Original Research Article

A study on the Influence of the Indian Religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism) on the Motifs of Nishapur Architectural Ornaments

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Abstract

Problem statement: More than half a century after Wilkinson published his article on Nishapur excavations, despite the conducted research, there are still many ambiguities about the nature and origins of some of the motifs. Although some Sasanian roots, as well as influences from Samarra motifs, have been discovered during research, these studies have provided significant help in understanding some motifs that are distinctly different from other known motifs in the first six centuries of the Islamic era.

Research objective: The present study seeks to present a new way of reading the motifs in the Eastern Islamic World.

Research method: This research attempts to present a new picture of the analysis of the motifs of Nishapur through a historical descriptive-analytical method.

Conclusion: The symbols and signs of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism appear to have been one of the pillars of the Nishapur motifs. These symbols and signs have made their way into the Nishapur motifs through such means as the Hindu slaves and captives, trade relations and the Silk Road, wars and the relationship of Muslim rulers with Indian religions, as well as the coexistence of Islam and Indian religions.

Keywords: Nishapur, Architectural ornaments, Early centuries of the Islamic era, New hub, Indian Religions.

Introduction and statement problem

Based on the historical texts, one can say that Nishapur, together with the cities like Herat, Balkh, and Merv, has been among the most important centers in the Greater Khurasan Province in the pre-Islamic period (Christensen, 1999, 160-161). For long centuries after the Muslim conquest of Persia, Nishapur has been one of the most important cities in the eastern Islamic World. The diversity of the social and religious classes (Frye, 1984, 94, 144 & 154; Shaban, 2007, 37, 43 & 94) caused Nishapur to continue to be one of the important ruling centers and seats of the autonomous rules on the one hand and one of the main strongholds for the public riots in the region (Spuler, 2012, 283-285) on the
other. However, despite the numerous references in the historical literature, there are no notable signs of the area called “Abar Shahr” in the Greater Khurasan at present, due to destructive factors such as earthquakes and the Mongolian invasion.

What we have in hand from the magnificent Nishapur at present is limited to the excavations of the Metropolitan Museum, which were carried out by Wilkinson and published in several volumes by the Museum’s Press. Despite the similarities to other Islamic artworks in the middle and western regions of the Islamic world, one important point with the study of the artworks collected from Nishapur is the idiosyncratic and unique motifs that are not characteristics of the known motifs in Islamic art. These artworks are primarily connected with the Nishapur wall paintings and stucco motifs. Even though more than half a century has passed since these artworks were published, there are still many ambiguities in interpreting and understanding these motifs, including the plaster cast of stucco at Tepe Madrasa, which is now stored in the Museum of Ancient Iran in Tehran. The paintings found in Nishapur are one of the first examples of wall paintings in the eastern Islamic World after the Muslim conquest of Persia. Despite this special position, the different aspects of these motifs have remained unclear. The present study attempts to present a new theory about the origins of such motifs based on the social, religious, and prevailing conditions of Nishapur. To clarify the status of this research, previously conducted studies must be examined first so that the starting point of this research can be identified. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that some of the most ambiguous motifs discovered in the Nishapur excavations during the Nishapur excavations, using a historical descriptive-analytical method. To this end, some of the most ambiguous motifs in Nishapur were selected and the formal elements of them were examined by adopting a partial approach to the form independently from the whole form of the object. In the following, the possible interpretive references of the parts/elements will be addressed based on the research hypothesis to achieve a coherent unified whole in making references to the motifs. After proving the presence of sufficient reasons for the influence of the Indian Religions on the motifs discovered in Nishapur, the historical reasons that have probably provided the ground for the transfer of these motifs will be studied. The statistical population of the research is presented in a case and qualitative form. Accordingly, three cast plaster paintings from Tepe Madrasa, Sabzpoushan, and Qanat Tepe areas will be analyzed as samples.

