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The Lotus in Central Asia: A Sassanian Motif in the Islamic Stucco Decoration

The pre-Mongolian Islamic architectural décor of Central Asia¹ features a widespread carved stucco (or *ganch*)² technique that dates back to the pre-Islamic art of Central Asian Sogdia³ and adjacent territories of the Middle East⁴. By the beginning of the Islamic period, stucco carving develops a broad range of vegetal motifs, among which the Lotus is especially prominent. The latter dates back to the Zoroastrian symbolism⁵ of the Achaemenid dynasty and

¹ Central Asia of the epoch (from the 8th century till 1220, i. e. between the Arab and Mongol conquests) comprises a number of historic and geographic regions whose borders were sometimes moving. Specimens of carved stucco are concentrated in the current territories of some of them: Transoxiana or Mawara'n-nahr (in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya interfluvium, or what is now the Republic of Uzbekistan, south-western and southern Kazakhstan, southern and south-western Kyrgyz Republic, and western and northern Tajikistan), Khurasan (southern Turkmenistan) and Dehistan (south-western Turkmenistan).

² 'Carved stucco', 'carved plaster', 'gach' or 'ganch' (in Tajik) are common terms long used by researchers of Oriental art. However, it is 'ganch' that became the established term applicable to the art of Central Asia. *Ganch*, or *gaj*, is the Central Asian name for a cementitious material made by firing local stone-like rock that contains 40 % to 70 % of gypsum (called alabaster stone) or from a mixture of gypsum and sand with natural loess admixture [35, pp. 11–12; 1, pp. 29–30]. The mortar thus obtained is applied to a brick wall (sometimes covered with clay first) in several layers, and ornament is carved before it hardens completely. Stucco can also be cast into a mould and dyed. In this paper, I use the term 'stucco', for I cite monuments from various Islamic countries that share this generic concept.

³ A pre-Islamic state entity mainly located in the Mawara'n-nahr territory in the eastern Amu Darya and Syr Darya interfluvium, at the centre of the Zarafshan valley (within the current State borders of Uzbekistan, the Sogd region of Tajikistan, and the Osh and Batken regions of Kyrgyzstan).

⁴ Early examples of stucco architectural décor date from the Achaemenid (6th to 2nd centuries B. C.), Parthian (3rd century B. C. to 3rd century A. D.) and Sassanid (3rd to 7th century) epochs. The brick walls in Persepolis were covered with a thick layer of plaster dyed with ashy colours [6, p. 45]. However, it is the mid-1st-century Parthian palace at Ashur that is generally considered the beginning of ornamental stucco [6, p. 45–46, 60]. Other monuments include the décor of Uruk at the village of Warka, Iraq; at the 2nd- and 3rd-century Qal'a-ye Yazdegerd complex in Kermanshah province, Iran, panels from the Kuh I Khwaja palace of the Parthian (1st century) and early Sassanid (3rd century) times [18, pp. 226–27]. Sassanid stucco includes: the Firuzabad palace [18, p. 197–98], 3rd-century Bishapur complex (B and D buildings) [18, pp. 195–96], 5th-century complex in Bandian, Dargaz, northern Khurasan [29], houses in Tepe Hissar south-west of Damghan in Iran, 5th- and 6th-century Kish palace in Iraq [8, p. 315, fig. 27, 35], 540, Taq-e Kasra Palace and 6th- to 8th-century dwelling houses near Ctesiphon in Iraq [7, pp. 33–46; 18, pp. 125–127, pp. 22–30, pp. 31–37, pp. 187–88].

⁵ In the Achaemenid and Sassanid periods, the lotus was an attribute of Anahita, goddess of water and fertility, symbol of good wishes and *farr* (or *Divine Glory*) [33, p. xi]. The Lotus flower was used to depict authority and good fortune, prosperity and land fertility, it also appears as a well-wishing emblem (the architectural decoration of Apadana palace (6th century BC), Taq-e Kasra Palace, Kish Palace, Taq-e Bostan (4th century)). The growth of lotus from clean waters is a sign of purity and potency. Since the lotus flower opens at dawn and closes at dusk it resembles the sun and it is considered as a sign of creation. For more information about these and other meanings in Zoroastrian symbolism, see monograph by Abolala Soudavar [33].

then re-interpreted in the art of Sassanid Iran, Sogdia in Central Asia, and the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates⁶.

Numerous studies are dedicated to succession between Sassanid and Islamic ornamentation and to the genesis of individual ornamental motifs. However, these either exclude the stucco monuments of Central Asia or have a limited coverage (*problem area*)⁷. In this study, I attempt to make a brief overview of the history of the Sassanid Lotus image in the stucco décor of pre-Mongolian Central Asia and to trace how the motif evolved between the 9th and 12th century (the Islamic period) (*objects*).⁸ The study follows a descriptive and historic approach. So, I aimed to sample Lotus images (*data collection*) from the stucco décor of the following times and regions:

- 1) 9th- to 12th-century Central Asia⁹,
- 2) 5th- to 7th-century Sassanid Iran¹⁰ and 8th-century Sogdia¹¹, Central Asia (predecessors),
- 3) 8th- to 12th-century Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan¹² (analogues from monuments that most researchers believe to have possibly fostered the development of Central Asian iconography).

