

## The Influence of Sasanian Motifs (Double-Wing) on the Decorations of the Chester Beatty Quran

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**Abstract:** Examining the historical background of ornamental motifs used in Islamic art is of particular significance, as it can reveal the continuity and persistence of artistic traditions across two dynastic periods in the same land. Tracing and understanding the importance of pre-Islamic Iranian design patterns can lead to identifying the early models and origins of decorative elements in Islamic art. One of the earliest examples that can contribute to recognizing the foundational motifs of the Islamic period is the ornamentation found in the Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab (preserved in the Chester Beatty Library). The similarity between the motifs in Ibn al-Bawwab's Qur'an and Sasanian double-wing designs is striking. From a formal and stylistic perspective, the visual parallels between these Sasanian motifs and those employed in this Qur'an are so strong that they reinforce the theory that Ibn al-Bawwab—drawing on his Iranian heritage and his familiarity with ancient Persian art and culture—incorporated these traditions creatively and innovatively in his designs. The resemblance is such that Sasanian motifs can be considered as the earlier prototypes influencing Ibn al-Bawwab. This article aims to trace the origins of the decorative motifs in the Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab. The study is based on formal comparison and descriptive analysis. The findings suggest that, after examining both sets of motifs and following their morphological and structural characteristics, it is highly probable that Sasanian double-wing motifs served as primary models in the design of the Chester Beatty Qur'an's ornamentation. In both sets of motifs, a symmetrical teardrop-like form combined with fine feather-like details creates the impression of wings radiating from the center of a circular medallion. The morphology of both groups reflects an abstracted double-wing form in which the feathers are gathered and gently curve upward, ending in a soft arc. Thus, through observing and comparing the two categories of motifs, one may reasonably conclude that Sasanian double-wing patterns functioned as the underlying antecedents that inspired Ibn al-Bawwab in producing new and innovative designs.

### Keywords:

Sasanian motifs  
Islamic motifs  
Double-wing  
Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab

Received: February 02, 2025

Accepted: May 28, 2025

Published: June 21, 2025

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Published by Heritage of Southwest Asia Journal.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2025.558954.1025>

## 1. Introduction

One of the works that can be attributed to Ibn Bawwab with a high degree of probability is a Qur'an known as the Chester Beatty Qur'an, named after its preservation in the Chester Beatty Library. The calligraphy of this Qur'an represents one of the earliest examples of the *Muhaqqaq* script within the Islamic calligraphic tradition. Beyond its script, the motifs present in this Qur'an are of significant importance. Its decorations—including the surah headings, markers within each page, and several standalone pages—feature intricate illumination. A particularly distinctive aspect of these decorations, and the primary focus of this article, is the depiction of 120 motifs, most of which appear at the beginnings of Surahs. These motifs, generally positioned individually along the surah headings, display a strong resemblance to ancient Iranian designs. Tracing the origins of these motifs and examining how and upon which prior designs they were based constitutes the main

objective of this study. Given that the production of this Qur'an falls within a period during which, according to Grabar (2008: 196), the framework of Islamic art was being consolidated, and that these examples were designed upon the foundations of preceding civilizations, the necessity of examining and tracing the roots of these motifs becomes even more apparent. Accordingly, the central research question of this article can be formulated as follows: From which culture and civilization were the decorative motifs of the Chester Beatty Qur'an derived? A secondary question concerns the social factors that facilitated such cultural borrowing. The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative, following a descriptive-analytical approach with a formalist perspective. Data were collected through documented library studies and subsequently analyzed visually. To achieve the intended outcomes and provide a brief overview of previous research, this article is organized into four sections: Sasanian Motifs and double-wing: Emphasizing the winged motifs—examined both in terms of content, meaning, and form—to establish correspondence between them.

- a) The Life of Ibn Bawwab
- b) Motifs in the Islamic Period
- c) Decorative Motifs in the Chester Beatty Qur'an: Comparing and correlating these double-wing motifs.

