, 2001, 49). In the Holy Quran, 63 times the word “water” has been used and the life of everything is described to be dependent upon water. Water in Quran is the blissful bounty of the Lord, which is endowed from the heavens, and God promises a paradise to the

righteous people under the trees of which brooks are flowing and this beautiful expression of paradise has left a deep influence on Iranian architecture and miniature (Khosrawi, 1999, 113). Many efforts have been made on behalf of Iranian artists for the creation of a world of ideas through symbolic signs (Ahari, 2006, 146-7).

Following the growth of Shia culture and given the fact that Shia Muslims believe that Imam Ali is the cupbearer of Kosar fountain, we become more knowledgeable of the importance of water and drinking it in Iranian culture and this religious belief has played a key role in formation and signification of Iranian literature. On the one hand, water was introduced as the dowry of Her Highness Fatima and also one can state that no historical-religious event could influence the religious spirit of Iranian people as much as the event of Karbala. This event is well reflected in the discourse, actions, poems, architecture, music, theater, proverb, beliefs, traditions, and rituals or in one word, people’s culture (Mehrabi Beigi, 2004, 17).

The existence of water at the counter of the mosque or at the vestibule of its gate is a symbol of purification of soul and entrance into the pure and clear world (Alam Al Hoda, 2003, 85). Use of water at the entrance of the building was generally observed in Sassanid religious architecture. Also, the same tradition has been observed in most of the Safavid palaces and mosques insofar as in huge mansions large pools or troughs are used while in those buildings that no such thing was possible small lavers or lavers were used.

Laver

Sangab the Persian equivalent for “Laver” is a compound noun composed of “Sang” [stone] and “Ab” [water]. That has been defined in Moein dictionary as follows: a huge container, which is made of stone, is set at the yard of mosques and religious sites, and is filled with water. So that the people who are thirsty can drink water (Dadmehr,

1999, 18) and it has had a special relationship with people's beliefs (Honarfar, 1966, 16-52).

Our review of the epigraphs of lavers of Isfahan showed that in the Safavid era other names were also used to refer to lavers. For instance, in the lavers of northern porch of Congregational Mosque and Teymurid Hall the title of "Jam" [Cup], in the laver of Emamzadeh Esmacil, the title of "Hawz" [Fountain] and in the lavers of Abbasid Congregational Mosque (Shah) and Khan Mosque the title "Qadah" [Tun] have been used. As previously mentioned, in the Safavid era various terms were used to refer to lavers but in the Qajar era, the majority of people used the term "Sangab" [Laver].

Laver of Emamzadeh Shah Seyed Ali of Isfahan

This Laver is located in front of the entrance gate of Emamzadeh. It is made of limestone and in a rectangular form. It is 107 cm long and 90 cm wide and 74 cm high from the front side and 50 cm deep and the length of its opening is 95 cm and its width is 70 cm. The corners are beveled and they appear as an octagon. This Laver is located eastward and only at its forehead (eastern corner), there are Motifs. The lower part of the laver is relatively narrow as compared to its crown insofar as it seems first that the Laver is located at the corner of the monument. Only on two sides of this laver (i.e. eastern and southern sides), there are ornaments while the northern and western sides of it are in raw form. Therefore, it becomes clear that these two sides are located inside the wall and there is no need for decoration. The laver has two outlets: one hole as a drain on the bottom of the laver and other at its crown with an edged conduit used for the discharge of the Laver in the event of its overflow. This part due to the flow of water over a long period of time, sediment deposited on its forehead motifs (middle part) and the beauty of many figures on it remains hidden. The Motifs and ornaments of the laver can

be divided into several parts: epigraphs, framing, Lion, and Sun (Fig. 1).

Epigraph

On the epigraph of the margin over the Laver two verses of a Persian Poem are engraved which have been separated from other figures with a horizontal line. It includes such issues as the name of the endower and the date of its construction in numerical form (1119 AH (Anno Hegirae)), which is mentioned at the end of the final verse (Fig. 2). In spite of the damage and illiteracy of the elementary and middle sections of the poem due to sedimentation and erosion, the poem can be read as follows:

This Laver was donated by Nasir Ibn Saleh/ To drink water with the memory of Hussein / the Master of Reason told us to seek for the date of donation/ in the Kosar fountain and cup.