⁶ Stucco became an ideal means for decorating vast surfaces of the palaces erected by the Umayyad Caliphs in the 8th century (Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Kharana, Qasr Umawi), and by the Abbasid Caliphs in Samarra, mid-9th century. The high status of the palaces in the central cities of the Islamic world meant that this kind of architectural décor easily found its way to the outlying lands of Islam, especially as Central Asia had its own pre-existing / pre-Arab tradition of stucco decoration.

⁷ In foreign literature, Central Asian stucco is mainly known from the monuments at Afrasiyab (a pre-Mongolian city site in Samarkand), Dehistan, Varakhsha, Termez, Huttal' (including but not limited to publications of S. Flury [11], E. Kohn-Wiener [17], P. Siemon [31], Ch. Wilkinson [37, pp. 104, 125–127, 142, 198, 200, 202, 212–213, 238, 241, 262] etc.) while in Mawara'n-nahr alone they number twenty-six.

⁸ The most representative monuments were created during this period, when the region was nominally part of the Abbasid Caliphate but actually ruled by the local Samanid, Ghaznavid and Karakhanid dynasties. The upper limit of its chronology corresponds to the technique's decline after the Mongol conquest of 1220, while its lower limit is the 9th century when the region's earliest stucco was made in the Islamic period. This period, being a pre-Mongolian period of Islam in Central Asia, is included into two broad chronological categories of the Islamic lands (Early Islamic period (roughly 650 to 1000) and Medieval Islamic period (roughly 1000 to 1250), according to R. Ettinghausen, O. Grabar and M. Jenkins-Madina [10, p. VII]). In Central Asia this period corresponds to Early Middle Ages (5th- to 10th-century) and High Middle Ages (11th- to 17th-century). I find it important to note that the 8th-century décor from the palace of the Bukhar Khudas (early Mediaeval rulers of Bukhara) on the Varakhsha city site, while dating from the time of the Arab conquest by 750, is considered the last stucco work of pre-Islamic Sogdia and the only one to reach us. More information will follow.

⁹ The 977–78 Arab-Ata mausoleum (Tim village in the Bukhara oasis), 12th-century Magoki-Attari mosque (Bukhara), 10th–11th-century Shir-Kebir (or Mashhad-i-Misriyan) mosque (Dehistan, Turkmenistan), 9th–12th century Jami' mosque on the Afrasiyab city site, Samarkand (hereinafter referred to as 'Samarkand Jami' Mosque'), 12th-century Termez palace (southern Uzbekistan) and 9th–11th-century palace in Hulbuk (Huttal, Tajikistan), 9th–10th century mansion in Sayed (same location), 11th-century Rabat-i Malik Caravanserai (between Samarkand and Bukhara).

¹⁰ 3th-century Bishapur (Iran), 5th-century Tepe Hissar (Damghan, Iran), 5th-century Kish palace and 6th–8th-century Ctesiphon (Umm-az-Sa'atir, Ma'aridh, Tell Dahab) (both in Iraq).

¹¹ Stucco of the Varakhsha palace is described in the text.

¹² Monuments in Syria (724–27 Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, 8th-century capitals from Raqqa), Palestine (724–43 Khirbat al-Mafjar), Jordan (710 Qasr al-Kharana, 724–744 Qasr Umawi), Iraq (9th-century Samarra (Palace of al-Mu'tassim, the Bab al-Amma)). Iranian monuments: late Sassanian-Umayyad Teppe Mille (or Tappe Mill, Teppe Mel) (Ray-Varamin), Nizamabad (Ray-Varamin) and Chal Tarkan (Esqabad, Ray-Varamin); 10th-century

I analysed the formal characteristics of ornament on thirty monuments: composition, scale, proportions, location, symmetry type, rhythm, and carving technique. The data obtained are collated chronologically; regional variants of the motif are identified and compared with previously classified ones, and their evolution vectors are described (*data synthesis*). The results are tabulated in Tables 1 and 2 that only include the most typical and representative images, which can be used for architectural conservation projects, as well as serve as a starting point for studying other floral motifs along the same lines.