Research background
Whatever has been said by researchers about the paintings from Tepe Madrasa is open to ambiguities and confusion. The most popular reference of the Nishapur wall paintings is a valuable book authorized by Wilkinson, the leader of the Nishapur excavations under supervision of the Metropolitan Museum, which has been published with the title “Nishapur: Some buildings of the early Islamic period and their decorations”. The book contained some extraordinary linear designs and pictures, which are the product of several years of valuable studies over long years. Everything relating to the description of the motifs has been done in a completely scientific way, with exemplary accuracy. However, as the author points out, the interpretation of the motifs has been accompanied by some difficulties. Wilkinson has not been able to go beyond the pure conjectures that had been made about the similarity of the motifs and some representations with the Sasanian samples and the Islamic-era paintings at such centers as Jawsaq al-Khaqani Center. In commenting about what do
“hands” represent, Wilkinson, states hesitantly that they may be the picture of Hazrat Fatima’s hands or the hand of Abulfazl Abbas that was cut by his enemy army in the Battle of Karbala. But, eventually, in the descriptions that are full of strange words, he concluded that “neither the excavations of Nishapur nor none of the historical sites in Iran”, as far as he knew, did not shed light about what these multiple hands in the Nishapur paintings are (Wilkinson, 1987, 172). Grabar and Ettinghausen have pointed to the similarities between the stuccos in Samara and other regions in Iran in terms of the high intensity of the designs and special styles. However, they attach less importance to such similarities, due to the unparalleled characteristics of these decorations. Besides presenting these motifs as one of the original examples of arabesque, it serves as a method in which the geometrical figures, the vegetal imagery, pictures that look like a horn as a symbol of abundance and prosperity, closely intertwined branches and, even, hands and eyes, all represent a live and real object. Unexpected compositions, incongruous motifs, and strange creativities are among the keywords that Grabar and Ettinghausen have used about the Nishapur paintings (Ettinghausen & Grabar, 1988, 6). About the stuccos of Nishapur, Dimand has pointed out the durability of the animal imagery drawing style in the Islamic industries, the impacts, and the extension of the Sasanian traditions into the Abbasi era, although he has not directly spoken about the Tepe Madrasa paintings. According to Dimand, despite the observable similarities between the stuccos in Nishapur and Samara and Nain, here we are witnessing a perfection and exaggeration of the surface decorations. Based on this assumption, Dimand has put forth the hypothesis that the Nishapur-style stucco is probably an intermediary ring between the Abbasi and Saljuqi artistic styles (Dimand, 1954, 55). Bernard O’Kane has also pointed out the ambiguities in the motifs from Nishapur; the motifs of the birds’ heads, hands, and eyes that, despite the ambiguity of the tendrils and arabesque motifs, present themselves well. O’kane goes on to relates these motifs to the “Vaq Vaq” motifs of the Seljuk era to provide a ground for the extension of the concept of animism to the stones in the Islamic-era paintings (O’kane, 1993, 85). An important point to mention is the emphasis that is placed on “ambiguity”, which has been accepted by O’kane goes too. According to Finster, these motifs have Western origins and have a bit deviated and assumed their specific characteristics. He views animism in relation to the flow of time and points to some similar examples in Nain and Ardestan decorations (Finster, 1994, 43). The most important study on the paintings from Tepe Madrasa has been conducted by Finbarr B. Flood. In his article, he refers to the history of the painted marbles and their representations. Then, by introducing the theory that the discovered pictures in Tepe Madrasa and Nishapur are connected with apotropaic or talismanic properties, attributes the reasons for such ambiguities to the regional factors and the tradition of portraying in Eastern Iran and Central Asia before Islam while addressing the bases of the ambiguities in the Umavi and Abbasi-era art, hence considers such ambiguities as a characteristic of the Islamic art in these periods. Further, Flood deals with the iconology of hands and eyes, and their positions in the pre-Islamic period as well as the highly ambiguous apotropaic or talismanic properties. The representation of the stones against the talismanic aura of the paintings has driven him towards the conclusion that the Nishapur decorations fluctuate between abstract and realistic representations. Finally, based on this theory, Flood concluded that due to such a fluctuation portraying is a phenomenon that is unstable ontologically, hence it is perceived differently every time. An existence that is plural ontologically (Flood, 2016, 20-58).

What can be understood from the researches is the emphasis that most of the researchers place on the animism, ambiguity, and idiosyncrasy of the motifs found in Nishapur. Giving spirit to the pictures add to their efficacy and for such phenomena, as the apotropaic and talismanic properties the ambiguity,
in its most complex form as the origin of Flood’s theory, is taken as an ontological element to interpret and deal with the motifs. What comes in the following in this research is an attempt to clarify some of these ambiguities.

Nishapur motifs analysis
Since there are no similar works for Nishapur motifs in the Islamic art field, the solution proposed by the author is to focus on each element and try to understand the motifs through these elements. To this end, we will divide some of the Nishapur motifs into smaller parts/elements to make an understanding of them as a whole.

