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From the Senmurw to the
Simorg: Persian Identity in
Early Islamic Iran Reflected in
Mythical Birds

By

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Introduction

In the middle of the 6th century, the 400-year rule of the Sasanian Empire fell to the Arab Muslims. This demise brought social, political, and religious changes that affected Persian identity. As the tides changed from Zoroastrian Sasanians to Islamic Caliphates over the 7th to 13th centuries, the mythical bird called the *Senmurw* evolved into the *Simorg*.¹ This transformation is a direct reflection of changes to Persian identity. Around the turn of the millennium, Persians turned to their pre-Islamic history and mythology to reinvigorate the Persian culture and identity. The Persian elites reinvented the *Senmurw*, allowing it to exist as the *Simorg* in a new Islamic context and therefore preserve cultural aspects of pre-Islamic Persia. This research will focus on the transformation of the *Senmurw* into the *Simorg* as a reflection of Persians adapting themselves to an Islamic context. My contention is reflected further in the mythologies of the *Rukh* and *Anqa* as they absorbed some of the changes to the characteristics of the *Simorg*.

Persian identity pertains to groups and individuals who associate themselves with the historical culture and traditions of geographically pre-Islamic Iran. To elaborate, the modern borders of Iran do not encompass the loose borders of Sasanian Iran and, therefore, do not reflect the culture and traditions in its entirety. Furthermore, the linguistic definition does not adequately embrace the cultural aspects for the purposes of my research.² The various Persian empires dating back to the Achaemenids are not defined by language but long standing traditions and

¹ Alternate spelling includes *Simurgh*. The later spelling is most popular among scholarship, but I have opted to use the transliteration utilized by *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

² I want to emphasize that I am not referring to Persian identity as anyone who speaks Persian, although many fall under this linguistic category.

cultural values.³ I opted for Persian instead of Iranian because the latter term fell out of use after the fall of the Sasanians due to its links to Zoroastrianism, whereas the ambiguity of the former term was preferred for self-identification from the 7th to 13th centuries.⁴ A map is provided in the List of Figures which depicts a general area of Persia to help readers visualize the loose geographical definition.⁵ For this specific research, the culture and traditions that are mostly referred to are of Sasanian origin and persisted through the various political and religious changes from the 7th to 13th centuries.⁶ I want to emphasize that I am not arguing for a national or holistic identity during these transformative years as the collected evidence can only provide a limited aristocratic perspective. Due to lack of primary sources, it would be too speculative to assert that lower classes adapted identically to the new Islamic context as the upper classes did. Instead, Persian elites attempted to reconfigure themselves amidst the sociopolitical transformations of the emerging Islamic world. I am analyzing this change through the lens of the *Senmurw* and *Simorg*.

Methodology and Literature Review

My organization will follow a chronological structure to align with the prolonged time period of my analysis. This approach mirrors the gradual development akin to that of the *Simorg*.

³ There was a change from Middle Persian to New Persian, which is used today, during my designated time period. Due to this change, as well as the encroachment of Arabic and Turkic languages, a linguistic definition does not encapsulate the identity connected to the Sasanian Empire. For these reasons including the previous footnote, I have chosen a loose geographical definition for Persian identity.

⁴ Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9-11. The term “Iran” is derived from the Middle Persian, “*eran*,” a term used by Sasanian aristocrats to connect themselves to the *Aryan* people. They are cited in the *Avesta* as the protectors of the Zoroastrians. For more, see Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origins*, 1989.

⁵ See Figure 1. Map courtesy of *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. Richard Frye, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶ In the context of identity, most of this research is focused on the Sasanian Zoroastrian past as it was the dominant religion, but I want to clarify that there were other religious communities such as Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Manicheans. Since the research focuses on a mythical bird in the *Avesta*, the discussion will be highlighting those who identify as Zoroastrian.

I will start with the Sasanians and the *Senmurw*, followed by the empire's fall, the sociopolitical and religious changes to Persia and its identity, the development of the *Simorg*, and lastly, this evolution reflected in the *Rukh* and *Anka*.

Sarah Bowen Savant, a prominent scholar of early Islamic history, argues in *The New Muslims of Post Conquest Iran*, that Persians reinvented themselves from the 9th to 11th centuries by altering their history to fit into a new Islamic context. The elites changed their past so that they could claim their Muslim identity had always persisted hence validating Persian Muslims existence in early Islamic Iran.⁷ My research is akin to Savant's argument, but instead of the past changing, it focuses on how Persians took something from their past and adapted to exist in their present. The *Senmurw* was reinvented into a new bird, the *Simorg*, hence forming a continuity of pre-Islamic Persian culture. This illustrates how Persians were able to both reshape their history and integrate culturally significant elements from their past into their present context. Delving into this transformation reveals their determination to preserve their heritage amidst sociopolitical shifts brought by the Arab conquest while simultaneously modifying their past to reflect both Persian and Islamic identities.

Scholars, like Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Prudence Oliver Harper, have acknowledged the connection between the *Senmurw* and *Simorg*, but there is fairly little in-depth analysis as to what is their exact correlation and why it developed. Additionally, this is little research on the birds prior to the 13th century, except in specific contexts, the *Simorg* in the world of the *Shahnameh* and the *Senmurw* in the historical context of Sasanian art. Prudence Oliver Harper is a leading scholar into the *Senmurw*, but scholarship is still relatively little due to a lack of primary sources. She attests that the *Simorg* directly evolved from the *Senmurw*, but does not

⁷ Savant, *The New Muslims*.

provide an argument as to why.⁸ Ahmed Al-Rawi provided an insightful linguistic perspective on the *Rukh* and its connection to the *Anqa* and *Simorg*. He argues that the *Rukh* is more connected to the *Anqa* rather than the *Simorg* based on mythology and linguistics. Although his research is in a primarily Arab context, it demonstrates how all of the birds interconnect with each other.⁹ There has been extensive research done on the iconographic significance of these mythical birds in art history during the Medieval era due to their increased representation in art and literature. Persis Berlekamp reasons mythical beasts, such as the *Simorg*, *Rukh*, and *Anqa*, further imposed a sense of awe and wonder in God's creations, a trend from the 13th to 15th centuries.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is little scholarship on why the *Senmurw* is connected to the *Simorg*. My research offers a hypothesis to address this question, underlining its importance in enhancing our grasp of the complexities inherent in Persian mythology. Additionally, I am hopeful that my work implores scholars to further study Persian mythology in early Islamic Iran.

