

Review of: "The Uniqueness of the Medieval Persian Art"

Carol Bier¹

¹ Graduate Theological Union

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Dr. Erbudak's essay offers an attempt to use statistics regarding the use of symmetry to distinguish among different cultural traditions in Iran and neighboring regions "with regard to the invading hordes up to the beginning of the 16th century, after which, due to the mobility of peoples, there is an intense mixing of artistic practice" (Introduction). The author's stated goal is to "examine the symmetry used in the ornamentation of various medieval civilizations and interpret it as a characteristic feature of each cultural group," and the cultural groups he enumerates in the abstract are Persians, Seljuks, Arabs, Greco-Roman (including Armenian, Eastern Roman Empire, and Kingdom of Andalusia).

These categories span a very broad geographic area from Spain to Central Asia, with cultural categories reflecting different time periods (Seljuk and Arab being after the Arab conquests and the advent of Islam). The last category, Greco-Roman, is a jumble of geography and times from antiquity to the late 15th century.

From my disciplinary perspective (history of art), which itself is interdisciplinary, relying upon history, cultural anthropology, and philosophy to a certain extent, this article is lacking in several respects.

The first sentence mentions nomadism, but by the author's definition, colonial expansion is included without any consideration of various disciplinary approaches to the study of nomadism; for example, recently, D. T. Potts, *Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (2014). For a broader anthropological consideration, see T. J. Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative* (1993). Since this is not germane to the author's intent, I would either omit the term "nomadism" at the start as too problematic, or dramatically expand the author's intent with the exposition of a theoretical foundation regarding nomadism and the movement of peoples (a subject, indeed, very pertinent to the topic of Iran, including Persian art, but likely not relevant to this article). I suggest beginning this paragraph, "Persia is located in the middle of the Silk Road..." and omitting the sentences above that.

To conclude that Persian art neither "exerted nor received influence" (Conclusion, first para) runs counter to what we know of Persian art. For the Achaemenid period alone, see C. Nylander, *Ionians in Pasargadae* (1970), M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (2021 [1979]), and J. Boardman, *Persia and the West: An Archaeological Investigation of the Genesis of Achaemenid Persian Art* (2000). See also *Excavating an Empire: Achaemenid Persia in Longue Durée* (2014) by T. Daryaei, A. Mousavi, and Kh. Rezakhani.

There is a very rich body of recent literature on Achaemenid history by P. Briant, J. Curtis, M. A. Dandamayev, H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, W. J. Vogelsang, among others. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of Iran under the Achaemenids was undertaken through a series of international seminars called "The Achaemenid History Project," convened by H.

Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt with scholars engaged in different fields from around the world. Proceedings were published in Leiden in the 1980s into the 1990s.

The wars between Classical Greece and Iran led to profound cultural exchange in many fields. Later, the conquests of Alexander the Great ushered in the Hellenistic era with massive cultural shifts that dramatically affected arts and architecture in Iran and other conquered lands. The Parthian dynasty, although Iranian in lineage, remained strongly under the sway of Hellenism. V. S. Curtis, *et al*, *The Parthian and Early Sasanian Empires: Adaptation and Expansion* (2016), focuses on numismatic evidence, including inscriptions, coins, seals, and seal impressions, as well as royal representations, for interpretation of political developments that incorporate foreign influences and more local interaction. Iranian historical geography expands and contracts with conquest, and in the later Sasanian period, one may perceive cultural exchanges with ruling authorities east of the empire, including Huns, Hephthalites, and Kushans (see Kh. Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians* [2017]).

The well-known incorporation of Roman craftsmen and engineers after multiple Persian conquests in Syria resulted in strong Roman influence in both technology and style of the third-century Sasanian mosaics at Bishapur. See E. J. Keall, BĪŠĀPŪR, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available at iranicaonline.org/articles/bisapur-town.

There are many new studies for the Sasanian period (3^d – 7th centuries), which provide expanded views of extraordinary internationalism; see Kh. Rezakhani, M. P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (2009); T. Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia* (2023); E. Sauer, ed. *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (2017). For summaries of recent archaeological excavation in Iran, see D. T. Potts, ed. *Oxford Handbook of Iranian Archaeology* (2013). Numismatic studies also reveal extensive international exchange.

I am troubled by some of the author's unarticulated assumptions, and by his use of the term "medieval" in the title, although spanning more than two millennia from Classical antiquity to early Modern times. How does he define Persian art and other cultural categories? What is his working definition of ornament? He doesn't explain why he restricts his study to architectural surfaces and does not include visual culture more broadly as expressed also in object/material culture. And his data collection is restricted to less than a handful of books, some published nearly half a century ago (Godard; Gray).

The author's study of symmetry, his definitions, and illustrations through diagrams are acceptable, indeed admirable. But I feel that he paints with too broad a brush, overlooking historical realities, theoretical models, and scholarly discourse.

Given the lack of a suitable framework for cultural interaction, exchange, and trade, as well as the movement of peoples including artisans and engineers, I have a difficult time accepting the statistical analyses as a viable means of approaching this subject of identifying cultural specificity.

The statistical approach may seem sufficiently scientific, as affirmed by multiple reviewers, but the underlying assumptions that remain unarticulated, and the lack of definition of cultural categories adopted by the author make it difficult for me as an art historian to trust the validity of the results and conclusions based on statistical analyses of the uses of symmetry in Persian art and that of neighboring regions, without adequate definition of those categories.