## 2. Background

Numerous discussions have been made regarding the life, thoughts, works, and artistic achievements of a figure such as Ibn Bawwab, most of which can be considered as secondary background for the present study. Generally, the outcome of such research has been derivative from a few primary sources, making it challenging to offer entirely new insights into his life and works. However, careful examination of Ibn Bawwab's own works can reveal details that may have escaped previous scholars, thereby offering a fresh perspective on his personality and artistic approach. Given that the main focus of this article is on the motifs and tracing their origins, and based on the secondary background and reference to the works themselves as the most important sources, this section aims to provide a brief overview of scholars who have studied Ibn Bawwab. Research on Ibn Bawwab has been conducted for several decades; notably, two commemorative events and collections of essays dedicated to his memory were published in Iran in 1998 and 1999 (organized by Naeimayi and Zarghami). Analyzing the structural arrangement of the inscriptions in this Qur'an demonstrates Ibn Bawwab's profound understanding of the organization of writing systems and visual forms alongside one another.

Tabbaa (2001), in his book, refers to Ibn Bawwab's life and his social and nationalist influences on his intellectual development. According to Tabba, while his nationalist perspective remained under the influence of the Abbasid dynasty, the significant impact of the Abbasid style is rooted in a civilization—the Sasanian—that he seemingly overlooked.

Khazaei (2023), in an article addressing the spiritual nature of arabesque motifs, argues that the meaning and application of these motifs remained aligned from the Sasanian period into the Islamic era. Although he does not directly discuss the Qur'anic motifs examined in the present study, his analysis of the appropriation of motifs in the Islamic period from earlier civilizations may be regarded as a relevant background, particularly insofar as it addresses the influence of Sasanian double-winged motifs on Islamic-period designs.

Blair (2007) provides a more precise examination of Ibn Bawwab and the social currents that influenced the formation of his thought and works in her book on Islamic calligraphy. Although Blair does not specifically discuss motifs, her artistic analysis of calligraphic trends is indirectly relevant to this study, which inherently deals with Qur'anic writing.

Other scholars, such as Grabar (2008: 196), classify Islamic motifs into three categories: vegetal, geometric, and miscellaneous motifs. While Grabar attributes Sasanian origins to these categories, he does not mention the double-wing motif. Although he discusses arabesques, he does not clearly distinguish them from vegetal elements.

Soudavar (2003), in his analysis, references the crowns of Sasanian kings, providing insight into one of the key symbols in this article—the Sasanian double-wing. In particular, he interprets the motifs from a philosophical perspective, linking them to divine glory (*farr*), solar symbolism, and traces of double-Wing imagery in the myths and sacred texts of ancient Iranians, especially the Avesta. He also provides illustrative examples from Sasanian coins and stucco work for each motif discussed.

### **A) Sasanian Motifs and the Place of Double-Wing Motifs**

The Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) regarded itself as the successor to the Achaemenid civilization (550–330 BCE). Although fewer artistic works and particularly fewer architectural monuments remain from the Achaemenid period, the existing examples clearly demonstrate the influence of Achaemenid artistic thought on the production of Sasanian works. While the religious aspect of Sasanian art, due to Zoroastrianism, constitutes a distinctive feature of this period, Sasanian art in general can be characterized as highly symbolic. As Krüger (2017: 404) notes, “No art is as filled with symbols as Sasanian art.”

A crucial aspect of Sasanian art is its profound influence on the formation of Islamic-period art. To provide a historical context for this development, it should be noted that many motifs in Islamic Iranian art can trace their roots back to ancient Iran (Grabar, 2008; Ettinghausen, 2014; Akasha, 2001; Tabbaa, 2001). In recent years, Iranian scholars have conducted scientific research examining the influence of Sasanian motifs on decorative patterns used in various Islamic-period artistic crafts (Khazaei, 2023; Zare’ Abarghouei et al., 2014; Shirazi & Hashemi, 2013). Among these studies, the connection between Sasanian motifs and the motifs of the Buyid period appears particularly close and striking (Sadeghpour & Mirazizi, 2018), a point to which this article will return in a later section.

