

Original Research Article**The Ritual Role of Golnār – The Pomegranate Flower in Iranian Art and Culture**Vahid Rafiei Dehaghani^{1*}, Shohreh Javadi²1. M.A. Student in Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts,
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Abstract

The pomegranate flower, known as Golnār, has been a prominent symbol in Persian poetry and literature due to its vibrant red color, representing beauty, fertility, immortality, and love. It is one of the most beloved and widely used motifs in Iranian art. Persian poets have employed this symbol to express deep emotions and various concepts; for instance, the red pomegranate seeds are often compared to a lover's lips, making the fruit a recurring emblem of love and beauty in poetry. In Persian literature, the pomegranate is considered a heavenly fruit, and divine religions have referenced its presence in paradise. Additionally, the infallible Imams have emphasized the significance of consuming this sacred fruit. Archaeological evidence highlights the depiction of pomegranates on pottery from the third and fourth millennia BCE. The earliest decorative motifs featuring pomegranates date back to the Parthian period, including the Yazdgerd Fortress and other examples found in Sassanian stucco decorations (in Kish, Nezamabad, Ctesiphon, and others). During the Sassanian and Islamic periods, this motif remained an important symbol, frequently appearing in tilework, various decorations, and carpet designs. A notable example is the bas-relief at Persepolis, where an Achaemenid king holds a Golnār with two buds in his hand, symbolizing peace and friendship. This imagery is also associated with Anahita, the goddess of fertility and abundance, reflecting the deep-rooted significance of the pomegranate flower in ancient Iranian beliefs.

Keywords: *Golnār, Sassanian, Culture and rituals, Persian literature, Carpet motifs, bas-relief.*

Introduction

The pomegranate flower is one of the most recognized motifs in Iranian art, particularly prominent in Islamic-era works. Its diverse forms and continuous presence have led to extensive studies on its origins and evolution. The motif of the pomegranate flower and fruit, deeply rooted in Iranian history and culture, is one of the most beloved and widely used designs in Iranian-Islamic art. This beautiful and symbolic motif has been featured in various artistic creations such as carpets, tiles, textiles, and jewelry since ancient times. Some of its earliest applications can be seen in decorative stucco and pottery from prehistoric Iran. In

its early centuries, Iran was governed by a ruling system that inherited the artistic traditions of Mesopotamia. The Achaemenids, as successors to Assyrian culture and civilization, developed an architectural and artistic style that blended various influences. During this period, and later in the Sassanian era, the sacred pomegranate symbol was frequently depicted. In the Islamic era, the pomegranate continued to be regarded as a heavenly fruit. Sassanian designs beautifully incorporated stylized pomegranate motifs alongside images of pine or cypress trees, often framed by large bird wings or serrated leaves. The pomegranate motif has consistently symbolized fertility, abundance, immortality, and prosperity, earning

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great reverence throughout history.

The pomegranate is one of the oldest fruits known to humankind. It originally grew wild at the dawn of agriculture and was among the first fruits cultivated by early humans. In ancient Iranian culture, sprigs of willow, olive, and pomegranate were traditionally placed on the Nowruz and Mehregan ceremonial tables. In the Quran, the word Rummān (pomegranate) appears twice in Surah Al-An‘am (verses 991 and 14¹) and once in Surah Ar-Rahman (verse 68), where it is described as a fruit of paradise. The motif of the pomegranate flower and fruit was widely used in different Islamic periods, including the Seljuk, Ilkhanid, and Safavid eras, adorning mosques, palaces, and historical buildings. A tile fragment from ancient Ray, housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (catalog number 20120106), features a pomegranate design dating to the emergence of the Seljuk dynasty (Kashmiri, 2015, 18). The pomegranate tree is among the most sacred and renowned trees, with a universal symbolic meaning. Despite its widespread significance, its artistic and architectural prominence originates from Iran, where it continues to hold a revered status. The tree itself is distinguished by thorny branches, glossy green leaves, bright red flowers, and spherical fruits. Since ancient times, the pomegranate has occupied a special place in Iranian culture, symbolizing fertility, life, and sanctity. In Avestan texts and Zoroastrian sources, the pomegranate is frequently depicted as a sacred fruit, serving as a bridge between humans and the divine. Additionally, in festivals and rituals such as Yalda Night and Mehregan, the pomegranate has played a significant role as a symbol of rebirth and light—its red hue metaphorically stands for fire and divine illumination (Motahari, 2015). Some scholars trace the origin of the pomegranate to Iran and Afghanistan, where it was venerated as a sacred symbol and used in Zoroastrian religious ceremonies.