According to the latter poem, the donator of this Laver is Nasir, the Son of Saleh, who has donated it for the sake of providing water for the thirsty, but what causes ambiguity is the last verse that comes to end with the date 1119 AH. i.e. the reign of Safavid Sultan Hossein (1105-1132 AH.), however, according to the last verse (seek for its date from Kosar fountain and cup) based on Abjad letters is calculated to be 1118 AH during the reign of Sultan Hossein and is one year lesser than the date engraved on the laver in numbers. Three hypotheses can be made in this regard: first, this mistake is not intentional; secondly, the construction of the laver had begun in 1118 AH. and ended in 1119 AH. or thirdly, it is due to the correction of the rhythm of the poem. Anyway, both dates refer to the construction of this laver during the reign of Safavid Sultan Hossein.

Framing

The second part of the Motifs of the laver is located within an altar-like frame that contains the whole



A



B

Fig. 1. A & B: Front view of the laver & The view of the laver from above. Source: author Archive.

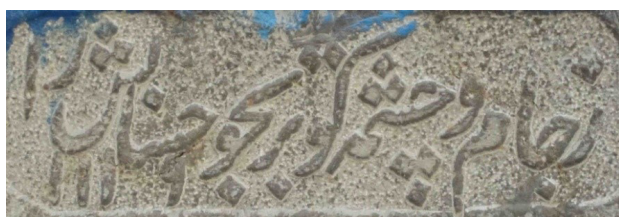


Fig. 2. Last verse on the laver and the date of its construction. Source: author Archive.

figures at the heart of the laver (Fig. 3).

Lion and Sun

The images of two lions on leashes with the sun (Lion and Sun) in a symmetrical form are in front of each



A



B

Fig. 3.A & B: Central Motifs of laver & Central frame of lavar. Source: Author.

other and their leashes are tied to a tree between them. The sun on the right side has twelve beams of light but the sun on the left side has eleven beams of light. It seems that one of these figures refer to the Shia Twelve Imams while the other eleven beams represent the occultation of the twelfth Imam. The hairs of the two suns are woven into three clusters and can be seen on two sides of the face and the hairs are parted at the top of the eyebrows. The eyes look like almond-shaped Safavid pictures and have thick eyebrows ending in the nose. The form of eyebrow and nose is the same; as if the nose at the top changes into two horns (Fig. 4). This form of eyebrows in many works of miniaturists of the Safavid era is repeated particularly in the School of Isfahan and under the Safavid columns of Mirror hall, which is in the form of a statue. They are now located at the sides of Chehelsootoon Pool (Fig. 5). We can see the same form of nose and eyebrows. It seems that the architect of the laver has taken the latter as his pattern. The same form of eyebrows can be found in Sassanid, Parthian and Achaemenid statues too (Fig. 6).

The image of the sun is relatively big and covers the whole waist of the lion (Fig. 7). The mouth of the sun



A



B

Fig. 4. A & B: The Sun & Details of the Levar. Source: author.

of laver is not clear and is hidden behind the lion. This seems to have been a tradition in the Safavid School.

In Lion and Sun of the northern side of Hasht Behesht Palace, the mouth of the sun is not clear (Fig. 8) and on the coins of Shah Tahmasb and Shah Sultan Hossein (which have been minted three years earlier than the construction of Laver in 1115 AH. in Isfahan), the sun lacks any mouth (Fig. 9). The form of hairs of the sun of laver, which are located on two sides of the face, is very similar to the sun of Hasht Behesht Palace. We can find the same form of the hair in the sun of the entrance gate of Ali

Gapu Palace (Fig. 10), the façade of Qeysaryah and the statues around Chelsootoon pool (Fig. 11). That is very similar to the form of the hair of the sun on one of the porches of Teymurid school of Shirdari of Samarkand (Rigestan); (Hill et al, 2007, 69) (Fig. 12). Drawing the lock of hair on two sides of the face has been repeated in Safavid miniatures particularly in the School of Isfahan.

