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Reflection and Analysis of the Tree of Life and its Transformation into the Flower of Life in the Near East

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Abstract

For a long time, humans have used plant motifs on objects such as pottery, goblet, and others, which sometimes have a symbolic appearance and were very important in the relics of a particular period. One of the most important motifs, that has a Mesopotamian origin, is the tree of life. The tree of life is a plant that is found in many mythical traditions of the Near East such as Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Egypt. The flower of life or the motif of geometric rosette is another valuable motif with six petals. In this paper, the authors first discuss the symbols and symbolism and then investigate the background of the tree of life and then discuss the motif of geometric rosette or flower of life, and later focus on the Golden, Silver and Bronze findings at the sites of Marlik, Amarlu in Gilan and Kelardasht in Mazandaran related to iron age of Iran and investigate the impact of this symbolic motif on archaeological findings in the surrounding sites that have probably transformed the motif of the tree of life into the flower of life. This motif emerged among the communities of northern Iran during a period almost identical to the Assyrian era at the bottom of the Golden and Silver and Bronze goblets and is a kind of symbol of the tree of life that then the artists replaced the sacred tree with six petal rosette.

Keywords: Tree of Life; Geometric Rosette; Flower of Life; Iron Age; Transformation.

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Introduction

Plant motifs, especially the tree of life in the pre-historic and historical periods, are among those humans have used on works such as pottery, goblets, architecture, reliefs, and other objects, which sometimes have symbolic appearances and have been very important in the relics of a particular period. They are important because plants are a symbol of life and evolution and the continued growth of plants is a sign of periodic revival of the myth of an eternal return to a single principle (De Beaucorps, 1995: 21). As Mashya and Mashyana, the first human couple were initially attached to each other inform of a plant so their gender could not be understood. The Asurig tree, the palm tree, the Haoma, and such plants and trees have also had a valuable place in the history of Iran and in the Near East. The Tree of Life is also a plant in many mythical traditions of the Near East, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, and the Tree of Life motif has been featured in a number of reliefs, seals and paintings. In Mesopotamia, the Tree of Life is a combination of various plants that have been sacred for their longevity, beauty and usefulness.

Research Literature

Plant motifs, especially the tree of life in the art of pre-historic and historical periods, have been the subject that some scholars have written about, with each describing, analyzing and interpreting these archaeological findings. Parpola has discussed the Tree of Life among the Assyrians and its relation to the Sefirot tree in Jewish Kabbalah (Parpola, 1993). Eliade (2007), Majidzadeh (2002), De Beaucorps (1995), Kazempour (2011), Rostami (2011), HosseinAbadi (2015), Mousavi Kuhpar and

Yasnzadeh (2012) have briefly referred to the tree of life and the rituals related to it, stories and myths of Mesopotamia and more. However, the authors of the article have discussed the transformation of the tree of life in later periods.

Research Method

This research, in terms of purpose, is a fundamental research and its nature and method is historical and archeological one in the descriptive and analytical manner. In the first step, the data is collected through library and documentation, with note taking. In the following, the paper discusses about the golden, silver and bronze findings at the sites such as Marlik and Amarlu in Gilan and Kelardasht in Mazandaran that are related to the Iron Age of Iran. The information is in the form of observation, note taking, photography and illustration of ancient findings and then they are analyzed by comparing them with similar motifs from Mesopotamia.

The Tree of Life Myth

Plants are an example of life and a symbol of evolution. The continued growth of plants is a sign of the periodic revival of the myth of the eternal return to a single principle (De Beaucorps, 1995: 21). In mythological analysis, on the other hand, the humankind is attributed to the source and origin of life found in all kinds of plants (Eliade, 2007: 288). Jung also states that man always feels a kind of father-child connection with the tree, and some tribes believe that man has several souls; one of them is dominated by plants (Jung, 1974: 130). Plants are the symbol of death and resurrection, the power and cycle of life. Symbols of flowers and plants are

associated with the Great Mother, the goddess of earth, fertility and plants. It is also linked to the fertility of life-giving water. Succulent plant, means motherhood; plants and trees are often mythical ancestors, accompanied by religions of the moon. Plants or flowers that grow from the blood of god or the hero symbolize the mythical unity between human and plant. The birth of life from death is the flow of life from one stage to another (Cooper, 2001: 318-319).

In the myth of the tree of life, we find that it is at the center of the universe and links the sky, the earth, and the underworld (Eliade, 2007: 285). The picture of the emergence of God from the tree is one of the most common pictures of the sacredness of trees which is very common in the visual arts of the ancient Near East and samples of it can be found in Mesopotamia, Egypt and ancient India (Eliade, 2007: 269). The appearance of God in the fig tree is depicted in Mohenjo-daro site in the third millennium BC. There are also some signs of the emergence of God in the Vedic texts (Fisher, 2005: 20).