Senmurw

Senmurw is the Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, spelling of *Saena*, a fabulous bird described in the Zoroastrian text called *Avesta*.¹¹ The *Avesta* was written down in a different Iranian language commonly known as the Avestan Language as it was specifically created to encompass Zoroastrian beliefs adequately.¹² Scholars agree that the oldest part, the Gathas, may have

⁸ Prudence Oliver Harper, *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire*, (New York: Asia House Gallery Publication, 1978), 96.

⁹ Ahmed Al-Rawi, "A Linguistic and Literary Examination of the Rukh Bird in Arab Culture," *Al-'Arabiyya*, Georgetown University Press, vol. 50 (2017): 105-117, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26451398>.

¹⁰ Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹¹ After this, I will be using *Saena* in reference to the bird in a Zoroastrian context while the *Senmurw* is in reference to its Sasanian context. The terms could be used interchangeably, but I want to show that, although linguistically they are the same, they are slightly different in certain contexts as demonstrated in the previous statement.

¹² *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v., "AVESTAN LANGUAGE I-III," accessed March 25th, 2024. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/avestan-language>.

originated around 1,000 BCE, demonstrating how ancient the stories within the *Avesta* are.¹³ The sacred Zoroastrian book circulated orally before being written down, likely after the 6th century. It is generally agreed that Zoroastrian priests decided to transfer the *Avesta* from an oral text to a scripture to reestablish the text's authority and keep the stories from being lost to time.¹⁴ It was around this period that the *Senmurw* rose in iconographic prominence. The *Saena* rests atop the Tree of All Seeds and, with some help from rain and wind, scatters its seeds across the Earth by beating its wings. In addition to this job, later texts state that the bird also takes care of children.¹⁵

Despite the *Saena*'s importance in the *Avesta*, it is rare in Sasanian art and only appears in the last two centuries before the fall of the Empire.¹⁶ Therefore, it is difficult to tell whether earlier artistic representations have been lost to time or it was a newer phenomenon in the 7th century. Prudence O. Harper and other art historians tend to agree with the latter.¹⁷ It first appears on rock reliefs at Taq-i Bustan, where the bird is depicted on the garments of Sasanian Kings and royal horsemen.¹⁸ Figure 2 demonstrates *Senmurws* in a decorative style with intertwined bands, traditional to Sasanian art. It is this style that was documented on the horsemen's garments at Taq-I Bustan, as seen in Figure 3.¹⁹ These heavily armored horsemen were a new militaristic cavalry called cataphract, and they helped push Sasanian campaigns into the east and west.²⁰

¹³ Shaul Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism: Reflections on Modes of Transmission in Late Antiquity," in *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World*, Julia Rubanovich ed., (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 44.

¹⁴ Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism," 49. This is additionally contested by other important Sasanian oral literature being written down during this period, most famously is the *Book of Kings*, or *Khwadāy-nāmag* (M.P).

¹⁵ Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, *Persian Myths*, British Museum Press, 1993, 21-22.

¹⁶ Harper, *The Royal Hunter*, 94-95.

¹⁷ Prudence O. Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity: Monuments and Artifacts of the Sasanian Near East, 3rd to 7th Century A.D.*, (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2006), 22.

¹⁸ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 73.

¹⁹ Katharina Meinecke, "Umayyad Visual Culture and its Models," In *The Umayyad World*, ed. Andrew Marsham, 103-129, (London: Routledge, 2020), 108-109. The figure I included is actually from the wall of an Umayyad palace in Palestine called Khirbat al-Mafjar, but the exact pattern is found on Sasanian calvary garments. This image was clearer and, therefore, more visually useful for readers.

²⁰ David Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 15.

Figure 4 comes from a 7th century Sogdian wall mural, and the figure on the right has *Senmurws* on his garments, demonstrating his royal status.²¹ Sogdia, or Sogdiana in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, was included in the Persian Empires dating back to the Achaemenid period through Sasanian times until being conquered by Central Asian nomads.

Interestingly, the physical description of the *Saena* in the *Avesta* does not match its counterpart, the *Senmurw*, when artistically represented. It is rendered in the Zoroastrian *Avesta* as a griffin or eagle, but the *Senmurw* adopted other animals in its physical depiction, making it a hybrid creature.²² It is portrayed as a bird with griffin ears, head of a dog, with wings and claws, and peacock feathers. It is generally accepted that the fantastic lion-dragon beasts of ancient Mesopotamia influenced the physical description of the *Senmurw*. Peacock feathers, an addition not seen on the lion-dragon beasts, were a widespread motif from the later Roman and Christian worlds.²³ Figure 5 represents a typical depiction of the *Senmurw*. Typically, when the *Senmurw* is represented by itself, it faces towards the left but can face right when alongside other *Senmurws* as a mirror image.²⁴ When more than one *Senmurw* is portrayed, it is usually on a textile (See Figures 2, 3, 6).²⁵ It is common to have its mouth open with a tongue sticking out, but this motif is not represented in all depictions. The front claw furthest from the viewer, usually its right, is higher than the other and sometimes shown in a bent position. The *Senmurw* has distinct wings and peacock feathers, the latter curls up and around the creature to create a circular look as it is

²¹ This mural represents the Persians celebrating the New Year festival called Nowrūz, which is still celebrated today. The same mural may have a *Simorg* rendered on the wall, telling the story of Rostam. Matteo Compareti is a scholar in pre-Islamic Central Asian art, and he suggests that it is indeed a *Simorg*. Due to its ongoing speculation, I opted to not include this hypothesis. For more, see Compareti, *Heroes Fighting Snake Demons*, 2019, or Boris Marshak, *Legends, Tales, and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana*, 2002.

²² Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 15.

²³ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 73.

²⁴ Figures 6, 7, and 8 are fragments or part of a medallion that would have likely had a right-facing *Senmurw* mirroring it. This can be partially seen on the textile fragment of figure 6.

²⁵ Figures 2 and 3 are interesting in this context because they are depictions of textiles displaying *Senmurws*. This may allude to a well-known way that the *Senmurw* was represented by the Sasanian elites.

most frequently represented within a circular shape. At times, the *Senmurw* is represented with rooster-like qualities as the *Saena* is occasionally referred to as the Sunbird, and the rooster announces the rising of the sun.²⁶

Figure 6 is an Iranian silk textile fragment depicting a *Senmurw* with a woven pattern and pearl border. This Iranian fragment was discovered in the Parisian reliquary of St. Helen and is dated to the 8th century at the latest.²⁷ Similar to the *Senmurw* at Taq-i Bustan, it is encircled by the intertwined, or medallion style, motif. This motif was imitated by nearby civilizations such as the Byzantine Empire, China, and Central Asia.²⁸ As well, it can be seen in Figure 7, a Byzantine silk fragment from 900-1100 CE. Victoria and Albert Museum identify the creature either as a Griffin or *Senmurw* attacking an elephant, a motif that will be further explored later.²⁹ Byzantine silk merchants came to Persia after a state monopoly imposed by Justinian, who reigned from 527-565 CE, destroyed the market and forced them to look for supplies elsewhere.³⁰ This fragment was made centuries following the Sasanian downfall outside of Iran, demonstrating the geographical spread of the *Senmurw* motif. A belt buckle from the 11th-12th centuries depicting a *Senmurw*, long after the Sasanian Empire fell, attests to its longevity of cultural and iconographic importance (Figure 8). Moreover, the iconography of the *Senmurw* changed very little from its earlier Sasanian depictions.