The number of beams of light in two suns of Hasht Behesht Palace is twelve while the sun on the left side of the laver has eleven beams of light and the sun on the right side of the laver has twelve beams. The lions have raised their tails and opened their mouths. They are very similar to the lions of Hasht Behesht from this perspective. Of course, there is still one difference, i.e. in the lions of Hasht Behesht the hands are coupled along with each other and the legs are moving. The raised tails have been mostly observed in Iranian art. "Depiction of the raised tail for lion and cats is a sign of more authority" (Abdollahian, 1999, 59; Grischmann, 1991, 338). The form of the eye of lions is very similar to the eye of the lion catching the buffalo in Takhte Jamshid. The same form can be found in the lions of Mesopotamia (Babylon).

Since one of the most important features of Iranian miniature is the use of symbolic elements (Khodi, 2006, 96), this tradition is directly related to the religious beliefs of the artist and is a type of institutionalization of notions that are rooted in his mind and have made their ways into the depths of his spirit. Thus, one can say that the root of the symbolic figures sometimes dates back to far pasts and the ancient ritual of worshipping the sun and the beliefs of Mazdisna and Zoroastrianism and sometimes the same beliefs have taken Islamic color to themselves (Ibid). Mehr (Sun) in Iranian culture (ancient and historical era) has been underlined and is the first god that Ahura has created (Avarzamani, 2018, 41-47). In Avestā, we read: "She (Sun) endows peace, silence and happiness upon the whole Iranian lands" (Ancient Avestā, 2003, 35). In Zoroastrian, religion sun is one



A



B

Fig. 5. A & B: Under the pillar around the pond in Chehel sotoun. Source: author Archive.



Fig. 6. Lion and Sun, Northeast Side of Hasht Behesht. Source: author Archive.



Fig. 7. Coppery coin of Shah Sultan Hossein. Source: Shariatzadeh, 2011, 216.



Fig. 8. The Sun in the Façade of Ali Qapu. Source: author.

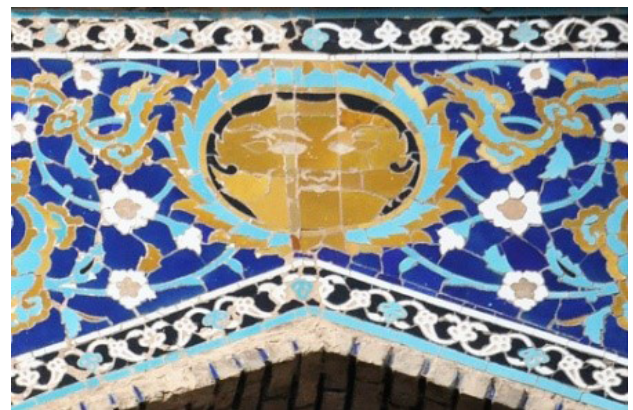


Fig. 9. The Sun in the Façade of Qeysaryah. Source: author Archive.



Fig. 10. Rigeštan of Samarkand. Source: author Archive.

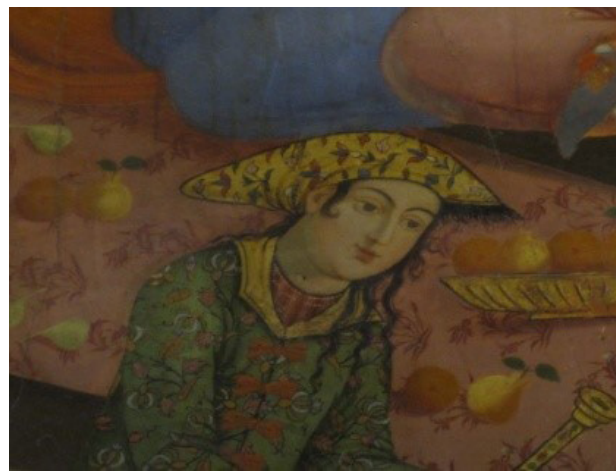


Fig. 11. Three locks of hair on the left cheek of a woman in the wall painting of Chehel Sotoun Palace. Source: author Archive.



Fig. 12. Lion and Sun of Northeastern side of Hasht Behesht. Source: author Archive.

of the purifying elements; in most processes, this point is revealed (Javadi, 2018, 17-18).