The belief that there is a spirit in some of the trees and plants that are useful to humans dates back to prehistory. The picture of a tree on either side of a pair of demigod or human motif appeared in Mesopotamian art (Hall, 2005: 290). The Tree of Life, with this icon has a special place in the art of Mesopotamia, is a combination of various plants that have

been sacred because of their longevity, beauty and usefulness (De Beaucorps, 1995: 13).

The tree of life is a sacred in many mythical traditions of the Near East such as Mesopotamia and Egypt. This tree is rooted in the earth and from the top pulls itself toward the galaxy and the sun (Majidzadeh, 2002: 188). The motif has been seen in a number of reliefs, seals and paintings. Perhaps the oldest one, in which, a sacred tree is seen with two persons on each side is related to a cylindrical seal dating to the middle of the third millennium BC. This seal, known as the Temptation Cylinder Seal, is now held in the British Museum (Parrot, 2013: 73; Fig. 53).

This motif, along with the motif of a shepherd king who is the preserver of life on behalf of Gods, was a Sumerian concept at the beginning of the historical period (Majidzadeh, 2002: 188).

After the Flood, various city-states and their dynasties of kings temporarily gained power over the others. The first king to unite the separate city-states was Etana, ruler of Kish (c. 2800 BC). Thereafter, Kish, Erech, Ur, and Lagash vied for ascendancy for hundreds of years, rendering Sumer vulnerable to external conquerors, first the Elamites (c. 2530–2450 BC) and later the Akkadians, led by their king Sargon (reigned 2334–2279 BC).



Fig. 1. Sumerian Cylindrical Seal with the Tree of Life (Parrot, 2013: fig. 53).

Although Sargon's dynasty lasted only about 100 years, it united the city-states and created a model of government that influenced all of Middle Eastern civilization

(Kuiper, 2011: 41) The motif has been seen in a stone relief depicting Sargon standing before a tree of life (Kuiper, 2011: 55).



Fig. 2. Stone Relief Depicting Sargon (c. 2334–c. 2279 BC) Standing Before a Tree of Life; In The Louvre, Paris (Kuiper, 2011: 55)

This motif is later seen in a monument in, that the king stands before God and there is a flower between God and the king which the king is watering (see Majidzadeh 2002; fig. 365). The stele, carved in the characteristic southern Mesopotamian style, was found at Susa.

The divine-mythical creatures that preserve the tree of life, sometimes, had an eagle's head instead of a human face. The prototypes of the tree of life can be seen in the

Ur-NammuStela of the Third Ur dynasty, in which the king is watering the tree in front of goddess Ningal (see Majidzadeh 2002: Figs. 334-336). This motif is also found at the top of the stele in old Babylonian periods (see Majidzadeh 2002: Fig. 365). In Egypt, too, there is a tree with two priests standing on either side of the tree and lotus blossoms are growing (McDonald, 2002: 113).



Fig. 3. Shamash on a Throne. A Worshipper Makes a Sacrifice to The Tree of Life (Majidzadeh, 2002: fig. 53).



Fig. 4. The Stela of Ur-Nemo (ca. 2112-2094 B.C.) (Vorys Canby, 1987).



Fig. 5. Details of The Stela of Ur-Nemo (ca. 2112-2094 B.C.) (Vorys Canby, 1987)



Fig. 6. Details of The Stela of Ur-Nemo (ca. 2112-2094 B.C.) (Vorys Canby, 1987)

This motif became increasingly common from the period of Tukulti-Ninurta I. This tree has an obscure, ornamental, exaggerated form that induces the mythical-supernatural significance of it to the viewers. The motif of the king is depicted with the same family signs, approaching the sacred tree symmetrically from left and right in order to have mercy on him (Moortgat 2007: 249).

This motif later reaches Assyria through Hurri-Mitanni, and can be seen on the seals of the second millennium BC in Kirkuk and the middle Assyrian seals after the reign of Eriba-Adad and during the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I (Majidzadeh, 2002: 188) and also in the palace of Ashurnasirpal (McDonald, 2002: 113) as well as the new Assyrian cylindrical seals (see Majidzadeh, 2002: fig. 559).



Fig. 7. Ashurbanipal by The Tree of Life, 9th Century BC (British Museum)

The subject of the tree of life, along with the motif of the royal shepherd and the preserver of life, is a Sumerian thought that has never been faded in the Near East since about 3000 BC from the beginning of the rich culture of the historical period. The royal shepherd, the mythical figure of the king at the beginning of Sumerian history, is depicted as a man with a lace skirt in art who is not only associated with plants as the origin of life but also occupies the place of the sacred tree. In new Assyrian beliefs, the tree of life is considered sacred like the king. However, the thought of a close connection of the king with survival and resurrection, which is originally Sumerian thought, first came to the Assyrian art through rules derived from the conquest of Hurri-Mittani period. The special generality and widespread use of these rules in engraving can be seen in the Kirkuk seals

and the Middle Assyrian seals after the Eriba-Adad kingship. In the art of the Neo-Hittite sub-kingdoms in northern Syria and northern Mesopotamia, and especially in wall reliefs, the motif of the tree of life under the winged sun is as common as later Assyrian carvings. The possibility cannot be ignored that the visual rule of the Assyrian royal myth may have come from it, and the Arameans, after 1200 BC, adapted it from the Hittites and Hurrians and then transferred to the Assyrians. However, there is no trace of this in the Middle Assyrian period (Moortgat, 2007: 249-250).

