


The Symbolic Representation of the Simorgh in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh Based on Mircea Eliade's Theory of Mythology

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Abstract

In the illustrated manuscripts of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, the Simorgh is represented as a dual symbol—both sacred and demonic. Drawing on Mircea Eliade's theory of mythology, this duality contrasts the Simorgh's wisdom-bestowing role in the story of Zal with its destructive function in the Seven Labors. Eliade's approach interprets reality through the re-creation of primordial time, and the Simorgh's symbolic duality reflects the inherent paradox of the sacred—its simultaneous allure and terror. This study aims to analyze the symbolic role of the sacred and demonic Simorgh in Shahnameh illustrations through Eliade's theoretical framework. The central research question is: How has the Simorgh's symbolic representation, within the sacred-demonic duality, been shaped in illustrated manuscripts of the Shahnameh?

The research employs a descriptive-analytical method, with data gathered from library-based sources. The corpus consists of five prominent illustrations from distinguished Shahnameh manuscripts produced by Persian painting schools between the 8th and 10th centuries AH, each depicting the Simorgh in either sacred or demonic forms. The findings demonstrate that the illustrated Simorgh embodies the manifestation of the transcendent within the material world, expressing both functional duality and cosmic connection. On the one hand, it appears as a healing force and a source of life and order; on the other, it emerges as a destructive power—what Eliade terms the terrifying aspect of the sacred. As an axis mundi within Eliade's framework, the Simorgh appears at pivotal moments in the Shahnameh—birth, crisis, and death—thereby reviving archetypal patterns and transforming the epic from linear historical narration into sacred time.

Keywords: Ferdowsi's Shahnameh; symbolic motifs; Simorgh motif; mythology; Mircea Eliade.

1. Introduction

Symbols are powerful images that form networks of cultural concepts and myths within semantic and mythological clusters. These clusters emerge through creative literary processes and become part of humanity's collective cultural memory. One of the most enduring of such symbols is the Simorgh, which originated in pre-Islamic Iranian texts and persisted in the cultural memory of post-Islamic society, evolving into new forms within Persian poetic and mystical traditions. The Simorgh is a legendary bird that appears initially in Zoroastrian religious texts and later in Iranian epic literature. Among epic works, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* grants the Simorgh a particularly prominent and active role, especially in its illustrated manuscripts, where it receives significant visual and symbolic emphasis. Indeed, the Simorgh is one of the most celebrated figures in Iranian mythology. First mentioned in the Avestan texts, it attains a uniquely multifaceted presence in the *Shahnameh* due to the diversity of its mythological functions and visual representations. The variety in the depiction of this bird indicates that the Simorgh has become a central signifier within Iranian culture. Given its prominent role in the *Shahnameh*, rereading the symbolic codes embedded in its imagery enables contemporary audiences to better understand the mythological worldview of Iranians in past centuries. According to Mircea Eliade, in primitive and ancient societies, myths were regarded as absolute, sacred, and repeatable truths that narrated a sacred history.

Eliade argues that myth represents sacred history and recounts events that occurred in primordial time. From this perspective, the characters of mythic narratives are considered superior to ordinary humans, and the stories themselves are perceived as expressions of reality rather than imagination. Eliade further distinguishes between the sacred and the profane as two fundamental modes of existence: the sacred represents true reality, characterized by order and structure, while

the profane is heterogeneous, disordered, and lacking meaning. Given that the Simorgh is one of the most prominent symbols in Iranian mythological texts, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the integration of visual analysis with Eliade's mythological interpretation, supported by historical documentation, provides a valid methodological approach for uncovering the symbolic depth of this figure. Such an approach not only reveals the sacred dimensions of Iranian art but also facilitates the revival of national symbols within contemporary artistic discourse, underscoring the significance of the present study. Accordingly, this research aims to analyze the symbolic role of the Ahuraic (sacred) and demonic Simorgh in illustrated *Shahnameh* manuscripts through the lens of Eliade's mythology. The principal question is how the symbolic representation of the Simorgh's Ahuraic and demonic roles, as depicted in selected illustrated manuscripts, was shaped from Eliade's mythological perspective. It is hypothesized that, in *Shahnameh* illustrations from the 8th to the 10th centuries AH, the Simorgh's symbolic role is constructed through its association with the axis mundi and its connection to sacred power.