The motif of Lion and Sun has both astronomical notions and religious symbols as well as close relations with ancient motifs of Iran (Poppe, 1999, 1051). In addition to the aforementioned notions, sometimes it referred to the fortune of the king who ruled in the time (Kasrawi, 1978, 11). Lion represented the sun (Nayyernuri, 1965, 10). The totality of traditions suggests that the sun is a manifestation of God while the lion is a symbol of power and authority, both of them in some way are related to the King, and historical evidence endorses this idea. According to the traditions, the Mehregan festival that used to be held on October 8 in Ancient Persia was known as the festival of KINGS (Khosrawan). This festival

was also held in the Islamic era. In the History of Beyhaqi, the author has referred to the Mehregan Festival in which Amir Masood has participated (Beyhaqi, 2010, 604).

According to the astronomers, whenever the sun star reaches the Leon position it is the time of peace, happiness and fortune (Khazaei, 2002). This was a sign of authority in the kingdom. In the words of Shabestari in Golshane Raz (Garden of Secret): Aries with scorpion took the place of Bahram/ the Leo turned out to be an abode of peace for the sun (Pur Abdollah, 2000, 70).

Given the ancient literature of Iran particularly Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, which has been drawn upon the Sassanid books of god, the motif of a lion was considered to be a symbol in the flag of Iranians (Ferdowsi, 2006, 188). In the Islamic era, the motif of lion continued to be used as the symbol of power and courage and thanks to the special intelligence of Iranians, it found a new function and very soon, it turned to one of the traditional factors of religion. In the History of Beyhaqi, there are two allusions to the figure of a lion on the flags of Ghaznavis (Yahaqi, 2015, 531).

The religious notion of the motif of lion and sun can be seen since the later Saljuqi era. The Lion/Sun

motif was used first by the Roman Sejuqis during the reign of Keikhosrow and due to his love for a Georgian girl (Kasrawi, 1977, 19; quoted from Ibn Ebri, 1994, 353).

What usually leaves a deep influence on an artist is literature. In Iranian literature in various eras, Imam Ali has been named as the Lion of God and Heydar and for this reason, lion turned to a symbol for Imam Ali in Iranian and specifically Shia culture and the motif of the sun was discussed as a symbol of the prophet (Khazaei, 1999, 57). Sa'di the great Iranian poet in a verse has written:

The prophet is the shining sun in the world/ These are the noble stars and the leaders (Sa'di, 2006, 729); The sun motif as a symbol has a significant place in Iranian fine arts and in the course of history; it has been associated with numerous notions. As its place has been mentioned in Zoroastrianism, there is a chapter in Quran called Shams and in the Islamic era, Shamseh (Arabic equivalent of Sun) has been used as a motif in most artistic works particularly in the illuminated manuscript of Quran. In some of the works of the Islamic era particularly the Safavid era, the motif or symbol of the sun in the form of Shamseh or Chalipa (Bukhturtash, 2001, 233-272) was used as a symbol of the prophet. One can say that the latter occurred under the influence of literature and it is perhaps drawn upon verse 174 of Chapter Nisa in the Holy Quran. In this verse, we read: "You People! An authority has been sent to you on behalf of your Lord and we have revealed a light for you" (Ayati, 1992, 106). In addition, Rumi states:

Sun came as a reason for the sun/ if you seek for a reason, you may not hide from it (Rumi, 2011, 42). After the officialization of Shia Islam in the Safavid era, one of the symbols frequently noticed by Shia Iran was the symbol of Lion and Sun that was used in this era based on a new understanding and as a sign of the nearness of the Prophet of Islam and the First Imam of the Shia Muslims. The first one of the Safavid dynasty who made use of the symbol of Lion

and Sun on their flags was Sheikh Joneyd the Grand Father of Shah Esmaeil (Qaem Maqami, 1963, 265). After the establishment of the Safavid dynasty, this symbol was used on the coins (Tavarneit, 2010, 280), flags, tiles and epigraphs in the Safavid era and made its way into the holiest Shia sites. the highest attention to it can be seen in the coins of Safavid Shah Abbas I who in addition to the lion and sun motif decided to minted the phrase "Dog of the House of Ali" over the coins (Sarafraz, 2000, 245). One of the most important documents for understanding the concept of lion and sun in Shia culture is the coin of Qajarid Aqa Mohammad Khan. This coin (Fig. 13) has the lion and sun motif. Inside the sun, the phrase "O' Mohammad" is inscribed and at the Philip, side under the lion the phrase "O' Ali" is engraved. At the façade of all porches and gates of the Safavid era, there is a sign of "Ali". Many sources trace the name of "Ali Qapu" back to the name of Imam Ali.