This motif is also seen among Urartians, as on a stone vessel found in Karmir Blur, there is the motif of two winged creatures on both sides of the tree of life, on top of it, a winged disc is also evident (Nanning van Loon, 1966: Plate VII).



Fig. 8. Two Winged Creatures in The Double Life Tree of Carmichael (Nanning van Loon, 1966: Plate VII)

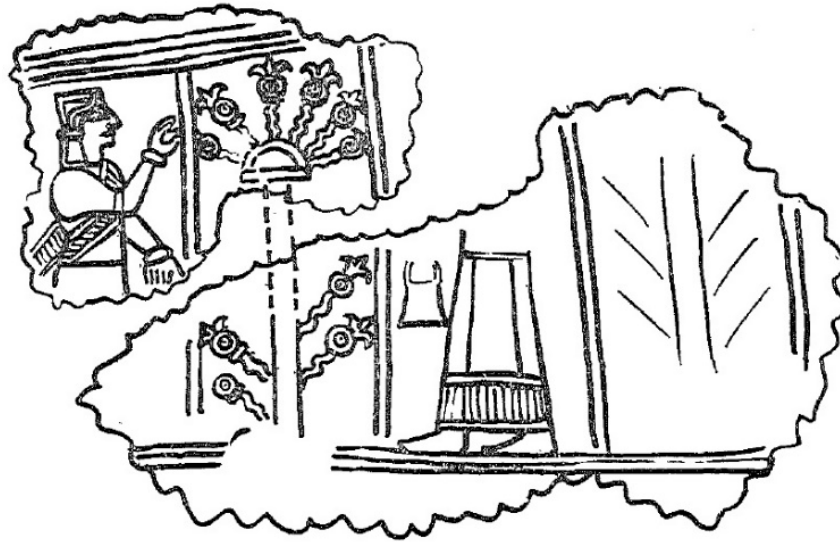


Fig. 9. Two People in a Tree of Life Living in The Mural of the Altintepe Palace (Nanning van Loon, 1966: Fig. 8)

In addition to the aforementioned motif, parts of the wall painting of the Altintepe Palace can be mentioned in which, the sacred tree is depicted with two persons on either side (Nanning van Loon, 1966: Fig. 8).

It is also seen on the bronze helmet of Sarduri I in Karmir Blur from the 8th century BC, there are repetitive motifs of individuals on both sides of the tree of life (Nanning van Loon, Plate XXVI).



Fig. 10. The Tree of Life on the Sarduri I Bronze Age in Carmelborough (Nanning van Loon, Plate XXVI)

The origin of thought of the sacred tree along with the king that was the symbol of life is Sumer. This religious-political belief is represented as a single symbol consisting of several visual elements (tree, king, crew, and attendants in the form of human or mythical, and winged sun). They do not represent a particular event or practice of a special king, but the symbol of the mythical-kingdom aspect is separate from place and time

(Moortgat, 2007: 252). Simo Parpola, the Assyriologist also believes that the tree motifs in which the king stands on one side represents the divine order of existence preserved by the Assyrian king (Parpola, 1993). The tree is, in fact, a symbol of the empire that not only legitimizes the Assyrian government but justifies the king's position as the absolute ruler (Parpola, 1993).

The Six Petal Rosette

One of the most important motifs, in some of the relics, is the six petal rosette. In Egypt, a motif of six petal rosette was found on a wooden object, possibly the oldest one. This motif was found during archaeological

excavations in 1935-1936 from a coffin in the tomb of Ramose and Hatnefer in Sheikh Abd el-Qurna in west of Thebes in northern Egypt related to the 18th Dynasty and dates from 1492 to 1473 BC (Metropolitan Museum).



Fig. 11. Inlay of a Six-Petal Rosette inside a Coffin in the Tombs of Hattenfar and Ramos in Sheikh Abdul Qarnani (Metropolitan Museum)



Fig. 12. Pattern of Six-Petal Rosette on Ivory Found in Nimrod Area (Herrmann et al 2009: Plate. 55)

Ivory Pieces

This motif can also be seen in Mesopotamia as it was obtained on ivory fragments during the excavations of Nimrud site in the

northwestern palace and the southeast temple of Ashurnasirpal, who reigned around 883 to 859 BC (Herrmann, et al., 2009: 212).