At the beginning of Sasanian rule, the first Kings called upon past concepts as a point of stability. They invoked a race of people from the *Avesta*, the *Aryans*, protectors of

²⁶ Tsila Zan-Bar Tsur, "The Tale of 'The Old Woman on the Mountain': A Jewish Folktale from Afghanistan," in *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World*, Julia Rubanovich ed., (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 356.

²⁷ "Woven Silk," 8579-1863. Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85315/woven-silk-unknown/>.

²⁸ Meinecke, "Umayyad Visual Culture," 103-129. See *Rukh* and *Anqa* section for further analysis of figure 7.

²⁹ "Woven Silk." 764-1893. V&A compared this fragment to other sources such as a West German silk and marble relief in an arch in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice.

³⁰ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 58.

Zoroastrianism. One motive behind this association was to unify the influential aristocracy under one ethnicity.³¹ When the *Senmurw* motif began to rise, there were internal and external political and militaristic conflicts. “Political disruptions contributed to the vulnerability and suffering of populations who turned to the supernatural for protection. The need to escape from known and unknown horrors was felt across the boundaries of class and religion.”³² Harper argues that with the rise in political upheaval, many people turned to supernatural forces for help and stability. This was evident throughout the Mediterranean socioeconomic spectrum of late antiquity, for instance Byzantine Catholic Bishops turned to magic.³³ In this environment, it is unsurprising that the *Saena* was revitalized as the *Senmurw* and became a Sasanian royal icon, symbolizing power and protection.³⁴

Fall of the Sasanians and Post-Islamic Conquest Iran

In 632 CE, the Prophet Muhammad died, and only five years later, the Arabs had expanded their Islamic conquest into Persia. The Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, or Madāen, fell in 637 CE, and another five years later, in 642 CE, the final blow came at Nehavand. The Arabs called it *Faṭḥ al-futūḥ*, or “the supreme victory,” which completely destroyed the Sasanian Empire. At this time, the current King, Yazdigird III, fled east, but was murdered in 651 CE. In only a few

³¹ Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin*, (Netherlands: Roma: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989), 137-138.

³² Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 22.

³³ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 22-23.

³⁴ According to P.O. Harper, in the last few decades prior to the Sasanian fall, the *Senmurw* began to appear on “simpler items.” This suggests that the icons were disseminating into lower classes and ceasing to be a royal icon. Harper does not provide examples of what these simpler items are, or what a simpler item is, therefore difficult to analyze its significance. If these simpler items with the *Senmurw* should emerge, it would make for an interesting analysis on Sasanian royal icons and why non-aristocrats would use such an icon to put on their items. Harper, *The Royal Hunter*, 96.

decades after the rise of Islam, the Sasanian Empire fell and was left in ruins. Zoroastrian temples soon became mosques, and Arab Muslims integrated into the ruling elite class.³⁵

Yet, despite this drastic change, Persian culture continued in contrast to Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, which all lost much of their cultural identity to Arabization.³⁶ They replaced their languages with Arabic and largely assumed Arab identity.³⁷ It is argued that Persia kept its identity because of the continuation of the Persian Language as New Persian and the preservation of pre-Islamic Persian history. Thus, Persians kept their identity, culture, and history alive, causing many of the later conquering Central Asian Turkish tribes and Arabs to be Persianized.³⁸ The Ghaznavids, Seljuqs, Khwarazmshahids, Atābeks, Timurids, Safavids, and Qajars, to name a few, adopted the Persian language and part of the culture into their own cultures and ruling systems. The fall of the Sasanians proved to be a temporary setback for Persian culture but not a permanent one.³⁹

During political, social, cultural, and religious changes, people tend to rely on the past for stability and group identity.⁴⁰ From the 8th to 10th centuries, many Persian dynasties that rose to power connected themselves in some form to the pre-Islamic past. Many families were immensely proud of their ancient lineage, so claiming descent from these families meant instant legitimacy and power.⁴¹ The Ispahbads, or “commander of the army” in Middle Persian, of Ṭabaristān attempted to establish themselves as independent from the rest of Islamic Iran. Due to

³⁵ Ehsan Yarshater, “Re-emergence of Iranian Identity after Conversion to Islam,” in *The Rise of Islam: The Idea of Iran*, Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart, ed. vol. IV, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 5.

³⁶ I am using modern terminology here to help emphasize their history of cultural distinction.

³⁷ Kennedy, “Survival of Iranianness,” in *The Rise of Islam: The Idea of Iran*, Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart, ed. vol. IV, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 13.

³⁸ Yarshater, “Re-emergence of Iranian Identity,” 8-9.

³⁹ Yarshater, “Re-emergence of Iranian Identity,” 8-9.

⁴⁰ Savant, *The New Muslims*, 3.

⁴¹ Kennedy, “Survival of Iranianness,” 20.

the mountainous landscape, the Arab Muslims did not attempt to take the area immediately.⁴² In the early 8th century, the Ispahbads minted coins with the image of the last Sasanian *Shah*, Yazdigird III (Figure 9). They endorsed the rebellion of Sunbadh, who attempted to avenge the murder of Abū Muslim and restore Zoroastrianism. After the uprising failed, the Arabs sought punishment and conquered Ṭabaristān in 758 CE. Despite this, Ṭabaristān continued as a region dedicated to Persian identity. The Bawandids replaced the Ispahbads in the 8th century. They claimed lineage from the Sasanian *Shah*, Kavad, and maintained sovereignty until the 14th century. They converted to Islam but preserved their Persian culture by adopting Achaemenid and Sasanian names like Shapur, Shahriyar, Rostam, and Dara (Darius) in honor of past Persian Kings.⁴³

In the centuries following the Arab Muslim conquest, localized states ruled independently for some time without much Arab incursion. It was common during the medieval period for the primary political powers to allow smaller independent states to continue their localized rule seeing they abide to tax collection and recognize a domineering sovereignty.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Arabs created alliances with these independent states to maintain their power and stability. This environment allowed these localized dynasties to preserve their Persian culture instead of becoming Arabized.⁴⁵ The dynasty of Afrighids in Khwarazm continued to uphold their power in accordance with Sasanian culture. As an independent state until the Seljuq conquest in the 11th century, the Afrighid Kings upheld legitimacy through their claim of Sasanian descent, and they

⁴² Ṭabaristān is a geographical region located in northern Iran along the Caspian Sea. It is protected on one side by the sea with the Alborz mountains on the other.