2. Literature Review

Relatively few studies have addressed the thematic focus of the present research. In his article "Investigating the Characteristics of the Simorgh in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*," Sabri (2024), using a descriptive-analytical method, concludes that the Simorgh is portrayed in the *Shahnameh* as a legendary being beyond the natural world—wise, knowledgeable, and aware of hidden secrets. As is common in mythological traditions, the Simorgh plays a decisive role in the fate of heroes and the unfolding of mythical events. Similarly, Fateh Dolatabadi (2022), in his study titled "An Analysis of the Character of the Simorgh in the *Shahnameh* and *Mantiq al-Tayr* Based on the Theory of the Mythical Mindset," employs content analysis to demonstrate that the divine aspect of the Simorgh encompasses healing, totemistic, protective, and revelatory

functions. However, he argues that the demonic aspect—primarily evident in epic texts, particularly the *Shahnameh*—represents a developed or transformed manifestation of the bird's totemistic function, reflecting its inherent behavioral and symbolic duality.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach. As the research seeks to generate applied knowledge with practical implications, it is developmental in nature. In terms of reasoning and interpretation, the study follows an analytical framework. The theoretical foundations and review of previous studies employ a descriptive-analytical method. Initially, authoritative domestic and international books and scholarly articles were examined. Relevant data were then extracted using a systematic note-taking technique, which informed the conceptual structure of the theoretical framework. The research corpus consists of five illustrations selected from distinguished illustrated *Shahnameh* manuscripts featuring the Simorgh motif: Small *Shahnameh*, Shiraz, Al-Inju School, 8th century AH *Shahnameh*, Shiraz, Al-Jalair School, 8th century AH *Shahnameh* of Mohammad Juki, Herat, Timurid School, 9th century AH *Shahnameh* of Ibrahim Sultan, Shiraz, Timurid School, 9th century AH *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, Tabriz, Safavid School, 10th century AH 4.

4. Findings

In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the Simorgh functions as a symbol of cultural continuity and resilience. Rooted in Sasanian and pre-Islamic traditions, this mythological bird experiences a form of rebirth in Islamic art—particularly in the illustrated *Shahnamehs* of the 8th to 10th centuries AH—thereby forging a symbolic link between Iran's mythological past and its historical present.

Eliade views myths as responses to collective anxieties regarding decline and chaos. Based on mythological narratives and visual

evidence related to the Simorgh, several key observations may be identified. First, the concept of the center of the world (axis mundi) in Eliade's mythology is clearly reflected in depictions of the Simorgh, especially when the bird is shown perched atop a mountain. The mountain functions as a cosmic axis, and the Simorgh acts as a mediator between the heavens (the supra-human realm) and the earth (the human realm), embodying both healing and destructive capacities. In this sense, the Simorgh simultaneously fulfills Ahuraic and demonic roles, reiterating what Eliade describes as the myth of the eternal return. Second, with respect to the hierarchy of the sacred and the manifestation of holiness, the Ahuraic Simorgh—particularly when descending from the sky or supporting a human figure—symbolizes divine grace intervening in the earthly realm. Eliade emphasizes that the sacred always possesses a dual nature: it is both attractive and perilous, and improper engagement with it may result in catastrophe. The exaggerated scale and imposing presence of the Simorgh visually express this ambivalence. Third, in manuscripts such as the *Shahnameh* of the Shiraz Al-Inju School and the *Shahnameh* of Ibrahim Sultan, where the Simorgh assumes a demonic role, the imagery reflects Eliade's notion that union with the divine is achieved not by avoiding chaos, but by courageously confronting and transforming it. Here, association with sacred power emerges through struggle rather than tranquility. The conflict between human figures and the Simorgh symbolizes humanity's inner struggle, leading toward self-knowledge and spiritual maturation. Conversely, in other manuscripts—such as the *Shahnameh* of the Shiraz Al-Jalair School, the *Shahnameh* of Mohammad Juki, and the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp—the Ahuraic Simorgh appears as a companion of sacred power. In these images, the bond between humans and the Simorgh represents liberation from temporal limitations through sacred coexistence. According to Eliade, true communion with the sacred occurs only in rare moments of

profound religious experience or symbolically through myth.

Finally, Eliade's concept of sacred time—a mythical time in which foundational events occur—is vividly expressed in scenes where humans confront or rely upon the Simorgh. These images transcend narrative illustration, returning the viewer to the primordial "first time." In doing so, they shift the Shahnameh from linear historical chronology into the realm of sacred time, where each event reenacts an eternal archetype.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the symbolic representation of the Simorgh in illustrated Shahnameh manuscripts through the lens of Eliade's mythology, it may be concluded that the Simorgh functions as a primary symbol of the sacred. It represents the manifestation of the transcendent within the material world and is defined by two fundamental characteristics: functional duality and cosmic connectivity.

On the one hand, the Simorgh appears as a nurturing and protective force, embodying the sacred as the source of life and cosmic order. On the other hand, in its confrontations with human figures, it assumes a destructive and demonic aspect—what Eliade refers to as the terrifying face of the sacred. This duality reveals the complex nature of holiness, which is simultaneously alluring and dangerous. Moreover, the Simorgh consistently occupies the position of the axis mundi. According to Eliade, myths manifest primordial time in order to restore cosmic balance. While the Simorgh signifies the presence of the sacred, it also underscores the alienation of human existence within a desacralized world. It illustrates humanity's limitations in confronting the sublime, allowing only fleeting, indirect encounters with transcendence as the sole possible form of communion. Ultimately, the Simorgh fulfills a dual role: it is both the guardian of the cosmic axis and its embodiment. Acting as a living bridge between earth and sky, the present and

eternity, it remains one of the most profound mythological symbols in Iranian visual and literary culture.

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Author's Contribution

The research was conducted solely by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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