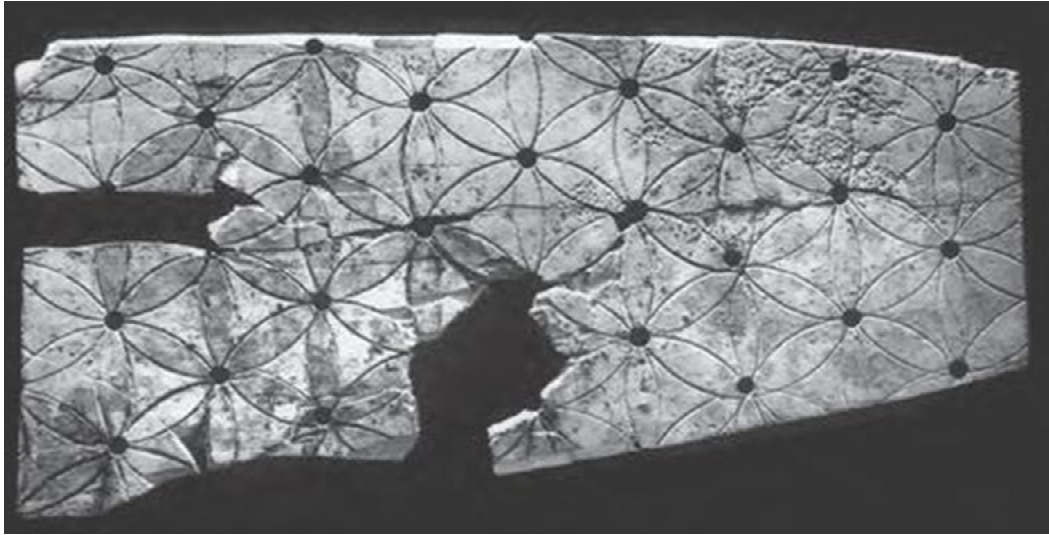


Fig. 13. Pattern of Six-Petal Rosette on Ivory Found in Nimrod Area (Herrmann et al 2009: Plate. 102)



Fig. 14. The Six-Petal Rosette Pattern At Ashurbanipal Palace, British Museum (Barnett 1976: 43, pl.XXVII)

Also in the Kuyunjik area of Nineveh of Iraq, the motif of six petal rosette was obtained from a pavement of the Ashurbanipal North Palace throne in various sizes that are now

kept in the museums of Baghdad, Louvre and British Museum (Barnett 1976: 43, pl. XXVII)

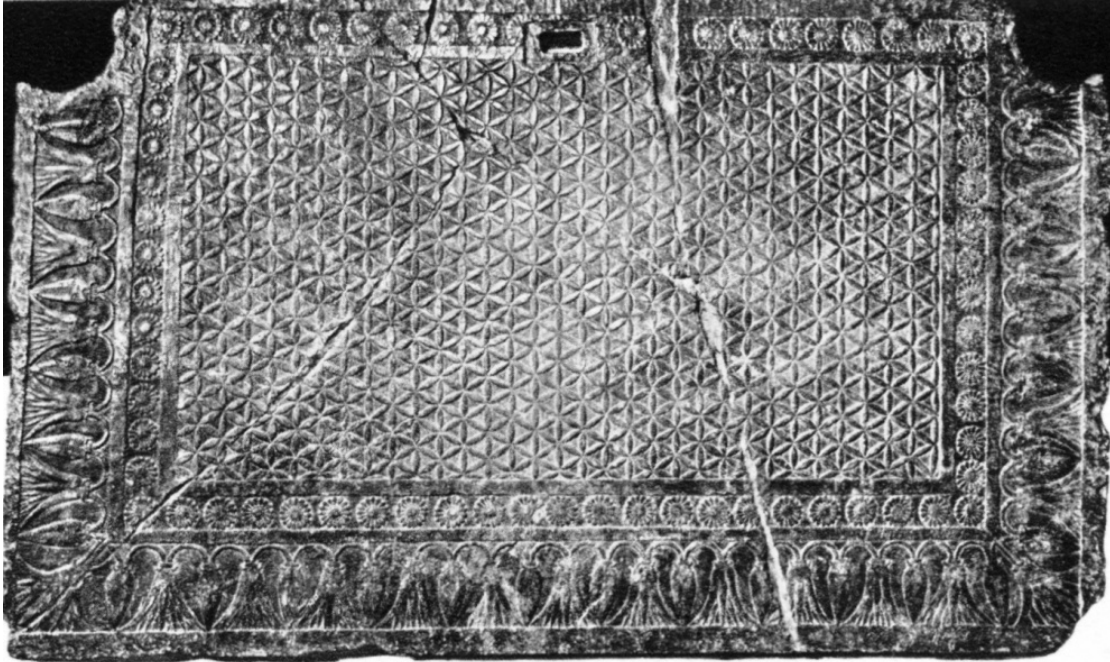


Fig. 15. Pattern of the Six-Petal Rosette Found in the Ashurbanipal Palace, in the Louvre Museum (Barnett 1976: 43, pl.XXVII)

In sites such as Marlik and Amarlu in Gilan and Kelardasht in Mazandaran in the first millennium BC, a motif is seen on the bottom of some of golden, silver, and bronze vessels. This motif is in the form of a six petal rosette that was symbolic considering its abundance in later periods.