⁴³ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 14-15.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness." This is chapter, Kennedy explores several reasons why Iran is not an Arab country. Among the reasonings in-text, he also highlights the speed of Arab conquest was vital in allowing independent states to exist.

⁴⁵ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 17.

did so without much Arab Muslim interference, likely by paying tribute.⁴⁶ Another Caucasus dynasty, the Shirvan, used the title of *Shah* despite its 8th century founder, Yazīd b. Mazyad al-Shaybānī, being of Arab descent. By the 11th century, the Shirvans used Persian names such as Qubad, Manucehr, and Faridun, falsely claiming Persian descent.⁴⁷

To continue, the Buyids, famous for seizing control of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, made use of the pre-Islamic past. During their reign as a semi-independent state, they minted coins invoking names and titles from the Sasanians, including *shāhān-shāh*, or “King of Kings,” and using the Pahlavi script. This was done right after the leader of the Buyids, Aḥmad b. Buwayh came to power in 945 CE, but it was most popular with his successor Azod al-Dawla.⁴⁸ The Buyids came from the Caspian provinces, specifically the region of Daylam. A great Sasanian family also came from this area, the Qarenid dynasty, and it is through this royal family that the Buyids claim lineage.⁴⁹

Lastly, the Barmakids was founded by a man named Barmak, whose family were the hereditary guardians of the great Buddhist shrine of Naubahar in the ancient city of Balk in northern Afghanistan.⁵⁰ They converted to Islam by the Umayyad governor of Khorasan, Asad b. ‘Abdallāh. Barmak and his son Khālid b. Barmak became local elites alongside the governor. When the Abbasid rebellion began, Khālid joined the rebels, where his administrative talents were praised. The Barmakid family rose to elite prominence within the Abbasid court until their

⁴⁶ Kennedy, “Survival of Iranianness,” 16.

⁴⁷ Kennedy, “Survival of Iranianness,” 16-17.

⁴⁸ There has not been much recent scholarship on the Buyids and their coins, but here are some sources that further explore this topic. Wilferd Madelung, “The Assumption of the Title Shāhānshāh by the Būyids and “The Reign of the Daylam (Dawlat Al-Daylam),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1969), 84-108, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/543315> and E. Askari, W.L. Treadwell, “Catalogue of Buyid coins in the National Museum of Iran,” *The Numismatic Chronicle*, vol. 162 (2002), 359-364, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42668220>.

⁴⁹ Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, “The Idea of Iran in the Buyid Dominions,” in *Early Islamic Iran: The Idea of Iran*, vol. 5, Edmund Herzig and Sarah Stewart ed., (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 153-158.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that the Barmakids did not exclusively promote pre-Islamic Persian culture. Barmak’s grandson translated Sanskrit texts and was interested in Indian religions. For more see: Kevin van Bladel, “The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids,” in *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes*, (England: Ashgate, 2011), 44-46.

demise in 803 CE. Throughout this time of administrative rule, the family advocated for Persian culture, values, and administrative processes while expressing pride for the past Persian Empires.⁵¹

The elites from these dynasties tasked themselves with transforming the Middle Persian language into New Persian. This allowed for the continuation of their language while assimilating to Arab infringement. The most notable change was the adoption of the Arabic script, which included the addition of a few new letters. Many Arabic words were added to the language, specifically in religious, administrative, judicial, and philosophical concepts.⁵² It functioned as an intermediary between Persians and Arabs and soon became the preferred language of Persian poets. The first New Persian poet is credited to Yā'qūb b. Layth in 865 CE. Yā'qūb was from Sīstan, the homeland of the mythical hero Rostam. He had recently won a victory against his local rival, and the court poets attempted to praise him in Arabic. Yā'qūb could not understand, so he set out to produce the first New Persian poetry.⁵³ It is important to note that New Persian was not the common tongue and was preserved only for courtly matters such as poetry. Arabic was the preferred language of the elites beginning in the 10th century and most Iranian histories from the 10th to 11th centuries tended to be written in Arabic.⁵⁴

However, by the 10th century, New Persian was the language of choice for the ruling Samanids in Bukhara. Similar to the other dynasties mentioned, the Samanids claimed lineage to the Sasanian royal house. They originated from the landowning *dehqans*, a Sasanian class that rose in importance after the fall of the empire. They were patronages of pre-Islamic Iran as seen in a silver plate displaying a *Senmurw*, one of the very few surviving representations after the

⁵¹ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 20-21.

⁵² Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 24.

⁵³ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 24.

⁵⁴ Savant, *The New Muslims*, 7.

Sasanian fall (Figure 10). They initiated a new court system and implemented New Persian as the prime language. Poets of significance, such as Rudaki in 940-941 CE and epic poet Daqiqi in 980 CE, began to flourish. By the end of the Samanid rule in 1005 CE, the new court system was fully implemented, and it was in these conditions Persian poetry flourished.⁵⁵

These dynasties from the 8th to 10th centuries demonstrate the effort conducted by Persian elites to maintain their pre-Islamic culture and heritage. Whether it was claiming lineage to Sasanians, minting coins in their image, or continuing the Persian language, this endeavor instituted a mindset among Persians to prioritize the preservation of their history. Accordingly, an environment blossomed that allowed for the reinvention of the *Senmurw* into the *Simorg* to occur.

Simorg

There are conflicting sources on whether the *Simorg* came directly from the *Senmurw*. Harper claims direct lineage, whereas Curtis of the British Museum states that it is probable but not certain.⁵⁶ *Encyclopaedia Iranica* tends to agree with Harper's viewpoint and even expands on it by connecting it to the *Anqa* and *Rukh*, which will be explored shortly. I mostly agree with the latter but with assertion that, over time, these birds became distinct. As these birds circulated into different sociocultural environments, they accumulated new traits and folktales, making them similar yet distinct.

The *Simorg*, an eagle-like mythical bird, is the New Persian spelling of *Senmurw* and was accentuated in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.⁵⁷ This Persian epic, created around 999 CE and finished in 1010 CE, was originally by Abu'l-Qasim Hasan, commonly known by his professional name,

⁵⁵ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 24-25.