Iconography that Emerged Towards the Pre-Mongolian Islamic Period

After the Arab conquest, the pagan symbolism of the Lotus is discarded, but the image itself remains, with minor changes. Eighth to tenth century Central Asian stucco shows almost all varieties¹³ of its Sassanid iconography (Table 1):

- 1) The lotus as a classical water lily (lat. *Victoria*, *Nymphaeaceae*) flower [18, pl. 21,4; 24,2; 87,2,3] and variations of it in the form of composite flowers, where
- 2) the flower head merges with a palmette [18, pl. 88,1], or is
- 3) transformed with an anthemion [18, pl. 86,2; 91,5] or,
- 4) acanthus [18, pl. 66,2], or,
- 5) suggested via derivatives (by selecting and separately transforming any component of the flower: stamina, pistil, seed-bud, and bract cup, with an exaggerated number of seeds) [18, pl. 15,3], or
- 6) flanked with Sassanid paired wings [18, pl. 83,5].

I found the seventh version of Sassanid iconography as well (with the Lotus decomposed, as though taken apart with a naturalist's practised hand, fragmented and sketched in this form)—not in stucco but in 10th–11th-century ceramics from Merv [37, fig. 3.70-d]¹⁴.

Most types of the iconography (Nos. 1–4)¹⁵ occur in the stucco of the Varakhsha palace near Bukhara¹⁶. Chronologically, it dates from the time of the Arab conquest¹⁷ (initially carved in the first half and renovated in the second half of the 8th century)¹⁸. However, it is considered

Nishapur (Tepe Madrase, Sabz Pushan, Vineyard Tepe), 10th-century Jurjir Portal in Isfahan; 960 Nayin Jami' Mosque, 8th–10th-century Seymareh mosque, 12th-century Kuh-i Banan Madrasa, 11th–14th-century Zavara Pamir Mosque, and 1119 Haydariyya Mosque. In Afghanistan, the Hajji Piyadah Mosque (or Mosque of Nine Domes, Tariqh Khaneh, Noh Gonbad), circa 9th century.

¹³ As classified by Arthur U. Pope and Phillis Ackerman [25, fig. 900].

¹⁴ Examples of such iconography are numerous in Nishapur (Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers: 37.40.44, 38.40.251, 38.40.252, 40.170.686). Nishapur and Merv were parts of Khurasan and had close historic and cultural ties, particularly due to the caravan road between them, which suggests possible existence of such iconography in the missing stucco of Khurasan that is now part of Central Asia.














¹⁵ Small size fragments that fail to locate the lotus in the overall arrangement. A monograph by T. G. Tsvetkova [35] deals with the reconstruction of such ornaments, mainly on carpets.

¹⁶ The Varakhsha city site is located 40 km north-west of Bukhara. The walls of its ceremonial space, the *iwan*, with the Bukhara ruler's throne place, were covered with stucco.

¹⁷ Mawara'n-nahr was finally conquered by 715 A. D. under the Khurasan governor Qutaiba ibn Muslim.

¹⁸ There is some disagreement among authors as to when the stucco was applied in two stages. The first researcher, archaeologist V. A. Shishkin, identified four periods [31, pp. 57, 62, 71–72, 75–77, 82–84, 236, 238]. The first one is dated between the late 5th and the 6th century (when the palace's premises were built). The sec-

Table 1. Adoption of pre-Islamic Lotus Iconography in Central Asia, stucco

<i>Adoption of pre-Islamic Lotus Iconography in Central Asia, stucco</i>			
<i>No</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sassanian¹⁹</i>	<i>Sogdian²⁰ and Islamic²¹ (Central Asia)</i>
1	Classical water lily (lat. <i>Victoria</i> , <i>Nymphaeaceae</i>) flower		
2	The flower head merges with a palmette		
3	Transformed with an anthemion		
4	Transformed with an acanthus		
5	Suggested via derivatives (by selecting and separately transforming any component of the flower)		
6	The flower is flanked with Sassanid paired wings		
7	Decomposed, fragmented and sketched in this form		Has not been found in stucco

ond period was between the 6th and late 7th century (when these were refurbished), then the palace burned out after the Arab incursion and fell into disuse in late 7th and early 8th century. In the third period, the iwan and the southern enfilade were built and decorated with stucco during the rule of Bukhar Khuda Bunyat between 775 and 782 A. D. [31, pp. 82–84]. The fourth period was in the 10th and 11th centuries when buildings appeared on iwan ruins after protracted abandonment. V. A. Shishkin notes that the décor was applied in two layers at different times, but admits that the period elapsed between the application of the earlier and later stucco cannot be identified for lack of information [31, pp. 174–177]. The earlier décor is present in small numbers, and its ornamental motifs are illegible [31, pp. 235–236, tabs. I and II]. Later studies based on the findings of an expedition by the State Museum of the East (Moscow) relocated and re-dated the stucco. According to archaeologist T. G. Alpatkina (named Tsvetkova in her publications after 2012), the iwan was built in the first period (late 5th

the only surviving Sogdian stucco monument and a pinnacle of this art of pre-Islamic Central Asia. The monument incorporated²² the Sassanid iconography of the Lotus including its special plastics²³, albeit in its local reading with its heavier and more reserved interpretation of vegetal forms.