Focusing specifically on the decorative motifs of the Sasanian period, it is possible to categorize them as follows. “Sasanian decorations emerged under fresh influences from the eastern regions and gradually evolved into a coherent stylistic expression. Throughout this process, Eastern principles increasingly shaped their composition.” These motifs can be classified into the following categories, as seen in Sasanian stucco decorations:

- a) Rosette-like ornaments,
- b) Strings of pearls,
- c) Hearts,
- d) Palm leaves,
- e) Flowers,
- f) Pomegranate motifs,
- g) Vine tendrils,
- h) Paired wings (double-wing) (Krüger, 2017: 364–402).

The last category, the paired wings, is one of the hallmark features of this period and later reappears in Islamic-period art. Although the execution techniques in the Islamic period became more abstract, the underlying design principles and the symbolic use of the double-wing motifs remain consistent across both periods.

The use of double-wing motifs is evident in ancient civilizations, particularly in Mesopotamian art and Achaemenid culture. Numerous visual examples from several centuries ago to the present have been documented and reported (see Lajard, 1858), highlighting the significance and symbolic status of the Wings in ancient cultures.

A distinctive feature of Achaemenid double-wing motifs is that they were generally used in contexts of religious or ceremonial importance. This practice continued into the Sasanian period, where double-wing motifs appear in a variety of artistic media, ranging from stucco decoration to metalwork. For instance, on Sasanian coins—such as those of Khosrow II (reign: 560–628 CE)—the right-facing profile of the king is adorned with a crown featuring falcon-like double-wing motifs

along with a crescent and star above it. On the left side, behind the king's head, the Pahlavi inscription in two lines reads "Farr-e Afzun" (increasing divine glory).

These coins influenced early Islamic coinage as well. In Arab-Sasanian coins (e.g., those of Abd al-Malik Marwan, 72 AH), the Pahlavi phrase "Farr-e Afzun" is retained, with an additional Kufi-script inscription of "Bismillah" placed alongside it. The combination of the two inscriptions demonstrates that the integration of pre-Islamic and Islamic elements was not contradictory but complementary (Rezaei Baghbidi, 2014: 21). This content synthesis in Sasanian and Islamic art—particularly during the Abbasid period, which was heavily influenced by Iranian thought—illustrates continuity in symbolic meaning. The wing motif, as a representation of divine glory (*verethraghna*), appears on the crowns of kings such as Bahram II, Bahram IV, Peroz, Khosrow II (Khosrow Parviz), and Yazdegerd III (*Ibid.*, 127). During the reign of Khosrow Parviz, the term *khwarrah* (*farr*) was added to coin inscriptions (Behnamifar, 2017: 118–127). A study of the application of winged motifs in ancient Iranian art reveals that their use was consistently associated with sacred or highly revered contexts. This highlights the symbolic importance and continuity of the double-wing motif across centuries of Iranian art and beyond (Fig. 1, Fig. 2 & Fig. 3).



Figure 1. Sasanian stucco decoration. (Soudavar, 2003).



Figure 2. An Arab-Sassanian coin (Rezaei Baghbidi, 2014).



Figure 3. Sasanian stucco decoration (Soudavar, 2003)

From a formal perspective, double-wing motifs share notable similarities with other motifs. "The resemblance of double-wing motifs to the lotus flower in Iranian decorative arts is considerable. This similarity in shape and application has been present in Iranian art since ancient times" (Soudavar, 2003: 56) and continues into the Islamic period. This formal similarity has sometimes led to the two motifs being considered interchangeable, as they share analogous structural features.