Ezzatolah Negahban began his archeological excavations at Marlik in the early autumn of 1962. The excavation that continued until next year, he could come across valuable findings (see Negahban, 2000). In the bottom of five of the findings, the six petal rosette motif has been engraved, as described below:

Gold Cup M352 with Recumbent Mountain Goat Motif

This cup obtained from Tomb 36 at Marlik site and is 6.8 cm tall and 5 cm in diameter. The scene on this golden cup shows two rows of mountain goats in the opposite directions and they are recumbent. At the bottom is a geometric six-petal rosette, with each showing pointed oval. Each petal, from the middle is cut into halves by a straight line. The area between the two petals that is roughly triangle with concave sides is covered with a dotted design. Around this geometrical rosette is enclosed by six similar petals, each connecting the tip of two petals to each other (Negahban, 2000: 206 and 207).

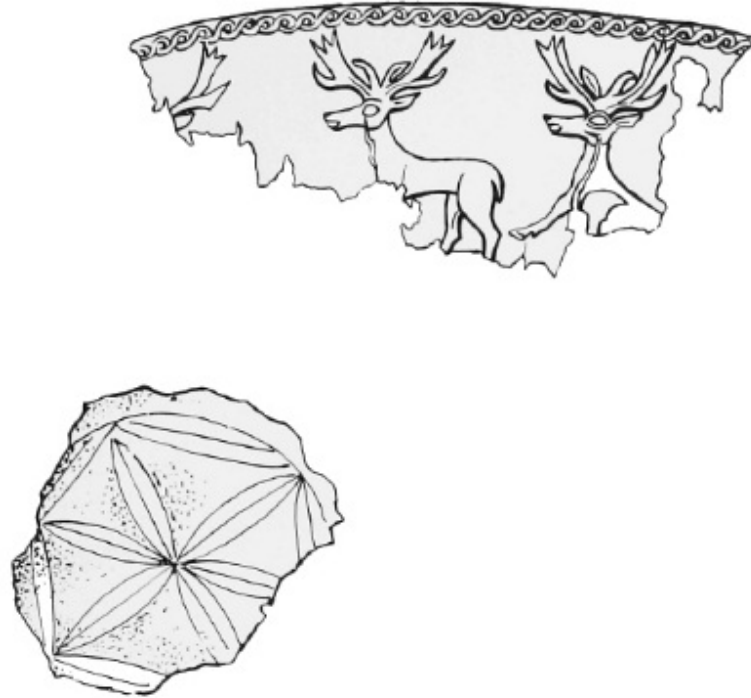


Fig. 16. Six-Petal Rosette (Negahban 1996: fig. 7: 50-51)

Bronze Beaker M1213 with Recumbent Stag Motif

A few pieces of a bronze beaker, its bottom diameter about 11 cm, were obtained during the excavation of Tomb 39. This beaker is probably tall and has straight walls and a thick lip and a bottom that extends beyond the body. Although the beaker is broken and part of its body is missing, but the remains visualize the full scene of the motif. The body of the vessel, in terms of decoration, is divided into upper and lower rows. In the lower, which is more complete, a motif of recumbent stag is shown that is repeated four times around the vessel (Negahban, 2000: 280). The bottom is decorated with a beautiful geometric rosette consisting of six sharp oval petals. In the middle of this beautiful rosette, there are three concentric

circles as the central core of the motif. The spacing between the petals is filled with a decorative petal made of sharp oval, forming a chain that decorates around the rosette, and this ring itself is surrounded by a band of semicircles (Negahban, 2000: 282).

Bottom of Bronze Beaker M1392 with Geometric Rosette

This is the fracture bottom of the bronze beaker; the diameter of the remaining part is about 7 cm which was obtained from Tomb 5. The geometric rosette on the bottom of the vessel is illustrated with simple, bright lines, showing the six-pointed star, each pointing like a sharp oval. The tip of the petals is attached to other similar petals and has surrounded this star (Negahban, 2000: 283 and 284).