⁵⁶ Harper, *The Royal Hunter*, 94-95 and, Curtis, *Persian Myths*, 21-22.

⁵⁷ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Simorg," accessed January 12th, 2024, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/simorg>.

Ferdowsi. He created this epic in dedication to Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, who did not particularly like Ferdowsi's work.⁵⁸ His *Shahnameh* was not the first of its kind. It is highly probable that an Iranian *Book of Kings* originated during the Sasanian Period. Although written documentation likely succumbed during the destruction of Baghdad where it was housed throughout the centuries, its songs were performed in court for the kings.⁵⁹ Ferdowsi utilized the work of an earlier *Shahnameh* poet, Daqiqi, who could not finish his work due to being murdered. He was inevitably favorable to the pre-Islamic Persia and Persian culture in general. He used Persian words or phrases even when an Arabic one would suffice.⁶⁰

There are many tales that include a *Simorg* in the *Shahnameh*, but its prominence is entwined with the family of Sam, Zal, and Rostam. All of whom will call upon the wisdom, guidance, or assistance of the *Simorg* at some point in the epic. It begins when Zal was born with white hair. Sam, Zal's father, felt despair and feared that God was punishing him. He proceeded to give orders to take Zal to the mountains and leave him there. This is where a *Simorg* found him, and although she initially approached Zal as potential food, God made the bird have pity over the child and decidedly raised him as one of her own.⁶¹ Years later, Sam had a nightmare about Zal and regretted his decision. So, he took off to the Alborz mountains to find him, and that is when he came across Zal and the *Simorg*. After exchanging words, Zal left with his father and two of the *Simorg's* feathers to burn in case he needs her.⁶²

⁵⁸ For more information on the creation of the *Shahnameh* and its creator please see: B.W. Robinson, *The Persia Book of Kings: An Epitome of the Shahnama of Firdausi*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, "Survival of Iranianness," 32.

⁶⁰ Robinson, *The Persia Book*, 7.

⁶¹ In Dick Davis's translation, this specific *Simorg* is feminized. It seems to distinguish this exact bird that nursed Zal from other *Simorgs*.

⁶² Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin House, 2016), 63-68.

Eventually, Zal assimilates into his new royal lifestyle and falls in love with a woman named Rudabeh. As she neared the end of her pregnancy, she began to have issues. When the time came, Rudabeh was in total pain, and Zal burned one of the *Simorg's* feathers for aid. She appeared and gave instructions to Zal that would result in the successful birth of a little boy named Rostam.⁶³ Later, when Rostam is a full-grown man, he became enemies with a seemingly unstoppable conqueror named Esfandiyar, who killed a *Simorg* during his seven trials.⁶⁴ Zal and Rostam burned the last feather to get the mighty *Simorg's* consultation on defeating Esfandiyar. Although she advised against killing him, by her love for Zal, she told them how to be successful which resulted in Esfandiyar's death.⁶⁵ Figure 11 shows a *Simorg* being slain by Esfandiyar during his trials, while in Figure 12 she is simply resting in a shady tree with her adopted son, Zal.⁶⁶

Later, Sufis employed the *Simorg* as a representative tool. In *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar, the *Simorg* is depicted as representing God, and all other birds take a pilgrimage to meet Him. Attar was a Sufi poet, and in this specific piece, he utilized birds to represent the inward journey one makes in the Sufi tradition. Shaked points out the similarities of inward-looking piety, which is a trend in Zoroastrianism and Sufism.⁶⁷ It may be inferred that for this reason, the *Simorg* was selected as a representation of inward-looking piety as it has connections to the origins of this trend and reflected well on the ideals of Sufism. Additionally, the poem mentions how the *Simorg* dropped a feather, and the feather has sacrality. This connects to the stories about the *Simorg* and the importance of their feathers in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. As well, the *Simorg* is described as having its origins in China.⁶⁸

⁶³ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 104-106.

⁶⁴ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 478.

⁶⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, 516-519.

⁶⁶ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*.

⁶⁷ Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism," 58.

⁶⁸ Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, ca. 1230, trans. Raficq Abdulla, (New York: Interlink Books, 2003).

The *Simorg* became correlated with the mythical bird commonly known as the Phoenix. In modern mythology, the Phoenix is a mythical bird that sets itself on fire only to be reborn from its ashes. There are two origins to the contemporary conception of a Phoenix, the *Benu* of Ancient Egypt and the *Fenghuang* of China. The name “phoenix” was established by Herodotus in the 5th century to describe a mythical bird sometimes seen in Egypt, and it now encapsulates both of these mythical birds. Ovid introduced the characteristic of rebirth in the early 1st century CE in his epic, *The Metamorphoses*.⁶⁹ The *Benu* originates in Egypt but is a distinctly different bird than the Phoenix, making it a precursor or an ancestor. It is closely associated with the sun and cosmology of Ancient Egypt. The *Fenghuang* is also associated with the sun, fire, warmth, and the color red, and it is known as the emperor of birds. It nests in the *wu t’ung*, or dryandra tree, and only appears in the world under peaceful rule or at the birth of a great sage. It diverges from modern characteristics of the Phoenix as the *Fenghuang* is immortal.⁷⁰

Both of these phoenixes have mythological motifs that are analogous to the *Senmurw* and *Simorg*. The *Saena* is known as the Sunbird in the *Avesta*, and this connection to the sun made the *Simorg* an ideal candidate for accumulating phoenix motifs. The *Saena* nests in the Tree of All Seeds, a motif similar to the *Fenghuang*’s dryandra tree with the *Simorg* (Figure 11). The *Fenghuang* is known as the emperor of the birds, a title also bestowed to the *Simorg* in *The Conference of the Birds*. Furthermore, the *Fenghuang* is associated with the births of great rulers, a motif that the *Simorg* is known to have as it was vital during the birth of Rostam.