The terminal movement of both elements—the wing and the petal—is depicted as a transition from strength to delicacy. Fine lines within each motif, representing either wing veins or leaf veins, further reinforce this similarity. The use of symmetry and mirrored movement in both motifs enhances their visual resemblance at first glance. In some examples, such as the double-wing

motifs at the beginnings of surahs in the Ibn Bawwab Qur'an, the inclusion of flowers and leaves alongside the decorative double-wing motifs reinforces this perceived identity. This discussion highlights the formal status of double-wing motifs, their placement within the Sasanian artistic tradition, and their continuity in both visual composition and symbolic content.

## **B) The Life of Ibn Bawwab**

Regarding the personality and works of this Iranian artist, who is said to have spent part of his life in Baghdad, previous research has either scarcely addressed him or, in some cases, non-Iranian scholars have attempted to distance his identity from his Iranian heritage. However, as will be shown below, an analysis of his works inevitably points to his knowledge of and affinity for Iranian artistic traditions.

Ibn Bawwab, who also served as a minister at the Buyid court, is believed to have adhered to Shi'a Islam<sup>1</sup>, contrary to some opinions. He passed away in 412/413 AH, and his tomb is located near the Imam al-Habal in Baghdad. To understand his thought, it is necessary to consider the Buyid dynasty, the court where Ibn Bawwab spent some time in Shiraz. "The Iranian ancestry of the Buyid rulers played a significant role in shaping their political consciousness, and the environment in which they first rose to prominence inspired myths and political ideas that guided their governance. The success of the Buyids, along with the Iranian interlude, reached its peak during the reign of 'Adud al-Dawla."

'Adud al-Dawla was regarded as a person of divine favor (*farahmand*), who considered himself a civilizing force for humanity and a sovereign destined to rule. His ideals and historical slogans drew inspiration from ancient times, and his title *Shahanshah* was a direct revival of the Sasanian royal title (Kramer, 1996: 295).

The Buyid court was also a center for the cultivation of knowledge and the arts<sup>2</sup>: "The ministers of the Buyids, most of whom were scribes, poets, and men of learning and art, inspired the rulers through their dedication to science and literature. This interest often encouraged the princes to seek knowledge and assemble gatherings with learned individuals. Many of these ministers, like the Buyid rulers themselves, maintained substantial personal libraries" (Zarrinkoub, 1994: 468). It was within such an intellectually rich environment that Ibn Bawwab operated. He pioneered a calligraphic style often attributed to the Fatimids in Egypt (Tabbaa, 2001), though it is more accurate to recognize the Buyid court as the true origin of this artistic development. Ibn Bawwab is a figure who, on one hand, can be seen as a symbol of the Abbasid state, and his influence is evident in the works of supporters of the Abbasid government, such as the Ghaznavids and Seljuks<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, his Iranian heritage reflects the nationalist movements of the time, particularly within the Buyid court. This phenomenon is also observable in independent regional dynasties that supported the Abbasids, where efforts were made to emphasize the Iranian identity of the Ghaznavids and Seljuks and their appreciation for Iranian culture. As noted in the introduction, numerous writings have appeared on the life of Ibn Bawwab, most of which overlap due to reliance on a limited set of sources. Among these, a particularly comprehensive study is the entry on Ibn Bawwab in the *Encyclopaedia of the World of Islam* by Mohammad Asif-Fekrat (2021), which effectively consolidates the available documentary knowledge about his life and works. Since the focus of this article is on Ibn Bawwab's own works, selected passages from this entry have been utilized to provide context and aid the development of this study, making it one of the most complete resources on the subject.