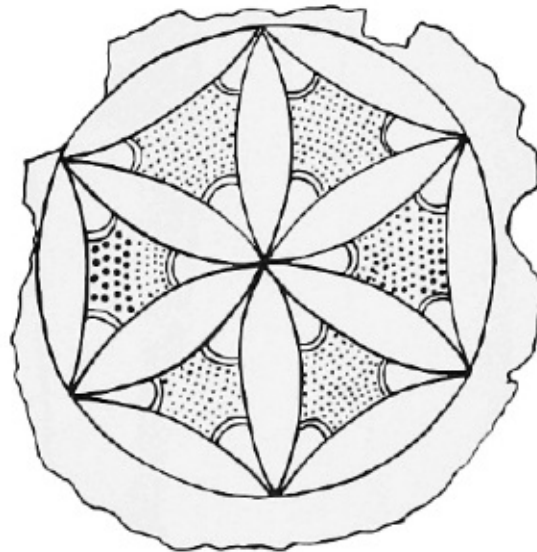


Fig. 17. Six-Petal Rosette (Negahban 1996: fig. 9: 61)

Broken Piece of Bronz Vessel M1398 with Geometric Rosette Motif

Only the fractured bottom part of this vessel with a geometric rosette about 7 cm in diameter was obtained in excavation of Tomb 44. The decoration of the bottom consists of a beautiful geometric rosette consisting of a flower with six petals. The petals are shaped like a sharp oval, surrounded by a ring of six sharp ovals, each being positioned between the tips of the petals. The distance between the petals in the shape of a triangle is distinguished by two curved lines inside each corner and its inner part is dotted (Negahban, 2000: 301).

Silver Vessel M277 with Gold Design

This silver spouted vessel is 7.5cm tall and its mouth diameter is 5cm and its gold spout is 8cm long, found from Tomb 50 of Marlik. On the shoulder of the vessel, one scene is repeated twice on each side and four times in total. In this scene, a lion is shown carrying his prey, which looks like a mountain goat. The lion nemesis shown with triangular

designs overlaid and the motif of swastika (broken cross) is engraved on the hind leg of the lion. On the lower register and the body of the vessel, an imaginary creature is seen with a pair of open-mouthed lion heads that shows the anger of the predator. Wings stretched out, upper body, breasts and hands are in human form, lower body covered with scales or feathers and legs and claws are shaped like birds. At the bottom is also the motif of a six-petal rosette, each with two parallel lines showing a sharp oval design (Negahban, 2000: 250-253).

In the book on Marlik findings, Negahban compares the motifs of the bottom of the vessels and says that the bottom design of the Marlik gold cup, which is a geometric decorative rosette with six petals, has been observed in other relics. The ivory pieces found in Nimrud excavations in the northwestern palace and the southeast temple of Ashurnasirpal, which ruled from about 883 to 859 BC, had designs similar to this motif (Negahban, 2000: 210).

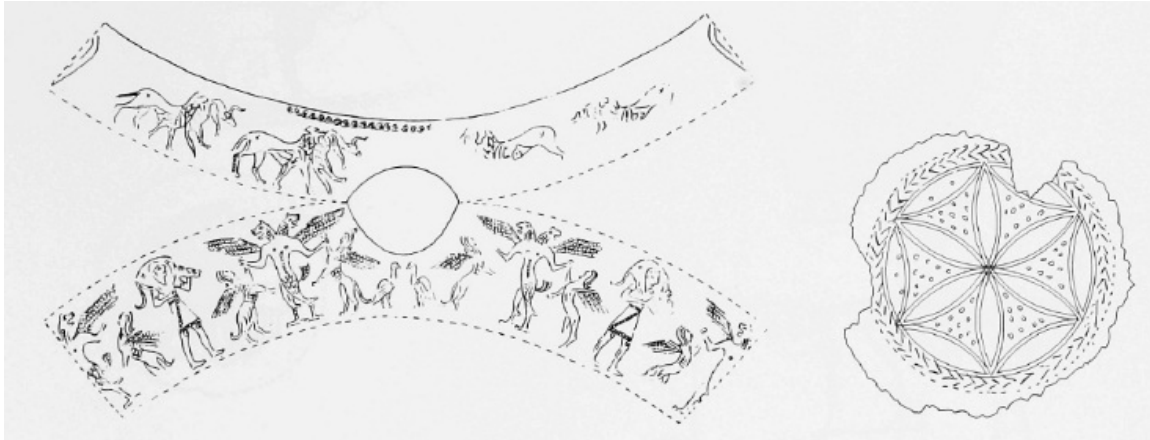


Fig. 18. Six-Petal Rosette (Negahban 1996: fig. 5: 21)

The Amarlu Gold beaker is 11.5 cm tall, with mouth diameter 7.5 cm and bottom diameter 7 cm. The beaker has two relief decorations, including a lion attack that has been repeated four times. Also on the shoulder and lion's rump is the design of the sun cross. In the second register, there are kneeling people with hats and decorated hair holding a vessel

in their hands, and a plant coming out of them that sticks the motifs of this register to each other. At the upper and lower parts of the beaker are chain motifs and between the two registers of relief, a zigzag band can be seen. The bottom of the beaker also has the design of geometric six-petal rosette (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).