The iconographic scheme No. 5 is the most persistent one, traced in a number of 9th — to 12th-century monuments (from the mihrab in the Samarkand Jami' mosque to the Magoki-Attari mosque and the mansion in Sayed and Termez palace).

The scheme No. 6 is found in just one Central Asian monument, on the rear wall of the smaller arched niche of the Shir-Kebir mihrab. It did not become widespread. This example may be so unique because the monument's décor originates from an earlier mihrab at the Nayin Jami' Mosque. Otherwise, both monuments may share a common predecessor that has not survived until this day²⁴.

The Iconography Development Vectors in Pre-Mongolian Islamic Period

Thus, by the 10th century Central Asian stucco came to actively employ six types of Lotus motifs dating back to Sassanid iconography. Until the 12th century, they would evolve on their own in five directions (Table 2). I shall now examine each of their lines of development.

1. Sassanid iconography adopted, with the rapport rescaled and relocated in the overall composition (Table 2, No. 1).

The Sassanid Lotus was usually placed in large flower head form at the centre of the composition (Tepe Mille columns, Kish panel [18, pl. 79,4]) or into a multipartite Tree of Life centrally located on a wall panel (Ctesiphon panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number: 32.150.20). Both schemes were borrowed in the Islamic period.

The first one found its way into the arched niches of the 8th and 10th centuries, where a big flower head of an elongated unopened bud is placed on the rear walls of arched mihrab niches of Samarra [14, abb. 167, orn. 167] and the Samarkand Jami' mosque, where it still retains Sassanid realism and special plastics. A century later, in one of the niches of the Arab-Ata Mausoleum, it tends to be more schematic already. After the 10th century, it is no longer used in

and 6th century) and decorated with the early stucco in 730–50 AD, not under Bunyat but during his predecessors' rule (under Toghshada I who ruled from 706\7 till 738\9 or under Qutaiba, in 739–750) [3, pp. 89–91; 35, p. 11]. According to A. I. Naymark, the early stucco dates from Bunyat's time (753–782 or 751–782\3) [20, p. 534; 19]). According to T. G. Alpatkina, the iwan was repaired after the fire and its décor renovated under Bunyat in 760–80 [35, p. 11; 3, pp. 90–91]. According to A. I. Naymark, the late stucco perished with the palace in 942–3 (time of the enthronement of Nukh ibn Nasr, great-grandson of Ismail Samani) [21, pp. 166, 168]; according to T. G. Alpatkina, that happened in late 9th century [2, p. 67]. The carving was knocked off the iwan walls, and its shatters went into the spoil heaps with the brick [3, p. 87].

¹⁹ Nos. 1–5, 7 [25, fig. 900]), Kish (No. 6), author's sketch.

²⁰ Varakhsha palace (Nos. 1–4) [35, figs. 16, 48].



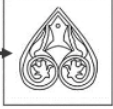



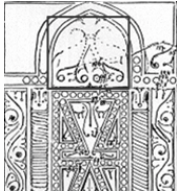













²¹ Samarkand Jami' mosque (No. 5), mansion in Sayed (No. 5), the Magoki-Attari mosque (No. 5) and Termez palace (No. 5), Shir-Kebir (No. 6), all author's sketches.




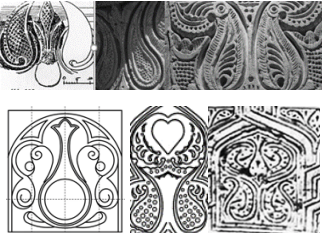



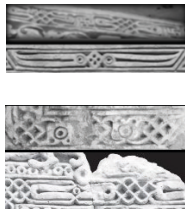

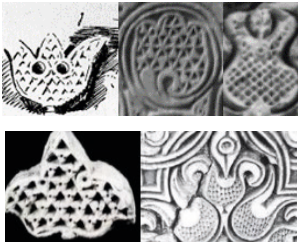
²² The new studies made by the Bukhara Archaeological Expeditions in recent years find more and more signs of the Sassanids' political and cultural influence in the Bukhara oasis [22].

²³ The Lotus leaves get thicker, curl, and droop, but their arrangement remains clear and well-organised.

²⁴ The earliest example is the rear wall of the niche at Qasr Umawi [28].