Research Background

Kashmiri (2015), in her article *Examining the Origins of the Pomegranate Flower Motif in Iranian Art from*

Ancient Times to the Seljuk Era, investigates the origins and transformation of the pomegranate flower motif in Iranian art across different historical periods. She identifies this motif as one of the most significant in Iranian art, with a strong presence in Islamic-era works. The study’s final conclusion challenges Arthur Pope’s view that the Islamic Shah Abbasi pomegranate motif is a continuation of the ancient side-profile lotus. Instead, historical evidence and structural analyses suggest that this motif originated from palm tree patterns.

Mobini and Shakarami (Mobini & Shakarami, 2022) published an article titled *The Continuity of Sassanian Vegetal and Geometric Motifs in the Stucco Decorations of Simreh Mosque*. This research explores the stucco decorations of Simreh Mosque, which dates back to the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, highlighting the influence of Sassanian stucco art on this structure. The mosque features vegetal motifs such as vine leaves, palm trees, acanthus leaves, pomegranates, and lotus flowers, along with geometric designs like square and circular frames all rooted in the Sassanian plasterwork tradition. The study emphasizes how Sassanian stucco decoration persisted into the Islamic period, evolving through innovative forms and diverse patterns. Notable innovations include the increased density of motifs, intricate detailing, and the introduction of new floral elements such as the Datura flower in Simreh Mosque’s decorations. This study underscores the strong connection between Sassanian art and early Islamic architecture. Darvishi and Narimani (Darvishi & Narimani, 2022) published an article titled *The Symbolic Role of the Tulip and Pomegranate Flower in Iranian and Ottoman Turkish Tilework*. Their study highlights how pomegranate and tulip motifs served as significant symbols in the art and culture of both Iran and Ottoman Turkey. The pomegranate, one of the oldest symbols in Iranian culture, is associated with mythological beliefs, particularly Anahita, the goddess of fertility and abundance. This motif has been consistently present in Iranian architectural and decorative arts from the Achaemenid era through the Islamic period, symbolizing fertility, immortality, and prosperity. In contrast, the tulip

became a prominent symbol in Ottoman art, playing a central role in their decorative traditions.

Pomegranate in Rituals and Beliefs

In ancient Iranian religious texts, although the Avesta does not mention pomegranates by name, they appear multiple times in Pahlavi texts such as the Bundahishn, where they are classified as one of the most auspicious fruits in Fargard 27. Pomegranate trees were planted in fire temples, and during religious ceremonies, Zoroastrian priests held their branches (barsam or pomegranate twigs²)—a tradition that has persisted to this day. Even now, lone pomegranate trees can be found near shrines or atop sacred hills, where people tie votive ribbons to them (Yahaghi, 2007, 166). The ancient Persian name *Narbola*, meaning “pomegranate flower,” is among the most significant symbols in Iranian culture. It is also the name of a beautiful and kind-hearted queen, the wife of Darius the Great, as recorded in inscriptions, reliefs, and statues. In the bas-reliefs of Darius, the *Narbola*—a pomegranate flower—can be seen in the hands of the king and his heir (see Fig. 6). The pomegranate was considered sacred in Zoroastrianism, where it played a key role in religious rituals. Even today, the Yarsani Kurds use pomegranates in their ceremonies (Ahangari & Hosseini, 2021). In Iranian culture, the pomegranate carries feminine symbolism, representing immortality and fertility, and is closely linked to Anahita, the goddess of water, birth, and abundance. In the Mazdean tradition, the pomegranate tree is among the sacred trees, with Zoroastrians holding its branches and fruit during religious ceremonies. Given these associations, the connection between pomegranates and sacred spaces (churches, mosques, and fire temples) becomes evident. Across many cultures, the pomegranate is a symbol of prosperity, often presented by grooms to brides at weddings to bless them with abundant offspring. For Muslims, the fruit represents beauty, and eating it is believed to promote health, radiance, and vitality. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) recommended pomegranates to pregnant women, saying that consuming them would