Fig. 19. Six-Petal Rosette (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).



Fig. 20. Six-Petal Rosette (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).

The Silver Amarlu beaker is 10.3cm tall, its mouth diameter is 8.5cm and bottom diameter is 5.7cm, with two trees of life and four horned goats which are standing in the opposite direction to each other and eating

the tree of life. There is also a register of chain designs at the top and bottom. At the bottom, a six petal rosette is depicted (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).

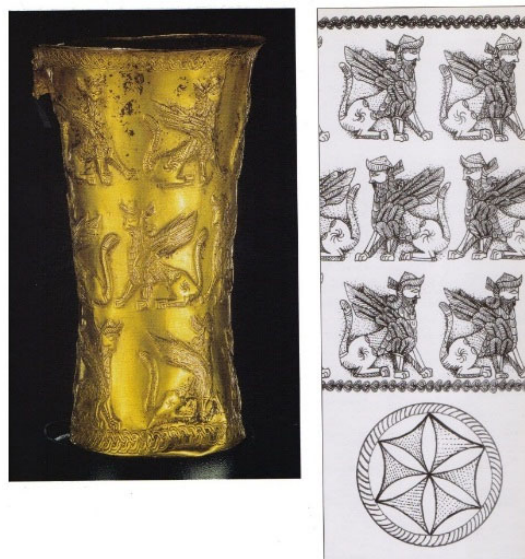


Fig. 21. Six-Petal Rosette (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).

The Amarlu Gold beaker is 12.5cm tall, its mouth is 7cm in diameter and its bottom is 5.5cm in diameter, with three registers of reliefs of hybrid creatures in a sitting position is seen with human heads wearing hats, headbands and having beards. It also has the upper body of an eagle with feathered wings, and the lower body of a lion. The motif of the sun cross on the thigh of this creature that is repeated five times in a row. At the top and bottom there is a register of chain designs, and on the bottom is a motif of six-petal rosette (Catalog of the National Museum of Iran).

Another finding of the design of the six petal rosette on its bottom is the Kelardasht beaker. In 1934, during the construction of a palace at Kelardasht for Reza Shah Pahlavi, beneath the pool floor that was built in the garden, underground installations were obtained with a large number of corridors containing skeletons with gifts for the dead (Porada, 2005: 125). In the meantime, there was a 5 inches (12.5 cm) tall gold beaker with three lions heads on the three sides of it (Yaghmaie, 2016). There are a six petal rosette design on the bottom of the vessel.