Table 2. The Iconography Development Vectors in Islamic Period, stucco

<i>The Iconography Development Vectors, Islamic Period, stucco</i>			
No	Description	Sassanian	Islamic (upper row — Middle East; bottom row — Central Asia)
1	Sassanid iconography adopted, with the rapport rescaled and relocated in the overall composition	Tree of Life ²⁵ 	  
		Large flower head ²⁶  	 
2	New ornamental compositions	Circular patterns ²⁷  	   
		Geometric patterns ²⁸  	   

<p>3</p>	<p>Altered morphology (reshaping)</p>	<p>Bract cup — scrolls²⁹</p>		
		<p>Bract cup — buta³⁰</p>		
<p>4</p>	<p>Adoption of Sassanid symmetry (repeating elements spread evenly along one axis) and introduction of a new (mirror-like) type of symmetry</p>	<p>Ci-devant symmetry³¹</p>		
		<p>New symmetry³²</p>		
<p>5</p>	<p>Changing carving technique</p>	<p>Triangular and diamond-shaped³³</p>		

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Central Asia, while being infrequently used in Iranian mihrabs in the post-Mongolian period as well (Kuh-i Banan Madrasa [15, pls. 9, 72], Zavara Pamir Mosque [38]) [15, pp. 80–82]³⁴.

The second scheme incorporates the Lotus into a composite Tree of Life. Under the Sassanids it is often tripartite, with vine, Lotus, palmette, and acanthus leaves protruding symmetrically from its stem and with paired animals standing in front [24, pl. 172D; 25, fig. 907 a-e]. In the Islamic period, the Lotus is still an integral part of the Tree of Life and stays symmetrical and multipartite. However, the motif is scaled down, and realistic elaboration of thin petals superimposed on one another gives way to austere chisel lines that outline the seeds and a mesh ornament on the flower's surface [18, pl. 66,3]. Moreover, from the central composition of the panel it moves to its periphery and often plays a subordinate role. This process is quite visible in the arched windows of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, upper and middle mihrab niches of the Nayin Jami' Mosque [24, pl. 267] and in the frieze of the later Shir-Kebir mihrab (both monument have similar décor programmes), as well as Sayed walls (Room 17 [16, figs. 69, 70]). Apparently, this composition never became widespread in Central Asia, as it was never used after the 11th century. Two centuries later, the composition of the arched niche in the Nayin mihrab is repeated in the rectangular frame of the 1119 Haydariyya Mosque mihrab [13].

These examples reflect the decline of Sassanid iconography, as the single big rapport is scaled down, fragmented and multiplied (in frieze ribbon ornaments) and also moved from the centre of the composition to its periphery.

2. *The Lotus incorporated into new ornamental compositions: circular and geometric patterns (Table 2, No. 2).*

The Lotus is part of the pre-Islamic Tree of Life as well as new ornamental compositions introduced in the 9th and 10th centuries, namely concatenated circles and geometric patterns.

The motif of concatenated circles and woven guilloche is known from as early as the Sassanid stucco of Ctesiphon [26, pl. 178]³⁵. Since then, rings linked by a spiral-shaped swirl were used in all materials, especially in textiles and toreutics [10, ills. 198, 202, 276, 398, 399]. In stucco, the Sassanid endlessly rounded swirl and guilloche merge in Abbasid Samarra of the 9th

²⁵ Ctesiphon (No. 1 [18, pl. 24,2]), Nizamabad and Shir-Kebir (No. 1, both author's sketch).

²⁶ Tepe Mille (author's photo), Kish (No. 1 [18, pl. 79]), Samarra (No. 1 [14, abb. 167]), Arab-Ata (No. 1, author's sketch), Sayed (No. 1, author's sketch), Samarkand Jami' Mosque (No. 1 author's sketches).

²⁷ Ctesiphon [26, pl. 178] [pl. 61,3], Nayin (left and right) [25, fig. 912], Samarra (in the middle) author's sketch, Shir-Kebir (author's photos).

²⁸ Ctesiphon [18, pls. 46,1; 89,7; abb. 92]; Samarra [14, abb. 116, orn. 118; abb. 152, orn. 153; abbs. 157–163], Termez and Magoki-Attari (both author's photos and sketches).

²⁹ Bishapur [18, pl. 91], Syria [8, fig. 46], Qasr al-Kharana [27], Nishapur [37, fig. 3.28], Samarkand (author's sketch).

³⁰ Ctesiphon [18, pl. 10, 5], Samarra [14, abb. 283], Hajji Piyadah and Nishapur, Arab-Ata, Shir-Kebir (all author's photos), Termez [2, ill. 53a, p. 150].

³¹ Ctesiphon [18, pl. 57,3,4], Samarra, Nayin, Rabat-i Malik (all author's photos), Termez [2, ill.7, p. 150].

³² Ctesiphon [18, pls. 15,3; 19,3; 36,6; 84,4], Nayin, Nishapur (all author's photos), Termez [2, ill. 49v, p. 129; ill. 50g, p. 130], Hulbuk [16, fig. 28].

³³ Tepe Mille [18, pl. 97,1], Samarra [14, abb. 272, orn. 271], Nishapur [37, ill. 2.26], Nayin (author's photos), Termez [2, ill. 35, p. 158], Sayed [16, fig. 88].

³⁴ Incidentally, an Egyptian stucco ornament inspired by Samarra shows the same trend, e.g. at the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo [10, ill. 296].