The stone lions despite the opposition of Islam with a sculpture made their ways into cemeteries and Emamzadeh shrines. It has continued its life among



Fig. 13. Coin of Qajarid Aqa Mohammad Khan. Source: Poppe, 2008, vol. 13, 1481.

the Bakhtiari nomads until today as a tradition. Tanavoli believes that the stone lion was set over the grave of the heroes and brave men who followed Imam Ali in their lives. This symbol was also used in some form on the flag of the Hussainiya and Shia congregational halls and on the armbands of the heroes (Tanavoli, 2009, 9-10).

We can offer several reasons for the existence of the lion and sun motif over the works of Shah Sultan Hossein era including Laver of Shah Seyed Ali:

A) As previously mentioned, the lion and sun motif was a religious motif and its use is an expression of the idea and belief and love of Safavid king of Imam Ali and the presence of this motif on Laver of Emamzadeh Shah Seyed Ali is indeed the continuation of the tradition of use of the lion and sun motif in Emamzadeh Shrines. On the other hand, the Laver itself was built with a religious goal and was an endowment in the name of Imam Hossein and according to the last verse of the poem of Laver, it was supposed to lead the endower (donator) to the cup and cup-bearer of Kosar, i.e. Imam Ali (Image 1-C). Moreover, there is a symbol of lion in other Emamzadeh shrines, for instance, the stone lion of Harun Velayat of Isfahan and the lion at the façade of Emamzadeh Ardakan of Fars (Ibid), Lion and Sun of Emamzadeh Ibrahim of Kashan (Fig. 14) and the symmetrical lions of Imam Reza Shrine.

B) It seems that since Shah Sultan Hossein was born in October he took the lion/sun motif to be a sign of fortune for his kingdom because in addition to the architectural works, this motif is also repeated on the coins of this era.

C) Cedar: There is an image of cedar between the two lions, whose margins are ragged and this makes it very similar to the cedar of the porch of Imam Mosque (Shah) and it lacks any branch. It is more like a shrub that later was used in the same form with few modifications in the era of Zandyyah and Qajaryyah for decoration of buildings. At the top of the cedar, there is an Arabesque motif buried under

the sedimentation (Fig. 15).

Inside this cedar, there is another small cedar and inside the latter, we can see a blossom-like design. Bringing a small cedar inside the larger cedar can be seen in the cedars of the northwestern side of the Hasht Behesht Palace (Fig. 16). It seems that the closeness of the year of construction of Hasht Behesht Palace (Shah Soleiman era 1077-1105 AH) to the date of construction of the Laver has caused the motifs of Hasht Behesht Palace to influence the motifs of the Laver.

Tree in its most ancient form, according to its description in the myths, is a giant universal tree that is the symbol of the universe and its creation. The apex of this tree has covered the whole ceiling of the sky and its roots have penetrated into the whole ground. Its wide leaves are extended through the whole world and its heart is the place of the fire of thunder. One of the most ancient songs of the world is the song of cedar that has been discovered in "Arido" of Mesopotamia (Nosrati, 2001, 68).

Cedar in Persian literature as the evergreen tree is the symbol of eternity, beauty and life after death (Sa'di, 2006, 176). Planting this tree had been so popular since ancient times in Iran and whenever a Zoroastrian had a baby he would plant cedar and named the tree after the name of his child. In History of Bayhaqi, it is also noted that Zoroaster brought two branches of cedar from the paradise and planted one of them in Kashmar and the other in Farivmad. Cedar has also been noted by the names of Shervin and Azad (Baqeri, 2010, 107). In Bandhesh cedar is described as a divine sign (Darabi Purshirazi, 2000, 89).