lead to beautiful children. Alongside the olive, date, and fig, the pomegranate is one of the four sacred trees in Islamic beliefs. Pomegranates also hold significance in Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism. Followers of this tradition break open a pomegranate at home or work on religious occasions, symbolically inviting fertility and prosperity. Nearly all major world religions have sanctified the pomegranate and attributed multiple meanings to it. In Greek mythology, the pomegranate plays a key role in the story of Persephone’s abduction by Hades, the god of the underworld, symbolizing life, death, and rebirth. As an evergreen tree, the pomegranate represents immortality, while its abundance of seeds signifies prosperity and fecundity. Many sacred texts reference pomegranate seeds, praising their beauty and taste, and acknowledging their symbolism of fertility and renewal. Architecturally, the pomegranate holds significant meaning and value. Ghiath al-Ghullat states: “Eating a pomegranate ensures health throughout the year.” Many cultures consider the pomegranate a legendary fruit. In Greek mythology, it symbolizes enduring marriage, a motif that appears in several renowned European paintings. In Chinese ceramic art, the pomegranate represents fertility, abundance, a prosperous future, and numerous noble offspring. Nizami Ganjavi, in *Khosrow and Shirin*, also refers to the pomegranate: “The engineer carved the iron blade, Always shaping it from moist pomegranate wood. From that handle, a pomegranate cluster emerged, Turning into a tree, bearing abundant fruit” (Khosrow and Shirin, Nezami, 2005, 341). Similarly, Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* mentions the pomegranate in relation to Esfandiar: “Then he gave Esfandiar to eat, A single pomegranate seed from his own sacred meal” (Shahnameh, 2006, 662). The word “*anar*” appears in the *Shahnameh* as “*nar*”, and its deep red juice is compared to wine in a verse about Bahram Gur: “All the streams were filled with musk-scented air, Like the red bloom of a pomegranate, wine in the jar”. In another instance, a ruby is likened to a pomegranate seed: “Each weighed two mithqals in stone, Like a single pomegranate seed in hue”.

In the story of Zal and Rudabeh, Zal's beauty is compared to a blossoming pomegranate (Ferdowsi, cited in Khaziz, 2012): "Your face resembles the blooming pomegranate flower, With joy, my heart smiles from love for you. When nine years passed over the turning sky, The yellow flower faded, like the pomegranate's hue. When Rudabeh heard those words and talked, She blushed deeply; her face turned pomegranate red."

Given the antiquity of the word "pomegranate," this motif has found its way into the legends of various nations, being interpreted as a symbol intertwined with both reality and imagination. In one tale, the daughter of the king of fairies emerges from a pomegranate fruit; in the play, *The Pomegranate Girl*, a cursed girl resides within a pomegranate tree. This legend, rooted in the oral literature of the Zagros region, has detached itself from mythological origins, as many ancient beliefs refer to the creation of humans from plants. Since ancient times, folktales have served as the expressive language of people, embodying their beliefs and aspirations in symbolic and mysterious forms. In Iranian culture, several folktales highlight the significance of the pomegranate: *The Fairy Pomegranate* tells of a ruler who, after experiencing a strange dream, weeps so much that he becomes blind. Other tales, such as *The Pomegranate and the Gypsy*, *Pomegranate Lady*, and *The Legend of the Pomegranate Daughters*, also illustrate the deep-rooted importance of the pomegranate in popular beliefs and traditions.

Pomegranate in the Myths of Nations and Cultures

Since ancient times, the pomegranate has been revered as a sacred fruit among various peoples worldwide. Its sanctity is evident in the Abrahamic religions, where its presence in paradise has been foretold, and religious figures have encouraged its consumption. In Christianity, the pomegranate holds a special sacred status, and in Buddhism, it is considered one of the three blessed fruits alongside grapes and figs. In ancient beliefs, trees and plants were often associated with deities and goddesses or were believed to have emerged from the blood of gods

and heroes. The pomegranate was traditionally seen as a symbol of fertility and love. According to old legends, the pomegranate tree was born from the blood of Orestes, and in some regions of ancient Asia, he was regarded as a youthful deity named Remon, associated with death. In Greek mythology, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, planted a pomegranate tree on the island of Cyprus using the blood of a demon. This mythical growth of a plant resembles the Persian legend of Perseiaushan or Khun-e-Siavashan, where Ferdowsi narrates that the plant sprouted from the blood of the hero Siavash. James Hall states: "The seeds of the pomegranate have been widely regarded as symbols of fertility and abundance among Mediterranean civilizations, the Near East, India, and beyond. The pomegranate was a sign of the Greek goddesses Demeter, Persephone, and Hera. Before Persephone departed from the underworld of Hades, she was given a pomegranate seed to eat. In Christian iconography, the pomegranate became a symbol of resurrection and immortality, and therefore, Jesus is often depicted holding a pomegranate in his childhood. Among Christians, it also represented chastity" (Hall, 2001, 171). Some cultures also revere the pomegranate for its resemblance to a brazier due to its red color and crown-like calyx (Fig. 1). Additionally, its deep red hue is associated with the sun, and its crown is reminiscent of sun rays. For this reason, the pomegranate and its blossom have been linked to Mithra (Mehr), the Persian god of light and the sun.