The first sample is a motif that has been obtained from the excavations in Tepe Madrasa (Fig. 1). The linear design of this motif has been shown in Wilkinson’s book (Fig. 2). As shown, hands are the most conspicuous elements of this symmetric motif. Among other important elements are the eye-like circular shapes in hands, an image of a wheel, sequin decorations, dishes at the four corners with an object in them, and rectangular ornamental designs. Another point is the presence of a lozenge pattern in the middle, with the motif’s red color on a blue background and frame. Wilkinson adds no notable explanation of this motif, instead suffices to its description. He makes a conjecture about hands, stating they are probably connected with the motifs with Islamic themes representing, for example, the hands of Hazrat Fatima or Hazrat Abulfazl (Wilkinson, 1987, 172). Also, Finbarr sees hands and, in some other motifs, serpentine forms when describing the motifs, but fails to find any connections other than a link between these motifs and the Islamic geometrical shapes (Flood, 2016, 23-24). Now, based on the research theory, it is better to identify the symbols and signs shown in these two pictures for a better understanding of the pictures. Perhaps, the most conspicuous element is a hand that bears a circle on the open palm. This symbol is observable in an effigy of Buddha at the Guimet Museum in Afghanistan, which dates back to the third and fourth centuries after Christ (Fig. 3). Another picture of this kind was observed in Mes Aynak in Afghanistan (Fig. 4). This position of Buddha’s hand is the most frequent of its kind, which can be seen in many effigies in Indian and Afghanistan. This symbol, which is known as “Ahimsa” in Jainism, is one of the oldest of the Indian Religions and has a special status. It symbolized the principle...
of nonviolence among the followers of Jainism and is shown by a hand with a wheel on the palm (Fig. 5). The word in the middle is “Ahimsa”, which represents the first virtue that forbids a follower of Jainism from killing other living beings (Klostermaier, 1998, 18). The wheel stands for the resolve to halt the cycle of reincarnation through a relentless pursuit of truth and non-violence. These signs together stand for the stopping of the cycle of reincarnation through the practice of asceticism and the prevention of hurting other alive beings.

Another symbol that is very visible in the motif is “Wheel”. The Wheel of Dharma is a symbol that became very popular among the followers of the Tibetan Buddhist later and found other applications. The cosmetic concept of the wheel can be deducted from the Vedic literature. The endless spinning of the wheel means renewal (Fig. 6).

From the spinning of the wheel, space and all parts of time are born. Only the central piece of the cosmetic wheel is motionless; the vacuum is the wheel hub around which the wheel rotates. In this hub rests Chakravartin, who is the one who sets the wheel in motion. This hub is, in fact, Buddha; a universal man and the king of the kings. The wheel that spins Buddha is the wheel of the law or the dharmachakra. This law is the same law of the fate of humanity. No kind of power is able to change the direction of the spinning wheel (Chevalier & Gerbran, 2000, 498-499).

Until now in this research, some symbols of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the motifs discovered in Sabzpoushan, Nishapur were examined briefly. However, these motifs have universal aspects and are used in various cultures in different forms. For providing the influences of these religions we can refer to more clear symbols in the pictures at Nishapur. In this motif, Modak, Trikona, and Trishula are mentionable definitely. Modaka, which is one of the symbols of Hinduism, is a round lemon-sized sweet that is made from rice flour, coconut, sugar, spices, and pickles, and its appearance.
symbolizes the expressed satisfaction with the pure happiness depending on the degree of its realization (Fig. 7) (Editors of Hinduism Today Magazine, 2007, 99).

The triangle “Trikona” symbolizes the deity “Shiva”, which expresses its absolute existence (Fig. 8). This element represents fire and depicts the ascending spiritual and freedom path, which is talked about in the Holy Book (ibid., 97) Trishula, which is shown as a trident in the Hindu and Buddhist motifs. This trident represents passion, practice, and wisdom. In the Indian artworks, this symbol is shown as a plant as well (Fig. 9) (ibid). According to what was said until now, several symbols of the Indian Religions can be seen in the motifs collected in Sabzpoushan, based on which other motifs collected in the Nishapur excavations can be analyzed (Table 1).

Another ambiguity in the motifs of Nishapur relates to the motifs that have been used on the corners and the discovery of their origins can help us to gain a better understanding of the Nishapur motifs (Fig. 10).

