

## The Network of Symbolic Meanings of the Bird Motif in the Tilework Decorations of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S)

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### Article info

### Abstract

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The use of motifs of imaginary creatures, such as mythological birds and celestial simurghs, in the art and literature of the Iranian plateau has carried profound concepts and has been prevalent in the creation and decoration of functional objects and architecture from ancient times to the present. Evidence indicates that the bird motif has long been employed by artists in the decoration of Iranian tiles, including those of the Holy Shrine of His Holiness Tham al-Hujaj (the Eighth Imam) (A.S.). The most important research questions are: What is the origin and evolutionary trajectory of the use of the bird motif in the tile decorations of the Razavi Sanctuary (A.S.)? And has the bird motif in the tile decorations of the Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.) served merely a decorative purpose, or have concepts such as ecstasy, love, affection, and liberation also been considered by the tilework artists? The data collection method is library and field research, and the research approach is historical, descriptive, and analytical. Through this process, the researcher has gathered and analyzed materials by studying, observing, photographing artifacts, and interviewing experts and artisans. In the course of the research, while answering and analyzing these two questions, the study elucidates the network of symbolic meanings of the bird motif in the tilework decorations of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.).



**Keywords:** Iranian Architecture, Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.), Tilework, Bird Motif.

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## 1. Introduction

The bird symbol holds a special place in Iranian art and architecture, particularly during the Islamic period. This motif, rooted in ancient Iranian mythology and Zoroastrian beliefs, integrated with mystical and religious concepts in Islamic art, transforming into a symbol of the soul, divine love, ascension, and liberation. The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.), as one of Iran's most significant religious and artistic structures, is a rich treasury of tilework adorned with bird designs. Beyond their decorative function, these motifs carry profound symbolic meanings. This study examines the evolution, types, and symbolic themes of the bird motif in the tilework of the Razavi Shrine, seeking to answer whether these designs served merely decorative purposes or expressed concepts such as love, spiritual ecstasy, liberation, and the soul's journey toward God.

## 2. Research Objectives

-Identify the types of birds used in the decorations, analyze their symbolic meanings, and explain the evolutionary trajectory of the bird motif in the tilework of the Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.).

-Investigate the influence of pre-Islamic art on these motifs and their continuity in Islamic art, providing an integrated analysis of the "thematic network of the bird symbol" in the Razavi Shrine through historical, semiotic, and mystical approaches.

## 3. Methodology

This research is fundamental in nature and employs a historical, descriptive-analytical method. Data were collected through both library and field research. Field data were gathered via direct observation, photography of tiles, and interviews with experts and artists. The theoretical framework combines "semiotics" and "historical analysis." Drawing on the ideas of thinkers such as Jean Chevalier, J.C. Cooper, and Titus Burckhardt, the bird motif is interpreted as a "sign" denoting concepts beyond its apparent form.

## 4. Findings

The bird motif in the tilework of the Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.) is divided into two main categories:

1 .Mythical birds (e.g., Simurgh, Hoopoe, Peacock)

2 .Natural birds (e.g., Nightingale, Duck, Falcon)

These motifs appear in various locations within the shrine, including the Atiq Court, the New Court, the Allahvardi Khan Arcade, and the Naqqareh-Khane Portico.

-The bird symbol in this context reflects concepts such as: the ascent of the soul and the journey toward God (inspired by Attar’s Conference of the Birds), divine glory (Farr-e Izadi) and heavenly protection (particularly in the falcon motif), heavenly beauty and divine manifestation (in the peacock motif), and messengership and guidance (in the hoopoe motif).

-During the Safavid period, the bird motif became intertwined with mystical and philosophical concepts, while in the Qajar period, under European influence, it shifted toward naturalism, employing yellow hues and Gol-o-Morgh (flower-and-bird) designs.

-In some instances, the bird motif is combined with other symbolic elements, such as flowers, the Tree of Life, and mythical animals (e.g., dragons), enriching its semantic depth.