The pomegranate is a decorative symbol in Eastern art. However, the depiction of a pomegranate within palm leaves is specific to the Sassanian period. In the later years of this era, split palmettes evolved into a pair of wings, symbolizing fertility and abundance while also carrying spiritual significance. Among the Sassanian stucco decorations, the artifacts discovered in Susa stand out. These consist of two upright leaves embracing a pomegranate, which, according to Roman Ghirshman, belongs to the Sassanian period (Fig. 2) (Panjebashi & Dolab, 2018, 26). Other examples include palm leaves with a pomegranate at their center (Fig. 3). The combination of pomegranate and palm emphasizes the importance and continuity

of this motif in Sassanian art. Notable instances of this design include the stucco reliefs from the Kish Palace (Baltrochaitis, 2008, 773), the remains of a palace between Ray and Varamin housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 172), silk fabric decorations in the Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris (*ibid.*, 200) Design No. 3-Q, and remnants of stucco reliefs from the Varamin Palace, currently preserved in the Berlin Museum (Ghirshman, 1991, 189); These artifacts exemplify the artistic representations of the pomegranate in Sassanian culture, reflecting both its aesthetic and symbolic value. The pomegranate is one of the pre-Aryan motifs of the Iranian plateau, which continued to appear in the artistic representations of later ruling dynasties. Various forms of this motif emerged not only during the Sassanian period but also in the mid-Parthian era. One notable example is a golden bowl housed in the Hermitage Museum (Pope & Ackerman, 2008, 137). A study of historical artworks reveals that the earliest recorded use of the pomegranate motif in Iran dates back to the Yazdgerd Castle from the Parthian period. Many examples of this motif appear in the stucco decorations of Sassanian structures, including those discovered in Kish, Nezamabad, Ctesiphon, Chal Tarkhan, Dasht-e Varamin, and Barzqavaleh (Fig. 5) (Shahin, 2001).

The earliest evidence of the pomegranate pattern in Iran traces back to prehistoric times. A stucco fragment from Chal Tarkhan features a pomegranate motif within a broad decorative border at the top, separated from the lower section by a horizontal band. This smooth horizontal strip includes a raised section above it, where three rows of nine half-palmettes, shaped like wings, are arranged. Between them, pomegranates rise vertically on stalk-like stems (Fig. 4) (Kolabadi, 2009, 139). During the Achaemenid and Sassanian periods, the pomegranate was regarded as a symbol of royalty, power, abundance, and prosperity. Many artistic works from this era depict jewelry such as pendants and earrings made of gold, as well as kings wearing crowns adorned with pomegranate motifs. This highlights the esteemed status of the pomegranate in the religious and political beliefs of the time. In Sassanian stucco reliefs, pomegranate flowers



Fig. 1. The calyx or crown of the pomegranate flower. Photo: Vahid Rafiei Dehaqani, 2023.



Fig. 2. Alternating depictions of pomegranate fruit and flowers in the stucco wall decoration of Ctesiphon Palace, 6th century CE. Source: Panjeh bashi, Doolab, 2018, 26.

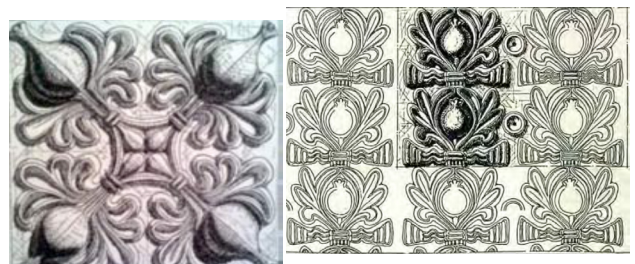


Fig. 3. Raised stucco reliefs in Kish Palace, featuring a composition of three-lobed palm motifs embracing a pomegranate. Source: Pop & Ackerman, 2008, 769. Left image: A Sassanian pomegranate motif from Kish Palace, Sassanian era. Source: Baltroshanitis, 2008, 773



Fig. 4. A gypsum plaque with a pomegranate motif from Chal Tarkhan. Source: Kolabadi, 2009, 228.

and fruits are depicted with realistic precision. The pomegranate, with its numerous seeds, was associated with Anahita, the goddess of fertility, while its flower, crown-like calyx, and red color were linked to Mithra, the sun deity (refer to Fig. 5). In Islamic culture and beliefs, the pomegranate is considered a fruit of paradise, symbolizing both worldly and spiritual pleasures. In mystical literature, it represents divine love and the inner beauty of the human soul.