In the artistic context, the *Simorg* adopted an iconographic similarity to the *Fenghuang* of China. Art historians have explored this iconographic connection and artistic relations between

⁶⁹ Joseph Nigg, *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xv- xvii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

Iran and China prompted by the Mongolian Empire. An early illustration of the *Simorg* is seen in the *Manafi-i Hayavan* by Ibn Bakhtishu ca. 1297/1299, or better known as the Morgan Bestiary as it is kept in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Yuka Kadoi, an art historian at the University of Vienna, highlights this exchange in her book *Islamic Chinoiserie* where she describes the *Simorg* illustrated in the Morgan Bestiary as having iconographic qualities akin to the Chinese Phoenix. As depicted in Figure 13, the bird is portrayed with these motifs rather than a physical description from the text due to its absence.⁷¹

In addition to its phoenix-like qualities, it has some elements similar to a rooster. This motif connects it to the previously mentioned rooster-like characteristics ascribed to the *Saena* in the *Avesta*. The *Fenghuang* is considered a royal icon, and this motif was emphasized during the *Simorg*'s usage by the Mongols. Figure 14 shows a tile illustrating a *Simorg* likely from the Ilkhanid palace, Takht-i Sulaymān. Figure 15 is an example of a *Simorg* with Chinese *Fenghuang* motifs from 1292-1293 CE during the reign of the Mongol Ilkhanate. The writing on the band surrounding the *Simorg* is Persian poetry, stating, “whose face is like the sun, if only the sun was adorned with musk.” By employing the sun along with the red background, this statement connects it to the characteristics of the *Fenghuang* and *Benu*. This adoption of Phoenix iconography by the *Simorg* was also used when the *Shahnameh* was first illustrated in the early 14th century (Figures 11 and 12).

The iconography and characteristics of the *Simorg* was not Islamic, but many of its attributes appealed to various Muslim communities. It is Persian symbol not a religious one because the purpose behind changing the *Senmurw* into the *Simorg* was to eliminate its direct relation to the

⁷¹ The artistic influx of Chinese motifs and iconography is a fascinating subject that is only now starting to be fully explored. Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom, previously of Boston College, as well as Robert Hillenbrand at Edinburgh University are wonderful scholars on early Islamic Art and Ilkhanid art. If you have further inquiries on this subject, I suggest delving into their work.

Saena of Zoroastrianism, not Islamize it. In doing so, it allowed the *Senmurw* and *Saena* to exist in a new form associated as a cultural bird of pre-Islamic Persia rather than a religious Zoroastrian beast.

“You hardly find a nation, with the exception of China, that in the course of its history has fallen so many times and then arisen again, phoenix-like from its ashes, with a show of new vigour and creativity.”⁷² Perhaps, it was for this reason that the *Senmurw* as it transitioned into the *Simorg* took on a phoenix-like representation as it was a reflection of how Persians felt. Some scholars argue that the *Simorg* directly symbolizes renewal, death and rebirth.⁷³

Rukh and Anqa

The changes in mythology and iconography from the *Senmurw* to the *Simorg* diffused into other mythical birds such as the *Rukh* and *Anqa*. The following section will explore how these mythical birds absorbed these changes and reflect how large-scale and well-known the redefinition of the *Senmurw* into the *Simorg* was.

The *Rukh* is described as an eagle-like bird so large that it can pick up elephants with its talons. This creature is most famous for its depiction in *A Thousand and One Nights* when Sindbad encountered them on two of his adventures. In his second voyage, Sindbad and his crew discovered a wonderful uninhabited island. This island was filled with luscious plants and animals, consequently putting Sindbad into a slumber. Later, he awoke to find his ship and crew gone. He began to search the island for a way to leave when he encountered a giant egg. As he was pondering its size, the sky suddenly blackened. He looked up to discover a giant bird and knew from the tales at sea that it was called the *Rukh*. Sindbad devised a plan to escape by

⁷² Yarshater, “Re-emergence of Iranian Identity,” 9.

⁷³ Tsur, “The Tale,” 356.

securing himself to the Rukh's ankle while it rested, intending to be carried away from the island to the mainland thereafter. His plan was perfectly executed.⁷⁴ In his fifth voyage at sea, Sindbad and his crew discovered another *Rukh* egg. Despite his warnings, the crew opened the egg, killed the baby, and ate it. The parents of the baby *Rukh* returned and saw what had happened to their child. They began a frenzy on the crew and their ships. As Sindbad and his crew attempted to escape, the *Rukhs* followed with giant boulders and threw them onto the ships, which sank them. Sindbad escaped by jumping off the ship and fleeing to a nearby island.⁷⁵ The author of *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*, Qazwini, recounts a story arguably similar to Sindbad's second voyage about the *Rukh* in his section on the Persian Sea in his 1280 manuscript.⁷⁶

The origins of *A Thousand and One Nights* are ambiguous, but scholarship has suggested theories over the origins of the stories and their accumulation. The first reference to this collection of tales comes from Mas'ūdī in 956 CE when he referred to stories translated from Persian, Greek, and Sanskrit in a book titled *Hazar afsana*, or *The Thousand Tales*. Scholars such as J. Von Hammer argue that the original collection must have come from Persia and India. Other scholars, such as S. De Sacy, assert that *A Thousand and One Nights* is not as ancient and not of Persian or Indian origin. Most academics studying the collection agree with von Hammer's take as it is evident through the characters' names that there is some origin in Persia. He suggests that the *Hazar afsan* was originally translated in the 9th century, then proceeded to be added to in 10th century Baghdad and finally 12th century Egypt.⁷⁷ In 1949, Nadia Abbot of the formerly known

⁷⁴ Wen-Chin Ouyang, ed. *The Arabian Nights: An Anthology*, (New York: Everyman's Library, 2014), 345-346.

⁷⁵ *The Arabian Nights*, 382-383.

⁷⁶ Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos*, 60-61.

⁷⁷ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Alf Layla Wa Layla," accessed January 19th, 2024. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/alf-layla-wa-layla>.

Oriental Institute (now Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures) at the University of Chicago, discovered the earliest known manuscript of *A Thousand and One Nights* in Cairo, Egypt. Known then as *A Thousand Tales*, it was dated to 879 CE. Additionally, the papyri had legal statements written on it. Abbott concluded that the manuscript is likely of Syrian origin and attests to *A Thousand and One Night's* popularity and extensive dissemination by the 9th century.⁷⁸

Outside of folktales, two famous travelers claimed to have either heard of the bird or encountered them. Marco Polo described the *Rukh* as a griffin based on the locals' description, but he did not see it himself. He is told that the birds are seasonal and associated with certain islands in the southern Asian seas.⁷⁹ While at the court of Kublai Khan, his envoys had returned from faraway islands and presented the great Khan with a *Rukh* feather.⁸⁰ The other traveler is Ibn Battuta, who claimed to have encountered a *Rukh*. He was on a Chinese ship when a large storm blew them off course, causing them to be lost at sea. Eventually, they saw a mountain rising into the air, believing they had finally found land, but later, daylight started to grow underneath it. The crew became extremely frightened, realizing the supposed mountain was a *Rukh*. Fortunately, a strong wind steered them from the bird when they were about ten miles away. Ibn Battuta never actually identified the *Rukh* as the ship did not get close enough, but it is clear that the sailors fully believed and feared it.⁸¹

The *Rukh's* large size is frequently showcased by its ability to carry elephants. This motif is present in the aforementioned Figure 8 which is of a Byzantine silk displaying a *Senmurw*. A

⁷⁸ Nabia Abbott, "A Ninth-Century Fragment of the "Thousand Nights" New Light on the Early History of the Arabian Nights," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1949), 129-164. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/542837>.