³⁵ A similar motif is present in the 8th-century stucco of Khirbat al-Mafjar [10, ill. 59].

century, then re-appear, in a more sophisticated form, in the Nayin Jami' Mosque [10, ills. 159, 161, 162] and Nishapur [37, figs. 3.25, 3.28] (Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers: 40.170.443) and first appear in Central Asia at the turn of the 11th century (Shir-Kebir mihrab). Such patterns are composed of guilloche, vine leaves, pomegranate, and Lotus.

The lotus incorporated into the new geometric patterns of Samarra [14, abb. 116, orn. 118; abb. 152, orn. 153; abbs. 157–163] becomes fully stylised and graphic (in the pre-Islamic period, its geometric organisation would place the Lotus into a mesh ornament [18, abbs. 88, 92, 93; pl. 46,1]). The panels of the 10th-century Samanid palace at Afrasiyab, inspired particularly³⁶ by the geometric patterns of Samarra, could well be expected to inscribe the Lotus motif into multi-beamed stars, circles, squares, and polygons. However, the vegetal ornament of that monument is still archaic and follows the Sogdian ornamental traditions (spirals and S-shaped swirls), while its palmettes are close to the Umayyad specimens from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi. That is because the vegetal forms would take much longer to change, although the capital city stucco décor inspired carvers on the outskirts of the Islamic world as well.

It was not until the 12th century that the Lotus was included, among other vegetal forms, in the geometric patterns of Central Asia (full-fledged *girikhs* already):³⁷ those on the façade of the Magoki-Attari mosque and on the Termez palace panels. In the former monument, the Lotus is an archaicised one, Sassanid in plastics and iconography, with an emphasised pistil and drooping petals³⁸. In the latter one, it follows the trends of its time, with the floral forms being subordinate to geometry.

3. Altered Lotus Morphology (Reshaping) (Table 2, No. 3).

The deep bract cup (leaves under the flower) developed in the Sassanid period (Ctesiphon, Bishapur [18, pls. 10, 5; pl. 91, 5–6]) is now separated and interpreted as surrounding leaves that may turn into scrolls (capitals from Syria [8, fig. 46], Qasr al-Kharana, Room 50 [27], Nishapur [37, fig. 3.28], Samarkand Jami' Mosque) or paired paisleys (*buta*). A *buta* is basically an oval with one end sharpened and curved (by that time, such interpretation had long been used in Syrian textiles and Samarran stucco)³⁹. This shape is close to the oval leaves found in Sassanid silver bowls, on silk, and in Samarra, Hajji Piyadah Mosque stucco [14, abb. 232, orn. 219; abb. 255, orn. 237], [23, tabs. 4, 33, 52, 60, upper row]. According to some authors, the *butas* may be a later transformation of lotus stamina [25, p. 2711] as seen from Nishapur stucco (Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers: 37.40.43). In short, multiple interpretations preclude a definitive conclusion.

³⁶ There were some other sources of inspiration as well: Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi [9, ill. 27], Qasr al-Kharanah (Room 59) [5, pp. 96–105], carved wood of the early 9th century (a wooden panel from Takrit, Iraq, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number: 33.41.1a–e), the columns of the Nayin Jami' Mosque and Nishapur [37, figs. 3.33–3.35; 26, pl. 269D]). Those compositions originate from a common source and became widespread in decorative and applied arts (late Sassanid textiles [26, pl. 199], book frontispieces in 9th–10th-century Egypt and Tunisia [9, ills. 103, 105]) as well as architecture.

³⁷ Special mathematical arrangements of geometric figures on radiate meshes.

³⁸ In this monument, the Lotus breaks out of the general schematisation trend.

³⁹ Their genesis originates from Sassanid stucco and then the Mshatta palace; at later times, they occur on a wooden panel from Ain el Sir made in the second half of the 8th century and now kept in Cairo; in strongly stylised form, on minbar panels at the late 8th-century Kairouan mosque; and ultimately stylised in Samarra stucco and in lustre pottery where they became parts of abstract décor [18, abb. 138; 8, figs. 6, 10].

In Central Asia, these transitional forms of the Lotus, with its bract separated, can be traced in 10th–12th-century monuments: the smaller mihrab niche of the Shir-Kebir mosque⁴⁰, niches of the Arab-Ata Mausoleum and, in a most stylised form, at the Termez palace. These examples indicate some affinity between the lotus and *buta* motifs but fail to clarify the origin of paired *butas*.