Ibn Bawwab, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Hilal (d. 413 AH / 1022 CE), was a renowned calligrapher and illuminator, later honorifically given the title '*Ala' al-Din* in some sources. His exact date and place of birth are unknown, but it is clear that he spent most of his life in Baghdad. His father, Hilal, was a gatekeeper for the Buyid court, which led to Ali ibn Hilal being known as Ibn Bawwab or Ibn Sutri. Even at the height of his fame, when he was addressed as "Master" by contemporaries, poets and others still referenced his father's humble occupation. His literary teacher was Abu al-Fath Uthman ibn Jinni, and he also studied under Abu 'Ubaydallah Marzabani and Abu al-Hasan Muhammad ibn

Sam'oon al-Wa'ez. In calligraphy, Ibn Bawwab learned from Muhammad ibn Asad and Muhammad ibn Samsani, both of whom had been students of Ibn Muqla. According to Qazi Ahmad Monshi Qomi (2004: 17–18), Ibn Muqla's daughter personally taught calligraphy to Ali ibn Hilal. Ibn Bawwab achieved such mastery that he became unrivaled in his time. It has been said that no one before or after him could write like him or even approach the quality of his script. When Fakhr al-Mulk Abu Ghalib Muhammad ibn Khalaf was appointed vizier by Baha' al-Dawla Abu Nasr ibn 'Adud al-Dawla, Ibn Bawwab joined his retinue as a court official (*Ibid.*, 15/121). He also served for a time as head of Baha' al-Dawla's library in Shiraz. It was in this library that he encountered twenty-nine parts of the Qur'an in Ibn Muqla's hand. When he was tasked with completing an incomplete section, he reproduced it with such skill and precision that Baha' al-Dawla himself could not distinguish it from Ibn Muqla's original work. This clearly demonstrates Ibn Bawwab's exceptional expertise not only in calligraphy but also in illumination and manuscript binding (*Asif-Fekrat*, 2021).

Several treatises on calligraphy are attributed to Ibn Bawwab. In one example, it cites a manuscript dated 908 AH written by Ibn Bawwab, which includes guidelines for various scripts such as Thuluth, Reyhan, Taqi', Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Ruq'ah, Musalsal, Luluwi, Riyasi, and marginal scripts. Although it is said that Ibn Bawwab copied sixty-four Qur'an manuscripts, the only complete surviving Qur'an in his hand is preserved in the Chester Beatty Library. This manuscript was written in 391 AH / 1001 CE.

Rais categorized its script as Naskh; however, it is more accurate to describe it as Naskh combined with Reyhan, or, in other words, Reyhani Naskh. Rais evaluated this manuscript comprehensively, and the illumination is also attributed to Ibn Bawwab himself. According to the colophon, this Qur'an was written and illuminated by the great Shi'a calligrapher and master illuminator Ali ibn Hilal, known as Ibn Bawwab, during the Shi'a Buyid rule in Baghdad (391 AH / 378 SH).

Al-Taybi notes that Ibn Bawwab served as librarian for Amir Baha' al-Dawla in Shiraz. At the time of writing this Qur'an, Amir Baha' al-Dawla was the ruler of Baghdad. This manuscript is one of the earliest examples of the Reyhan script on paper. Moreover, because it is preserved in the Chester Beatty Library, it is commonly referred to as the Chester Beatty Qur'an<sup>4</sup>. The focus of this article is on the colophons and decorative elements found at the beginnings of surahs and at the opening and closing pages of this manuscript.

### 3. Ibn Bawwab: Painter and Calligrapher

In tracing the development of this study, the words of al-Dhahabi are particularly significant. According to al-Dhahabi, before becoming a calligrapher, Ibn Bawwab was engaged in painting and decorating houses. He later turned to manuscript illumination and eventually devoted himself to calligraphy (*al-Dhahabi*, *Siyar*, 17/316).

Before examining how Ibn Bawwab's background as a painter influenced his Qur'anic manuscripts, it is important to consider his creative and free-spirited artistic temperament. Al-Dhahabi (*al-'Ibar*, 2/224) recounts that Ibn Taqtaqi mentioned a manuscript he initially believed was in Ibn Muqla's hand. He consulted Yaqut al-Musta'simi, who, upon examining the manuscript, realized it was written by Ibn Bawwab in the style of Ibn Muqla. Yaqut observed that, after considerable effort, Ibn Bawwab could not exactly replicate Ibn Muqla's script and therefore developed his own method.