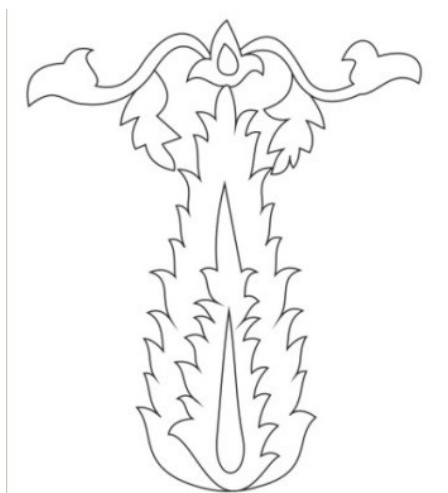
According to the beliefs of ancient Iran, cedar is a plant related to the sun (Mitra). In some sources, it is described as being related to Nahid (the Goddess of Flowing Water). It is also a manifestation of a positive and lively aspect of life. Thus, religious places still are surrounded by cedar. Zoroaster in Avestā alludes to a type of cedar and describes it as a paradise tree whose leaves are knowledge and



Fig. 14. Imamzadeh Ibrahim of Kashan. Source: author Archive.



A



B

Fig. 15. A & B: The design of the Cedar and Arabesque of the Laver. Source: author.



Fig. 16. Cedar Motif at the Northwestern Side of Hasht Behesht. Source: author Archive.

its fruits are the reason and everyone who tastes its fruits will become eternal (Abdollohian, 2008, 52). Throughout Takhte Jamshid one can find the motif of cedar which is evergreen and eternal.

Following the emergence of Islam, the sacredness of this tree continues with the tree of Tuba and in the Quran, it is noted as the fig and olive tree and tree finds a sacred stature. Some of these sacred trees can be found today in every corner of Iran that everyone goes to them for their own needs, and there are many stories in Persian literature about this (Sa'di, 1980, 137).

Most of these trees are located alongside a water pond and on the day of Ashura, they cry in the memory of Imam Hossein beside these trees. This signals Persian ancient traditions in Shia Iran. On the Laver of Emamzadeh Shah Seyed Ali, we are witness to the sacred ancient tree that is the ancient symbol of sun and is located between two animals related to sun. It is on the forehead of a Laver that is full of water. It is a symbol of moon and belongs to the goddess of flowing water, i.e. Nahid the symbol of purity and in Shia culture water is the dowry of Her Highness Zahra and an indication of the story of Karbala and reminds us the following poem by Ferdowsi:

The Prophet is the Sun and the leaders the moon/ they together build the straight path (Ferdowsi, 2006, 4).

On the other hand, in the ritual ceremonies of Ashura, all banners and signs are inspired by the motif of sacred cedar, which is a symbol of liberty of Imam Hossein. In this Laver, the Iranian and Shia traditions have been observed in the best form. "Safavids who were conscious of the respectfulness of cedar among various classes of Iranian people struggled to make use of it in order to establish Shia Islam as well as the mourning ceremonies for the commemoration of Imam Hossein. A type of small cedar made of a metal called banner having the names of Mohammad, Ali and the Prophet's Household is carried at the front of the mourning group. Another type of it is made of timber and is called palm (Tanavoli, 2000, 54) (Fig. 17). It has a palm form and is made as a thick and wide cedar (Zarezadeh, 2009, 44).

D) Two animals in front of each other: Use of two animals in front of each other that have a plant between

them is of ancient history and has been repeated in the historical eras of Iran. Roman Grischmann writes in this regard, "Iran has drawn the theme of animals on two sides of the sacred tree from Babylon and Ashur. It is not by accident that in Avistā, these trees which grow near a pond and have their own guards are mentioned" (Grischmann, 1991, 233). In the Laver of Emamzadeh Shah Seyed Ali, we are witness to ancient and Avistā based tradition: two lions that guard the (sacred) tree of life. The best example of it can be found in tombs and palaces of Achaemenid kings (Baqeri, 2010, 102; cf. Vandenberg, 2008, 225) (Fig. 18). Its culmination occurs in Sassanid art. Given the fact that lion in Iranian myths is the symbol of guard and man, on the backside of most Sassanid coins, we find the image of two armed men who guard the sacred fire. This same tradition has been followed for the sacred fire, and it has continued in al-Boye's art (Fig. 19).