During the Safavid and Qajar periods, the pomegranate motif flourished in decorative arts, appearing in carpets, tiles, textiles, and other ornamental crafts. The pomegranate flower and fruit hold a profoundly significant place in Iran, not only for their beauty and vitality but also due to their deep-rooted connection to ancient Iranian beliefs associated with the worship of Mithra and Anahita (Darvishi & Narimani, 2022, 23). A notable bas-relief from Persepolis (housed in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran) depicts Darius the Great holding a pomegranate flower with two buds in his hand.

Some archaeologists believe that the flower depicted is a lotus, while others argue that the lotus, being native to India, China, and Egypt, did not hold significant cultural or religious importance in Iran. However, it has occasionally appeared in Iranian art and culture. Recent research based on historical evidence suggests that this sacred flower in Achaemenid and Sassanian art is actually the pomegranate blossom, deeply rooted in Iranian beliefs. The German Iranologist Heidemarie Koch attributes the figure seated on the throne to Darius the Great and identifies the flower he holds as a “lotus.” In

her description, she writes: “Darius, seated on the throne with his heir beside him, rests his feet on a special stool. In his right hand, he holds a staff that tapers downward and has a round handle at the top...” (Kiani, 1995). In his left hand, the king holds a lotus flower with two buds. However, the depiction clearly resembles a Persian pomegranate blossom (Golnar) with two buds (see Fig. 6). Various myths, allegories, riddles, and beliefs about the pomegranate and its flower are widespread among people. The naming of certain pomegranate varieties is sometimes based on their use in specific ceremonies and sometimes on their appearance. For instance, the variety called Suri derives from Sur, meaning celebration, as Zoroastrians used this type of pomegranate in wedding ceremonies. This naming tradition further reinforces the sacred association of pomegranates with Zoroastrianism. Some notable pomegranate varieties in Iran with interesting names include Khatouni, Khānōmi, or Ameneh Khatouni, named due to their popularity among women⁵ (Pomegranate in Iran, 1998, 184). Another variety, Panje Arous (Bride’s Hand), is named for its resemblance to the henna-dyed fingers of brides. Certain pomegranates are also linked to Persian romantic literature, such as Leili, Dokhtar Hammami (Bathhouse Girl)⁶, Farhad’s Pomegranate, and Rumman al-Abidin. According to legend, a pomegranate tree in Bisotun was called Farhad’s Pomegranate⁷ (Adelzadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2008). Another variety, a large seedless pomegranate known as Keivani Pomegranate, once existed but has since disappeared (Avarzamani, personal interview, Oct 12th, 2024).

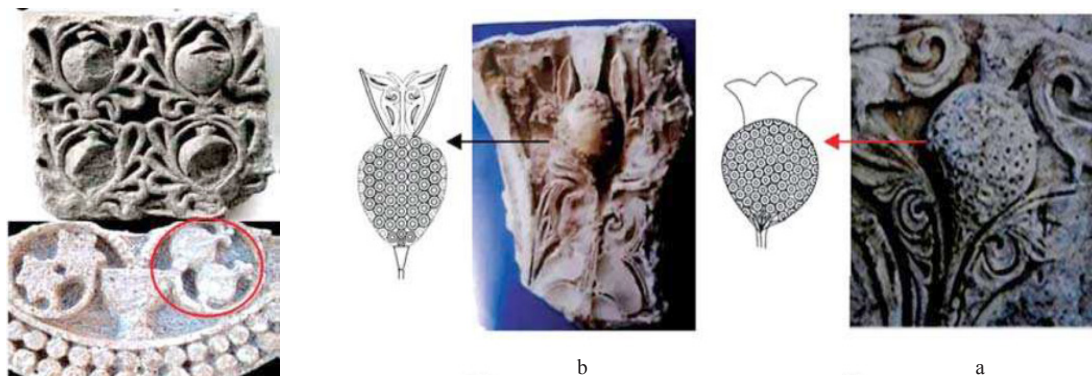


Fig. 5. (a, b): Two examples on the right are of pomegranate motifs in the stucco decorations of Simreh Mosque. Source: Lakpour, 2010, 241–243. (c): The example on the left is a Sassanian stucco relief from Ctesiphon Palace. Source: Mobini & Shafiei, 2015, 56.