In a 9th/15th-century manuscript in Berlin entitled *Risalah fi 'Ilm al-Kitabah* by an unknown author, Ibn Bawwab is described as recognizing that earlier calligraphers had attempted to refine the Kufic script, and that Ibn Muqla and his brother had worked to perfect the Taqi' and Naskh scripts but had not fully succeeded. Ibn Bawwab, therefore, undertook to complete their work (*Asif-Fekrat*, 2021).

From this, it can be inferred that although Ibn Bawwab could not exactly reproduce Ibn Muqla's script—a limitation perhaps stemming from his independent and painterly temperament—his choice to innovate and develop a new method is significant. An artist who cannot replicate an

existing model may create something entirely new, but what allows such innovation to become a benchmark for subsequent generations? Undoubtedly, a spirit of curiosity and pioneering is crucial, yet it must be accompanied by skill and an understanding of aesthetic principles. This artistic freedom and aesthetic insight were likely gifts cultivated through his experience in illumination and painting.

Rice (1955) notes that the geometric proportions of the letters were developed by Ibn Muqla, but Ibn Bawwab, who was already familiar with illumination and painting before becoming a calligrapher, infused these proportions with a heightened artistic sensibility. Generally, mastery of one related artistic domain can significantly influence another. Since both writing and drawing belong to the visual arts, they naturally inform and enhance one another. In summary, it can be concluded that Ibn Bawwab initially gained experience in drawing and decoration before turning to calligraphy. As will be discussed in the main body of this article, the clear influence of his familiarity with painting and illustration is evident in this Qur'an manuscript. The harmonious integration between the Qur'an's decorations and its script demonstrates that both were executed by the same artist (Khazaei, 2009). In contrast, many other manuscripts from the same period show decorative elements that reflect the work of multiple hands on a single page. In the following sections, this study will examine how Ibn Bawwab's artistic skills in illustration and design contributed to the distinctive character of the Chester Beatty Qur'an's inscriptions.

#### 4. Motifs in the Islamic Period (with Emphasis on Double-Wing)

Fortunately, a systematic classification of Islamic decorative motifs<sup>5</sup> has been established. The blending and assimilation of Iranian motifs into Islamic ornamentation justifies adopting a unified classification in this study, where terms such as "Iranian," "Islamic," and "Iranian-Islamic" are approached from a common perspective.<sup>6</sup> One of the most well-known classifications can be found in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*<sup>7</sup> under the entry "Arabesque." This source identifies several categories of Islamic decoration: geometric motifs, vegetal motifs, calligraphic elements, and even representations of living beings (Kühnel, 1986: 558)<sup>8</sup>.

Several theories have been proposed regarding the origins of Islamic ornamentation, particularly vegetal and arabesque motifs, some of which were discussed earlier (in the section on Sasanian motifs). For example, the theory proposed by the Marçais brothers traces the roots of these motifs to Tunisia; Hartmann locates their origin in Tashkent; Another theory attributes the origins of Islamic ornamentation to Greece. Among these views, however, Strzykowski identifies the vegetal ornaments appearing on Kufic letters as having Sasanian origins (cited in Faraj al-Hosseini, 2014: 72–74).

Based on the arguments that will be presented, the author aligns with Strzykowski's theory and considers the origins of arabesque and vegetal ornamentation—particularly in the context of Islamic Iran—to lie in the Sasanian period. The motifs examined in this article (the double-wing motifs) belong to and are situated within the family of arabesque (eslimi) motifs—a designation that has itself been a source of certain terminological ambiguities.<sup>9</sup>