⁷⁹ Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016), 181-182.

⁸⁰ Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo The Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. by Sir Henry Yule, (The British Library, 1921), 411-421.

⁸¹ L.P. Harvey, *Ibn Battuta*, (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007), 96-97.

portion of the trunk of the elephant can be seen on the bottom left side of the fragment.

Unfortunately, only a small portion of this silk has been preserved, but experts at the Victoria & Albert Museum have compared it to other silks of similar design. In this comparison, they were able to guess with high certainty that the overall design would display this scene of attack.⁸²

The characteristics of the *Rukh* described in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta's accounts show a correlation to the *Senmurw* and *Simorg*. The importance of the feathers in the *Shahnameh* and *The Conference of the Birds* is expanded by Polo when he recounts a *Rukh* feather being presented to the great Khan. Moreover, Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo stated that the *Rukh*'s homeland is on an island in the seas south of Asia. This motif is seen in the Morgan Bestiary which specifies that the *Simorg* lives on an island (Figure 13).⁸³

The *Anqa* is an extremely large pre-Islamic bird with a life span of approximately 1,700 years, at the end of which it burns itself to rise again. It is similar to both the *Rukh* and *Simorg*, although, in an article by Ahmed Al-Rawi, he argues that the *Anqa* is more closely associated with the *Rukh* rather than the *Simorg*.⁸⁴ In Arab traditions, God created the *Anqa* as a perfect bird, but over time, it kept devouring other animals and taking children. The Arabs started to pray to God to stop this destruction, and He obliged. The *Anqa* was prevented from rising again at the end of its lifetime and eventually became extinct.⁸⁵ This rebirth motif directly correlates with the Phoenix. As well, the *Anqa* is described as red which is similar to the *Fenghuang*. This can be seen in a 1315 CE illustrated version of Qazwini's *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence* (Figure 16). Qazwini, originally written in 1280 CE, says the big red bird was once

⁸² "Woven Silk," 764-1893, Victoria & Albert Museum.

⁸³ Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie : The Art of Mongol Iran*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 138-139.

⁸⁴ Al-Rawi, "A Linguistic and Literary Examination," 112.

⁸⁵ Jane Garry, and Hasan El-Shamy, "Mythical Animals," in *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, (Routledge, 2005), 81.

responsible for stealing a bride away on her wedding day.⁸⁶ Also, note the rooster iconography and tail of Figure 11, similar to the *Simorg* in the Morgan Bestiary.

These beasts all have one common representation, an eagle. The eagle has been an important symbol in Jewish, Zoroastrian and Muslim cultures. In Judaism, it signifies divine and mystical power within the universe. In Zoroastrianism, the *Saena* is typically described as an eagle and represents royalty. The eagle motif has been found on items used in coronation ceremonies. On a coin, the Sasanian ruler Hormizd II, who reigned from 303-309 CE, is wearing a crown bearing an eagle symbol (Figure 17).⁸⁷

By analyzing and comparing the motifs of the *Rukh* and *Anqa*, it is clear that they both have similar characteristics to the *Senmurw* and *Simorg*. Hence, it acknowledges the significance of the changes that the *Simorg* underwent. Persian mythology also changed as Persian history changed. It was purged of its connection to Zoroastrianism, and reborn as a mythology solely of Persian culture. This evolution is fully realized by tracing the representation of Persian mythical birds from the *Saena* to the *Rukh* and *Anqa*.

Conclusion

When the Arab Muslims conquered Persia in the 7th century, Persians had to reconfigure their history to fit into their new Islamic world which required them to be both Persian and Muslim. Through a reconstruction of history, they could identify under both terms.⁸⁸ Art and literature were a clear and primary way to demonstrate this shift. Oleg Grabar argues that there is a purposeful large-scale change to the visual world of early Islamic Iran compared to its Sasanian

⁸⁶ Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos*, 62.

⁸⁷ Tsur, "The Tale," 356. It is difficult to say whether the eagle on the crown is supposed to represent the *Saena* or an eagle. Until more research is conducted, it is sufficient to say that it is an eagle.

⁸⁸ Savant, *The New Muslims*, 3.

past.⁸⁹ “The same image may take on, in time, a different meaning: the same concept may be expressed through different images.”⁹⁰ The transformation of the *Senmurw* to the *Simorg* is an ideal representation of the previous statement. It articulates a continuum of Sasanian concepts by tying itself to pre-Islamic Persia and insinuating an altered identity that can be expressed in the new Islamic world.⁹¹ This revision is entirely conceived when looking at the transformation and evolution of characteristics and iconography in the art and literature of the ancient Zoroastrian *Saena* into the *Senmurw*, then Ferdowsi’s *Simorg*, and later into the *Rukh* and *Anqa*.

⁸⁹ Oleg Grabar, “Arts of Iran in Late Antiquity,” in *Early Islamic Iran: The Idea of Iran*, vol. 5, Edmund Herzig and Sarah Stewart ed., (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 39.

⁹⁰ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 3.