Fig. 6. A bas-relief of Darius holding a pomegranate flower. Source: Author.



Fig. 7. Pomegranate flowers at the base of a column in the Apadana Palace of Susa. Photo: Vahid Rafiei Dehaqani, 1403.

The Pomegranate in the Islamic Era

Before Islam, vegetal motifs appeared in the stucco decorations of Sassanian palaces, often represented in a realistic manner, including depictions of flowers, leaves, and pomegranates (Fig. 7). In the Islamic era, geometric and vegetal motifs continued to adorn architecture. However, due to religious restrictions on human and animal imagery, the use and diversity of these motifs increased. These designs were often integrated with Quranic verses, embellishing architectural structures. With the advent of Islam, Iranian art and culture, enriched by the Sassanian legacy, underwent refinement—removing elements incompatible with the new faith while preserving those in harmony with its principles. In the Islamic period, artistic expression was divided into courtly art, displayed in palaces, and religious art, which flourished in mosques and other Islamic buildings. Architectural decorations included geometric and vegetal motifs, while human and animal depictions were occasionally used in palatial settings.



Conclusion

The pomegranate blossom, as one of the richest and oldest symbols in Iranian culture, has played a lasting role in the art, rituals, and beliefs of this land. Its presence in literary texts, architectural decorations—such as stucco carvings and tilework—and other ornamental arts, from ancient times to the Islamic era, highlights its significance in conveying spiritual, social, and cultural meanings. In religious traditions, the pomegranate blossom symbolizes fertility, immortality, and peace, closely linked to the deities Anahita and Mithra, who are associated with nature. In Persian literature, this flower is a feminine symbol representing beauty, love, and delicacy. From ancient Persia to Islamic Iran, the pomegranate blossom has held a special place in both art and literature. Research findings suggest that it is not merely an aesthetic element but also a medium for conveying concepts such as sanctity, joy, and Iranian identity. This symbol reflects the deep connection between humans and nature while also preserving the collective values and shared beliefs of generations. The pomegranate flower and fruit, associated with the moon and sun deities (Mithra and Anahita), continue to hold cultural and artistic significance in Iranian heritage.

Endenotes

1. “And it is He who sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby the growth of all things; We produce from it green foliage from which We produce grain from the midst of the grain; and from the palm-trees, of their spathes, come forth clusters of dates hanging low and near; and (We produce) gardens of grapes, olives, and pomegranates, each similar in kind, yet different in variety. Behold! in these things there are signs for those who believe.”]
2. Barsam refers to freshly cut pomegranate branches, which can be seen in the hands of Mithra as well as Zoroastrian priests during prayers and rituals.
3. Stuccowork (Stok): A piece of stucco decoration featuring various designs. It is made from a paste of gypsum and a sarshim (lead acetate) solution. The gypsum is poured into hot sarshim solution and mixed. This paste takes longer to set than regular gypsum but is significantly stronger. When mixed with metal oxides, it resembles marble (Sayyed Sadr, 2004, p. 56).
4. For a long time, the pomegranate blossom has been mistranslated as “lotus” or “rosette” in Persian-translated sources, a common misinterpretation that still persists. In this paper

and several published articles, we have pointed out that this motif actually represents the sacred pomegranate flower and is deeply connected to Iranian rituals and beliefs (Javadi & Avarzamani, 2009, p. 49).

5. One variety of pomegranates found in the provinces of Isfahan and Yazd has been favored by women since ancient times.

6. Dokhtar Hammami is a type of pomegranate from Pishva, Varamin, known for its beautiful peel. Its delicate and attractive appearance led to its name. In Sabzevar, it is referred to as Leili.

7. It is said that when Farhad heard of Shirin's death, he struck himself with his pickaxe. The bloodied handle fell from the mountain to the ground, where its wooden tip, made of pomegranate wood, took root and grew into a pomegranate tree. The fruit of this tree, when split open, is found to be burned and turned to ash inside.

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