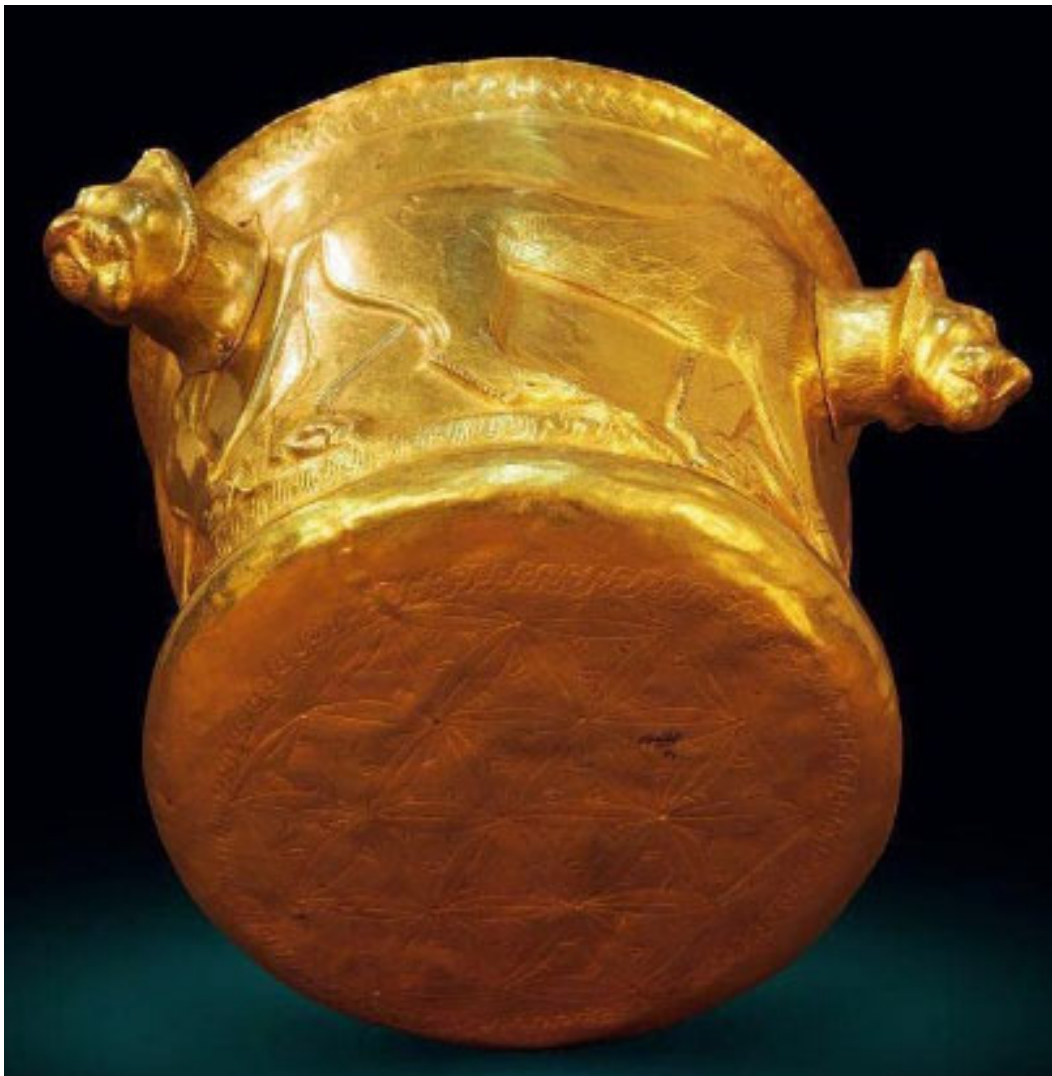


Fig. 22. Six-Petal Rosette (National Museum of Iran)

Conclusion

Considering the background of the tree of life which is in Mesopotamia and dates back to the Sumerian period, the effect of this motif can be seen in later periods. This design also extends beyond Mesopotamia, as Hall believes that the picture of the tree with animals on either side of it is an example of the tree of life that came to Iran and even reached India (Hall, 2005: 291). However, the motif of the tree of life in the later periods is transformed into the flower of life. As we know, the symbol is something related to something else that gives meaning or represents it (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2000: 24). Hall also believes that the symbol is simply something that is used instead of

something else and that it signifies or implies it (Hall, 2005: 14). According to what has been said and Parpola's view who has investigated and compared the pattern of the tree of life in Assyria with the pattern of the Sefirot tree in the Jewish Kabbalah from the viewpoint of the similarities of Mesopotamia gods, the functions and designs (Parpola, 1993) it can be possible that the motif of the tree of life is transformed into the flower of life, and this design appears almost at the same time as the Assyrian period at the bottom of the Gold and Silver and Bronze beakers in northern Iran, and thus becomes a symbol of the tree of life, that this time the artist replaces the sacred tree with the six petal rosette.

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بازتاب و تحلیل نگاره درخت زندگی و دگردیسی آن به گل زندگی در خاور نزدیک

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چکیده

انسان از دیرباز، نقش‌های گیاهی را روی آثاری همچون سفال، جام و دیگر اشیاء به کار می‌برد که گاه این نقش‌های گیاهی جلوه‌ای نمادین یافته و در آثار دوره‌ای خاص بسیار مهم جلوه می‌کردند. یکی از نقش‌های بسیار مهمی که خاستگاهی میان‌رودانی دارد، نقش درخت زندگی است. درخت زندگی گیاهی است که در بسیاری از سنت‌های اسطوره‌ای خاور نزدیک همچون میان‌رودان و آناتولی و مصر جایگاه سپندی دارد. گل زندگی یا نقش ترنج هندسی از دیگر نقش‌های ارزنده است که با شش گلبرگ دارد و به گل زندگی نامدار شده است. نگارندگان در این مقاله نخست به نماد و نمادگرایی پرداخته‌اند و سپس پیشینه درخت زندگی را بررسی کرده‌اند و سپس تر به نقش ترنج هندسی یا گل زندگی پرداخته و در ادامه به یافته‌های زرین و سیمین و مفرغین در محوطه‌های مارلیک و عمارلو گیلان و کلاردشت مازندران مربوط به عصر آهن ایران پرداخته‌اند و تأثیر و تأثر این نقش نمادین را بر یافته‌های باستان‌شناختی در محوطه‌های پیرامونی ایران واکاوی کرده‌اند که به احتمال نقش درخت زندگی به گل زندگی دگردیسی یافته و این نقش در دوره‌ای تقریباً هم‌زمان با دوره آشوری در کف جام‌های زرین و سیمین و مفرغین در میان جوامع شمال ایران پدیدار شده و به نوعی نمادی از درخت زندگی شده که این بار هنرمند گل شش‌پر را جایگزین درخت مقدس کرده است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: درخت زندگی، ترنج هندسی، گل زندگی، جوامع عصر آهن، دگردیسی

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