Following the renaissance of the Safavid era, we are witness to the revival of this tradition. Use of the motifs of animals and birds on two sides of tree of life not only can be seen in Laver of Shah Seyed Ali rather also in the Laver of Chelsootoon palace, porch of the gate of Imam Mosque (Shah) (Fig. 20) and the tiles of the tomb of Sheikh Safi Al-Din (Fig. 21).

The use of the form of a tree in this Laver and two guards, in fact, the Laver is indeed representing the same pond mentioned in Avistā (life water).

Lion as the representative of Mehr (Bayani, 1984, 52-55) is a powerful and enlightened guard (Avistā, 2001, 29). Therefore, as lions in symmetrical form were used at the gates of palaces, it seems that these lions have been used for guarding the temple of Anahita (Tanavoli, 1977, 26). This tradition was practiced even after the arrival of Islam insofar as the outlet of many drinking water reservoirs was in the form of a lion's head and alongside the water pools in Iran, there were lion forms and motifs. For example, we can refer to Safavid water house pool of Imam Jomeh of Isfahan and Chelsootoon Palace and the use



Fig. 17. Mourning Palm of Abyaneh. Source: author Archive.



A



B

Fig. 18. Two lions guard the holy lotus flower. A: Thatcher's Palace Courtyard. B: Ardeshir Second Armory Reservoir. Source: author Archive.



A



B

Fig. 19. Two Guarding Lion and Life Tree. A: Coin of Sassanid Shapur. Source: Sarafraz, 2000, 20. B: The Textile with Sassanid Motifs. Source: Grischmann, 1991, 233.

of the term “Shire Ab” (which literally means “Lion of Water”) [faucet] in contemporary Iran culture is indeed originated in the ancient tradition of the relationship of Mehr and Nahid.



Fig. 20. Façade of Imam (Shah Mosque), Source: author Archive.



Fig. 21. Tomb of Sheikh Safi Al-Din Ardebili, Source: author Archive.

Conclusion

Many ancient motifs and symbols of Iran are crystallized in the art of the Safavid era. One can state that the dynamic culture of Iran, Shia literature and religion have played a key role in the formation of art in this era.

The use of laver and its symbolic motifs in the Safavid era is related to Iranian and Shia ideas, which express the valuable and symbolic place of water in Iranian-Islamic beliefs. Decoration of lavers has been handled with utmost precision; there is a close relationship between architectural decorations, ornaments of Lavers. SLavers are built in different forms, and their decorations include epigraphs, Arabesque motifs, plant motifs, animal figures and symbolic motifs.

The laver of Emamzadeh Shah Seyed Ali like most of the lavers of Isfahan has an epigraph that contains the name of donator, the goal of donation, prayer and the date of construction in poetry (Abjad letters) and number.

What distinguishes this laver from other lavers of the Safavid era is the use of the lion/sun motif in its decoration that continues the tradition of lion building in Emamzadeh shrines of the Safavid era. This motif has its origin in the ancient religious

tradition of Iran and represents the relationship between Mehr and Nahid. The lion/sun motif in the Safavid era has been presented with a new notion that expresses the nearness of the Holy Prophet and Imam Ali and their valuable and symbolic place. On the other hand, the existence of water in Laver reminds us of the historical event of Karbala, the sufferings of Imam Hossein, his family, and their thirst. The lion/sun symbol continues the ancient method of Iranian sculpture and is hugely under the influence of Safavid School of miniature and the mouthless face of the sun and the makeup of its hair has been under the influence of Safavid and Teydmurid tradition.

The use of symbolic ancient motifs of cedar tree which is a symbol of Imam Hossein in the Safavid era and putting it in the middle of the Laver between two lions and sun (symbol of the Holy Prophet and Imam Ali) bespeaks of its special importance and centrality of Imam Hossein and the epic of Karbala in Shia's thought and is also the symbolic Safavid art. Symmetrical use of the figures and depicting the guarding animals in front of each other and before the sacred and universal tree, which was the symbolic feature of Iranian art before the arrival of Islam, continued in the art and thought of post-Islamic Iran and symmetrical use has been performed in this laver

with the same concept.

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