4. *Changing Rules of Symmetry (Table 2, No. 4).*

Besides, there is evolution towards more complicated symmetry patterns in the margins. Parallel transfer of a vertically arranged rapport (with repeating elements spread evenly along one axis), characteristic of the 6th-century Sassanids (Ctesiphon [18, pls. 15,3; 19,3; 36,6; 57, 3,4]) on the one hand, develops in Khirbat al-Mafjar [9, ill. 58], Seymareh mosque, Samarra, Rabat-i Malik, and Termez; on the other hand, it gives way to more sophisticated mirror symmetry, and the rapport is arranged horizontally.⁴¹ This process is first observed in 9th–10th-century Abbasid monuments (Nayin Jami' Mosque, Sabz Pushan at Nishapur), and then in 10th–12th-century Central Asia (Hulbuk and Termez).

5. *Changing Carving Technique (Table 2, No. 5).*

Under the Sassanids, opening Lotus petals were engraved using hatchwork on stucco [18, pl. 97,1] and metal [34, figs. 66, 67, 68 [25], S-271]. In the first centuries of the Islamic period, a special elaboration technique prevails that uses grooves of triangular and diamond-shaped section to achieve a peculiar play of light and shadow. This is mainly applied to the Lotus in all the lands of the Abbasid Caliphate (from Iraq with Samarra to Tajikistan with its mansion in Sayed) [14, abb. 272, orn. 271], [37, fig. 2.26], [4, ill. 35, p. 158], [16, fig. 88]. For comparison, leaves of other plants are engraved in shallow hash notches, and pomegranate fruit using round holes⁴².

A more complicated carving technique means that Lotus surface is fragmented and its shape gets completely stylised to obey geometric forms. The botanic accuracy previously pursued is finally discarded. The bud and stem are no longer linked via the swirl, with the pattern elements now determined by geometric forms. In this form, the Lotus last appears in Central Asian stucco at the Termez palace. The Mongol invasion of 1220 that led to a temporary decline of building and the leading role of polychromic glazed décor in the second half of the 13th century combined to actually displace stucco from architectural décor.

Conclusion

The Sassanid Lotus iconography was apparently adopted by Sogdian stucco with minimal re-interpretation of the plastics. The only example of Sogdian 8th-century stucco⁴³ that reached us contains four types of Sassanian iconography; two more are found on monuments posterior

⁴⁰ These show a conventional outline of the lotus cup juxtaposed with Sassanid paired wings; such winged lotus iconography is known from as early as 5th century Kish stucco [18, pl. 10,5].

⁴¹ One exception is an archaicised motif in the 12th-century Ribat Sharaf frieze [10, ill. 238].

⁴² A choice probably resulting from adherence to the Sassanid traditions (all those elaboration types are represented in Ctesiphon, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers: 32.150.57, 32.150.73, 32.150.61, 32.150.56, 32.150.68, 32.150.80, 32.150.65) and in Sassanid metal [34, fig. 36 [18], S-6; fig. 69, 70 [25], S-271].

⁴³ It is incorrect to limit Central Asian Lotus exclusively within the circle of the Iranian monuments. Since it was depicted in the local Sogdian architectural decoration, including stucco (the Varaksha palace). It is the only surviving stucco monument of that time, which incorporated the Sassanid Lotus iconography and its special plastics, albeit in its local reading with its heavier and more reserved interpretation of vegetal forms.

to the Arab conquest. For over four centuries, the Lotus motif was re-interpreted and evolved on its own along five vectors before it finally became history:

- 1) the rapport scaled down and moved from the centre of the composition to periphery;
- 2) the motif incorporated into a new composition scheme (based on concatenated circles and geometric patterns) with the vegetal forms subordinated to geometric ones (through stylisation and schematisation);
- 3) plant morphology altered by separating the bract leaves that turned into scrolls and paisleys;
- 4) symmetry and
- 5) Lotus surface elaboration technique getting more sophisticated.

Its development proceeded:

- 1) from adoption and minimal reinterpretation of the Sassanid tradition (which culminated in Sogdian stucco) to the development of a new iconography by altering plant morphology in the 10th century and by introducing new composition schemes based on concatenated circles (in the 10th and 11th centuries) and geometric patterns (in the 12th century);
- 2) from 8th-century Sassanid plastics (with characteristically thickened petals and stems, and a fringe added) — away from botanical accuracy and towards complete schematisation, graphic and austere lines of the 12th century.

Those trends follow the processes that were going on in Umayyad and Abbasid art; however, in Mesopotamia and Syria the changes were more rapid but slower on the eastern outskirts of the Islamic world. For example, in the western lands the Lotus was introduced into the new composition schemes based on concatenated circles, symmetry and carving technique became more complicated in the 9th and 11th century and in the eastern parts, since the 10th and 11th–12th centuries. This evolution was common for all lands of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates (taking into account that the capital city's stucco décor inspired carvers in Central Asia with a bit of lag). As a result, the Sassanid iconography, composition, scale, symmetry, and carving technics were reinterpreted. After such reinterpretation a few basic pre-Islamic elements were still recognizable (a large flower head form, a Tree of Life, circular patterns, developed deep bract cup). The Lotus became subordinate to geometry (due to geometric ornamentation development), occupied only a very modest place among a broad range of new vegetal motifs.