## 5. Conclusion

Iranian art in the Islamic period continued the aesthetic and symbolic logic of pre-Islamic art, preserving its original foundations while being redefined in a form harmonious with the Islamic worldview. This artistic continuity is particularly evident in the architecture and decorations of holy sites such as the Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.). Based on this study, the key findings regarding the bird motif in the tilework of this shrine can be categorized as follows:

1 .Mythological and Historical Roots: The use of bird motifs in Islamic architectural decorations, especially in the Holy Razavi Shrine, stems from the symbolic motifs of ancient Iranian art. Birds such as the Simurgh, Falcon, and Eagle, which in pre-Islamic times embodied concepts like “Divine Glory” (Farr-e Izadi), “Divine Protection,” and “Kingly Symbolism,” were repurposed in the Islamic era while retaining their symbolic significance. Alongside these mythical birds, natural species such as peacocks, hoopoes, storks, ducks, and sparrows are also present in the decorations.

2 .Symbolic Meanings in the Islamic Era: During the Islamic period, these motifs transcended their mythological origins and merged with mystical and religious themes. For instance, the hoopoe became a symbol of “Guidance” and the “Mes-

senger of the Unseen,” while the peacock was associated with “The Manifestation of Divine Beauty” and “Guardian of the Sacred Precinct.” This transformation demonstrates the ability of Iranian artists to blend pre-Islamic heritage with Islamic and mystical discourse.

3 .Sublime and Spiritual Themes: The bird motif in the shrine’s tilework was not merely decorative but conveyed profound concepts such as the soul’s flight, liberation from worldly attachments, divine love, spiritual ecstasy, and the mystical path. These themes, particularly influenced by Iranian mystical literature, especially Attar’s Conference of the Birds, are vividly manifested in these works.

4 .Influence of the Safavid Gol-o-Morgh School: The use of the Gol-o-Morgh motif in the shrine’s tilework is largely influenced by Safavid miniature painting, where birds were depicted alongside natural flowers. This combination reflects the harmony between the natural world and the realm of meaning.

5 .Diversity in Composition and Accompanying Motifs: In addition to birds, other floral and animal motifs were employed, enhancing the visual and semantic richness of the artwork. These include the Mohammadan Rose, pomegranate flower, iris, apple blossom, Eslimi (arabesque) and Khatayi (floral) patterns, as well as animals such as lions, leopards, snakes, dragons, and fish.

6 .Location and Distribution of Motifs: Bird motifs appear in numerous areas of the shrine, including spandrels, squinches, entrances to the Atiq and New Courts, the Vasal Niche, the Naqqareh-Khane Portico, and the Allahvardi Khan Dome Arcade, underscoring the simultaneous symbolic and decorative significance of this motif.

7 .Developments in the Qajar Period and European Influences: During the Qajar era, bird motifs trended toward greater naturalism and the use of bright yellow colors. The influence of European art is also evident in landscape depictions and chiaroscuro techniques. While human figures were previously limited in the shrine due to religious considerations, this period saw the inclusion of angel imagery inspired by European art.

8 .Principles of Visualization and Composition: Most artworks adhere to principles such as proportional form and motif, balanced composition, and attention to framing and golden ratios, though these principles were somewhat diluted in later works.

In conclusion, the bird motif in the Iranian-Islamic art of the Razavi Shrine is not merely a decorative element but a bridge connecting the worlds of myth, mysticism, and popular beliefs. This ancient motif has undergone dynamic evolution within the

context of Shiite culture and continues to endure to this day. This analysis demonstrates that Iranian artists, with their deep understanding of symbolic concepts and technical skill, have created unparalleled works that express both devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) and the profound wisdom and aesthetics of Islamic-Iranian art.

**Suggestions**

- Conduct similar studies in other holy sites across Iran.
- Incorporate these motifs into contemporary art with an authentic and innovative approach.
- Expand interdisciplinary research focusing on the connection between mystical literature and visual arts.

**Keywords:** Bird Symbol, Tilework, Shrine of Imam Reza (A.S.), Islamic Art, Semiotics, Iranian Mysticism.