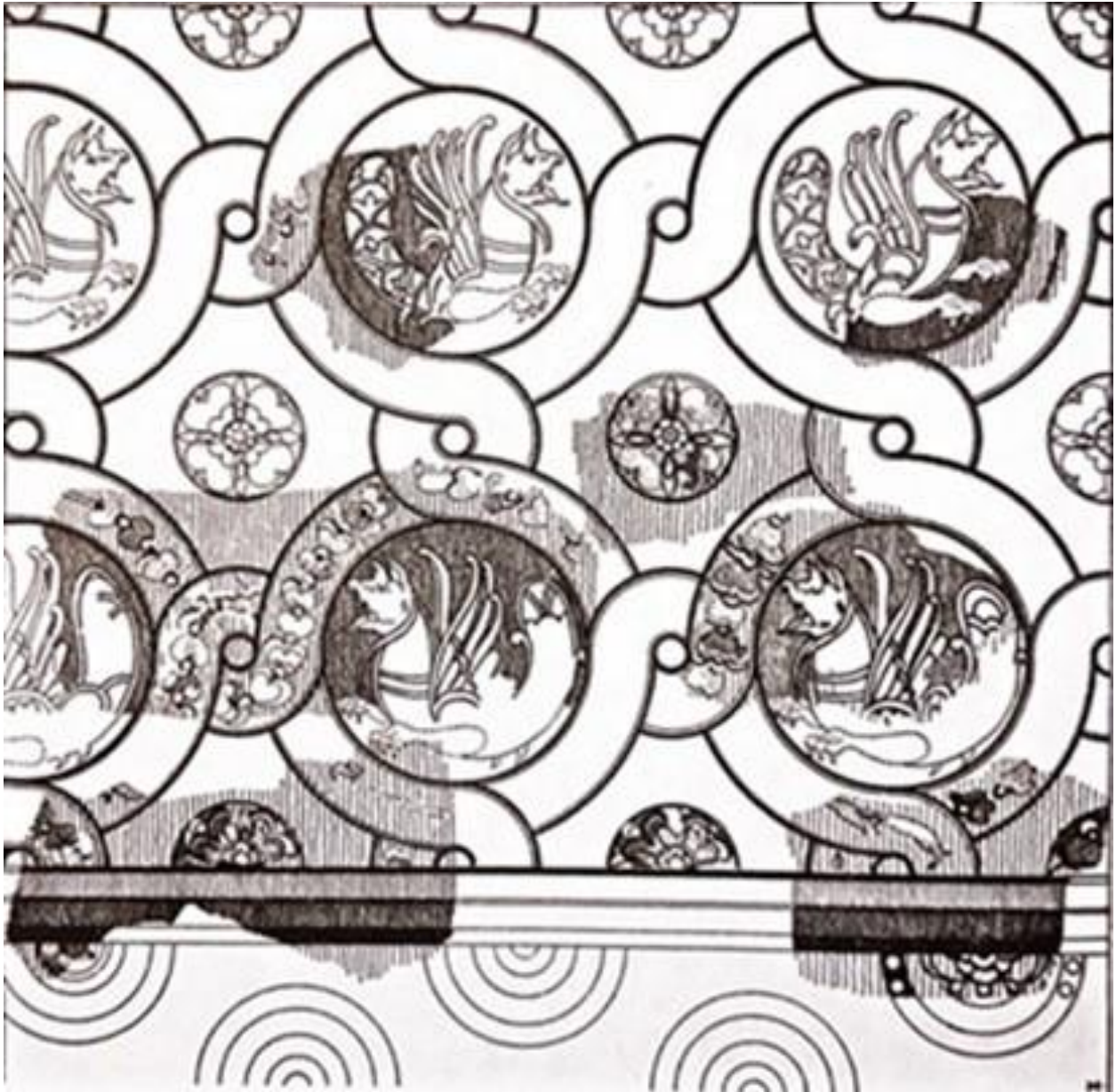
⁹¹ Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, 11.

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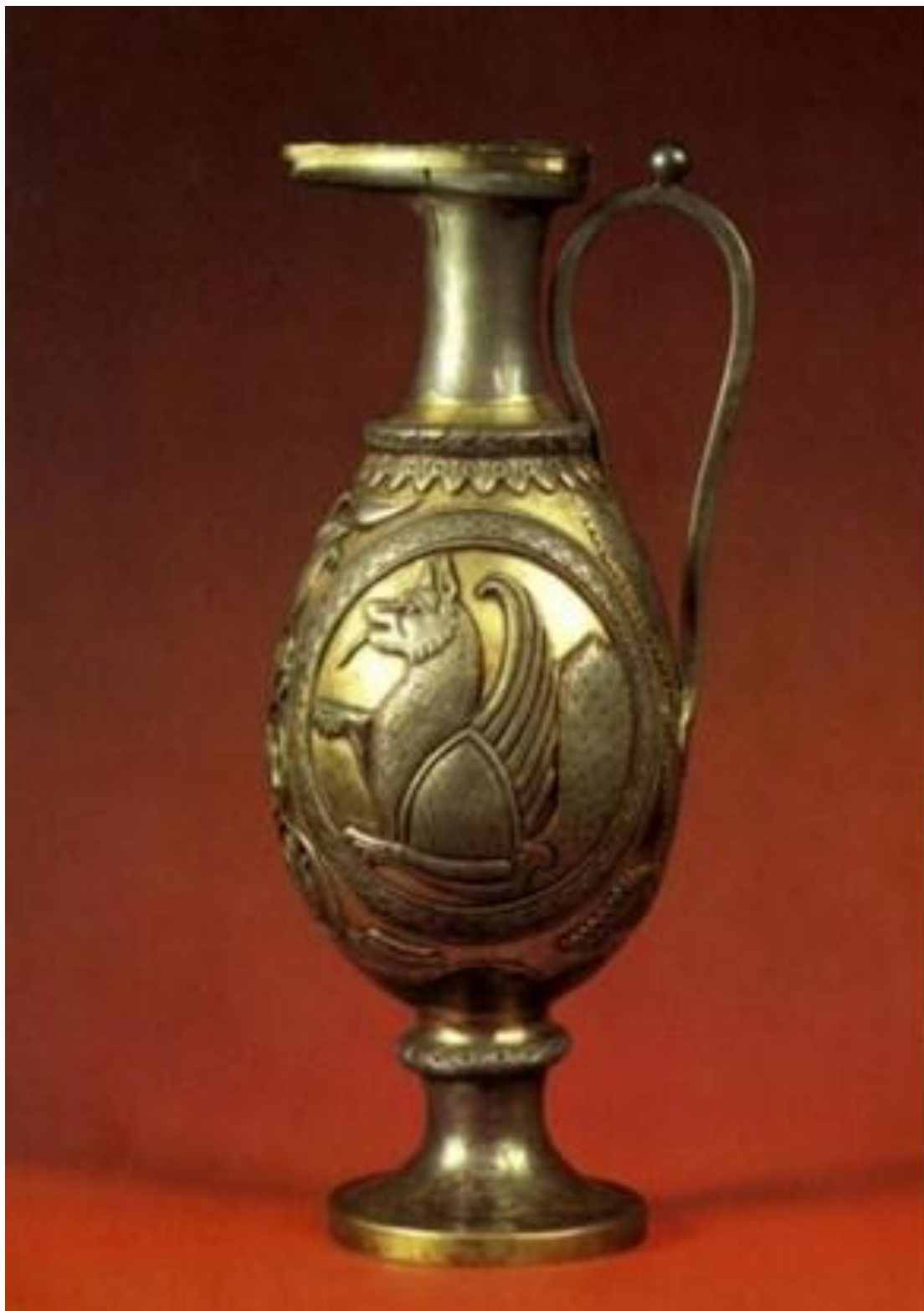


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