The specific features of the Central Asian Lotus are as follows: not all types of the Sassanid iconography were adopted (Table 1, No. 7), the motif (both its archaized and stylized forms) was included into *girikhs*⁴⁴ on the façades and interior panels (Table 1, No. 2).

Thus the Central Asian Lotus embodies all the above influences (Sassanian, Sogdian, Umayyad and Abbasid)⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ Which are specific and are subject matter of another research.

⁴⁵ Roman and Byzantine tradition does not have any influence on this iconography. Pre-Islamic Central Asian art adopted and reinterpreted (6th- to 8th-century) from the Classic art an acanthus, a palmette, a vine leaf and a vine scroll.

This research serves both as a brief review of one Sassanid motif in the Islamic art of Central Asia for architectural conservation projects and as an example for further studying other ornamental motifs. At the same time, it does not serve to illustrate (or substitute) the general development of the pre-Mongolian Islamic ornament, since the vectors of the geometric, epigraphic, zoomorphic, and vegetal ornament evolution were multidirectional. Each of them is the subject-matter of further studies.

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Title. The Lotus in Central Asia: A Sassanian Motif in the Islamic Stucco Decoration

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Abstract. This publication aims to review the history of Lotus images as reproduced in the stucco décor of pre-Mongolian Islamic Central Asia and to trace its evolution between the 9th and 12th century. The Lotus motif originates in Achaemenid Iran and is sequentially re-interpreted in the stucco of Sassanid Iran, Central Asian Sogdia, and the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. There are many studies dedicated to succession between Sassanid and Islamic ornamentation; however, such reviews either have a limited coverage of the stucco ornament of Central Asia or overlook it altogether. The publication is focused on the Central Asian iconography of the Lotus that embodies all the above influences. The study follows a descriptive and historic approach. The Lotus

images in stucco are selected chronologically and on a regional basis: monuments of Sassanid Iran and Central Asian Sogdia, and Islamic monuments of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Regional versions of the motif are identified and compared with those classified previously. I analysed the formal characteristics of ornament on thirty monuments: composition, scale, proportions, location, symmetry type, rhythm, and technique. Five vectors of the development in 9th to 12th century Central Asia were identified: Sassanian motif re-scaled and relocated in the overall arrangement; the motif incorporated into new ornamental designs; plant morphology altered; and both symmetry and carving techniques becoming more complicated. This research not only provides a brief review of Lotus in the Islamic art of Central Asia for architectural conservation projects, but also serves as a starting point for studying other ornamental motifs along the same lines.

Keywords: architectural décor, Islamic stucco of Central Asia, Islamic architecture, Islamic ornaments, lotus, Sogdian ornament, stucco décor

Название статьи. Лотос в Средней Азии: сасанидский мотив в стукочном декоре периода ислама

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Аннотация. Эта публикация делает попытку обозреть историю изображения лотоса в стукочном декоре Средней Азии и очертить её эволюцию с IX по XII вв. (цель). Мотив лотоса восходит к Ахеменидскому Ирану и последовательно переосмысливается в стукочном декоре Сасанидского Ирана, среднеазиатского Согда, Омейядского и Аббасидского халифатов. Теме преемственности сасанидской и домонгольской орнаментики периода ислама посвящено много исследований. Однако такие обзоры стукочный орнамент Средней Азии либо исключают, либо привлекают ограниченно (проблематика). Для того, чтобы восполнить этот пробел, мною рассмотрены прежде всего среднеазиатская иконография лотоса, в основе которой — все перечисленные влияния. Исследование основано на описательном и историческом подходах. Изображения лотосов в стукочном декоре отобраны по хронологии и регионам: домусульманские памятники Ирана и среднеазиатского Согда; а также архитектурный декор периода ислама в Ираке, Иране, Сирии, Афганистане, Средней Азии. Идентифицированы региональные варианты мотива, сопоставлены с ранее классифицированными. Проведён анализ формальных характеристик орнамента по 30 памятникам: композиция, масштаб, пропорции, место расположения, вид симметрии, ритм, техника. Выявлено 5 векторов развития мотива в Средней Азии IX–XII вв.: заимствование сасанидской иконографии при одновременном изменении масштаба и место положения мотива в общей композиционной схеме; введение мотива в состав новых орнаментальных композиций; изменение морфологических признаков растения; усложнение принципов симметрии и техники резьбы. Это исследование является не только кратким обзором эволюции одного мотива сасанидского происхождения в искусстве домонгольской Средней Азии периода ислама для проектов по архитектурной консервации, но и основой для исследования других орнаментальных мотивов по тому же принципу.

Ключевые слова: архитектурный декор, лотос, орнамент Согда, архитектурный орнамент периода ислама, стукочный декор Средней Азии, стукочный декор