The linear design of these motifs has been drawn by Wilkinson (Fig. 11). When it is juxtaposed with Kalasha, one of the symbols of the Indian Religions,
and other similar samples, the similarities between this motif and the Hindu samples can be observed (Fig. 12).

This symbol illustrates a pot covered with leaves, representing Kalasha in Hinduism or Jainism (Fig. 13). Kalasha is a ceramic or copper pot that is filled with water and topped with a corona of mango leaves and a coconut. Kalasha has many symbolic meanings, such as the primary waters of the universe creation, a loving and compassionate soul, abundance, and hospitality. The coconut symbolizes God’s head and the eye represents Vishnu’s eye. Kalasha is present in all major faiths of Hinduism and Jainism and forms the foundation of the “pot of treasury” in Tibetan Hinduism (ibid). Based on this, the motifs that are seen on the corners have been influenced by the Indian Religions directly or indirectly.

Another example of such similarities can be found in an image painted on a wall in Nishapur. The peculiar shape of the nose and red face reflect the major characteristics of the image (Fig. 14). A similar to this picture is Bodhisattva, Future Buddha, in Kandahar, which looks like the picture in terms of respect to the nose shape and hairstyle (Fig. 15).

Based on what was said until now, the influences of the Indian Religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism) on the motifs of Nishapur has been proven. Now, how such influences have taken place historically should be addressed. The causes of these influences can be categorized into four major groups (i.e. Hindu slaves and captives, trade relations and the Silk Road, wars and interactions of the different governments with the Indian Religions, and the coexistence of Islam and the Indian Religion.

Hindu slaves and captives

The Hindu slaves and captives formed a large part of the workforce in the early centuries in the eastern Islamic World. In fact, there are a lot of pieces of evidence for the slave trade in the cities of Khurasan Province. Some researchers like Bertold Spuler believe that the socio-economic developments
in that period owe to slavery. There are pieces of evidence that the slaves were trained for different works in the cities like Samarqand, Khwarazm, and Sogd. Depending on their workplaces, these slaves and handmaidens were called the servants of the inside and the servants of the outside (Spuler, 2012, 283). A large spectrum of these slaves and captives were Hindu. Repeated wars in the early centuries of the Islamic period, in particular, the numerous wars staged by the Ghaznavid dynasty against the Indian and Afghan people triggered the movement of the Hindu slaves into the cities of the eastern Islamic World (ibid). The number of slaves was so large that Unṣur al-Maʿālī in his book Qabus Nama has dedicated a chapter to the slave selection rules. One type of slaves about which he has talked in the book is the Hindu (Unṣur al-Maʿālī, 1989, 116-117). The people of Hindu origin formed a large part of the Ghaznavid army. Khajeh Nizam al-Mulk in his book Siysatnama has referred to these military
forces (Khajeh Nizam al-Mulk, 1965, 45). Besides, a comprehensive study has been conducted by Jabir Raza on the presence of the Hindu people in the Ghaznavid army, which according to the historical evidence is clearly indicative of the vast presence of the Hindus in the high levels of the Ghaznavid military hierarchy, which is an evidence for the tolerance of the presence of the Hindu people with the Muslims and their coexistence (Jabir Raza, 2010-2011, 213-225). These pieces of evidence all reflect the fact that the Hindus have had vast communications with the big cities in Khurasan Province. Hence, their presence as laborers and masters as their influences can be taken as the means of the transfer of the Hindu symbols and signs.
Trade relations and the Silk Road

One of the major means of the development and spread of Islamic art in the course of history has been trading relations and the cities which hosted different walks of life, in particular the businesspersons, due to their special historical and geographical situation. Considering that Nishapur has been the seat of different ruling dynasties for many centuries, it found a special position among the cities in the eastern Islamic countries. In the historical literature, references have been made to Bazaars and caravanserais in Nishapur. According to Ibn Hawqal, a geographer in the 4th Hijri century, a wide range of guilds and caravans had been engaged in different professions (Ibn Hawqal, 1987, 167-168).

According to some researchers like Labaf Khaniki, although the Silk Road is several thousand years old, “the emergence of the large population centers such as Nishapur added to the importance of this route and the Silk Road attracted more and more attention from the businessmen and tourists. By providing the pillar conditions that are required for a city, which include the population concentration, the establishment of social institutions, economic and political development, the Silk Road transformed Nishapur into the most important city in Northeast Iran so that it managed to attract capital and commodities from the neighboring countries, hence added to the prosperity of the East-West trade highway by ensuring security in the region (Labaf Khaniki, 2012, 171-202). Among the geographical regions that were in access of the traders of Khurasan Province were the present-time Afghanistan and India where there was a flow of business transactions and trade communications. According to Bosworth, trading slaves was the most important type of trade in Khurasan Province (Bosworth, 1993, 150). In his book, Narshakhi has mentioned a Bazaar called Bazaar Makh where idols have long been traded for two days every year (El- Narchakhy, 1972). The author of the book The Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam has mentioned the names of such cities as Dinavar and Kashmir where temples could be found in large numbers and the Muslim traders resided. In some cities like Ghazni, on the borderline of the Muslim and Hindu countries, there was a host city for the businesspeople (Anonymous, 1984, 72-73).

Wars and the rulers’ interaction with the Indian Religions

Wars, conquests, and loot have always been the major means of influencing or being influenced, and cultural interactions. Based on the various historical evidence, many wages have been staged and many conquests have been achieved by the Muslim rulers during the first centuries of Islam, in particular during the Ghaznavid era, for plundering India and Afghanistan. This literature has numerous references to the loot which were brought to the cities like Ghazni and the Muslims’ contacts with the temples which were
compared with the Muslims’ Kaaba in terms of its value for the Hindu people (Gardizi, 1968, 66-99). These loot included objects, articles, jewelry, slaves, and soldiers. Ghazni as the capital of the Ghaznavid dynasty was one of the destinations of the loot. The relations between the Indian and Ghaznavid people were in such a way that, according to Lahore, India was viewed by the Ghaznavid people as their second capital. These influences have continued in the Seljuk era by the conquest of Ghazni and, subsequently, the marriage between Alaoudole Masud III and Alp Arslan’s daughter. During the period, the Seljuks influenced Ghazni to such an extent that some Ghaznavid rules adopted typical Seljuk titles such as Al-Sultan Al-Mu’azzam (Bosworth, 1981, 21). These types of royal relations along with the brought loot have provided a ground for the transfer of the motifs from the present-time Indian and Afghanistan to the cities in Khurasan Province, particularly Nishapur.

Coexistence of Islam and the Indian Religions

The other side of the massacres and destruction of the temples after the conquests to which the historians have pointed, lies the coexistence of the Muslims and the flowers of the Indian Religions in the different cities, which has been mentioned by the authors of the books on the historical geography. The author of the book The Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam refers to these points when describing the geography of the cities. According to Bosworth’s observations, there used to be many idol worshippers in Ghor, and now the Muslims introduce Ramayan as a city where a few Muslims live with the idol worshippers as the majority group. Alongside this, he refers to the idols in the city and the religious ceremonies that they hold for the idols. Further, the author mentions a city named Benhiar which is ruled by a Muslim king and where the Muslims, Afghan and Indian people live together and there are three principal idols (ibid, 69-73). Considering the age of the book The Ḥudūd al-ʿĀlam, which dates back to the 4th Hijri century, one can deduce that these religions coexisted with Islam for three centuries after the advent of Islam.

Conclusion

Based on the samples of the motifs and symbols which were mentioned in this article and by comparing them with the Nishapur motifs, one can conclude that the motifs collected in Nishapur contain the symbols and signs of the Indian Religions and have been brought under their influence. The Hindu captives and slaves, the Silk Road as a highway, traders and trade relations between the Muslims and the Indian people, the war loot, the human relations created as a result of the conquest of the different cities in the region and, eventually, the extension of the Indian Religions in the Eastern Iran and, subsequently, the Muslim-Hindu coexistence are among the causes and means of the transfer of these motifs. These influences should be viewed alongside the resources like Sasanian art and the Islamic artistic approach which recommends avoiding realistic representations. This is why such an influence on the Islamic-era art has lost its realistic aspects as far as possible, although the influence of the Indian Religions can be observed in the said motifs. It should be noted that this does not mean the complete elimination of all realistic aspects, but the artist’s choice of giving more weight to the abstract visual possibilities from the existing possibilities. This is why the symbols of the Indian Religions have survived over time due to their abstract characteristics and similarity to the approach adopted by the then Islamic art. This has caused these left motifs to seem that they have spirits inside them because of the symbolic elements such as the eyes and hands, although they are not realistic representations of the beings. In the end, it is hoped that a new window is opened to the interpretive possibilities in interpreting the motifs of the first centuries of the Islamic period in Eastern Iran while taking their roots and connections with the Indian Religions.

Reference list

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