Double-wing motifs appear with a relatively consistent formal structure across a wide range of works from the Islamic period. Visually, these motifs take the form of a stylized pair of wings whose feathers are compacted and rise symmetrically from both sides, culminating in a gentle upward curve at the terminal points. Although the specific morphology of these wings evolved over time—gradually moving toward greater abstraction through formal development—the double-wing element itself remained a persistent and meaningful motif throughout Mesopotamian civilization, and particularly within Iranian art. In a symbolic sense, it functioned as a mediating form, representing a means of connection between the human realm and the celestial or transcendent world. Moreover, the abstract presence of the double-wing motif in privileged and sacred contexts—such as mosque mihrabs and Qur'anic manuscripts (including the Qur'an under discussion)—which hold profound sanctity and reverence for Muslims, indicates that this motif itself must have carried a respected and meaningful status. This formal continuity and visual

affinity have not gone unnoticed by art historians, and a tangible example of such continuity can be observed in Ibn al-Bawwāb's Qur'an. As Ettinghausen notes:

“A double-winged and winged figure enclosing a pomegranate appears in Sasanian stucco decoration, and it may be argued that the image found in many early Qur'ans—often interpreted as a mihrab or fire altar—has Sasanian roots. The circular forms marking individual verses are also likely of Iranian origin, as simple circles were used as punctuation marks in Middle Persian literary texts written on papyrus, preserved today in the Archduke Rainer Collection” (Ettinghausen, 2014: 232) (Fig. 4).

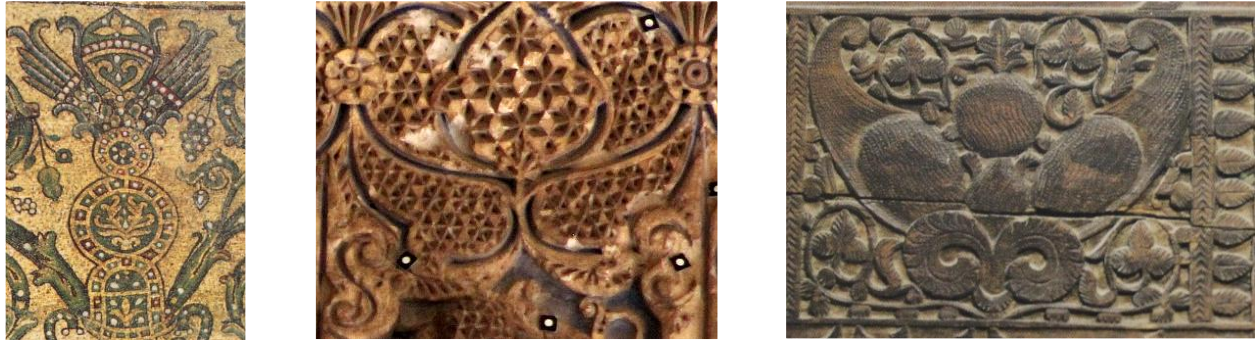


Figure 4. Examples of the use of wings in the earliest years of the Islamic period. From right to left: Dome of the Rock, a wooden Minbar from Egypt, and a stucco Mihrab carving in Iran (Khazaei, 2023).

#### 4.1. Ornamentation in the Chester Beatty Qur'an

The decorative program of Ibn al-Bawwāb's Qur'an is of exceptional importance, as it represents one of the earliest formative examples in the historical development of Qur'anic illumination.<sup>10</sup> In a previous study by Khazaei (2009), the decorations of this manuscript were classified into three principal categories. The present article adopts this classification as its analytical framework and, in a subsequent stage, focuses specifically on the third category for detailed examination. Accordingly, the decorative elements of the Chester Beatty Qur'an may be divided into three main groups:

##### a) Full-page Illumination

The full-page illumination (*taḥrīb kull ṣafḥa*) in this Qur'an consists of five sets of double pages, of which three appear at the beginning of the Qur'an and the remaining two at the end. The text is decorated with small hexagons, each featuring a lotus flower, a motif whose origins trace back to pre-Islamic Iranian decorative arts.

The last two double-page illuminations are similar to the first three, with only minor variations in design. In these pages, the decorative elements are further divided using twelve interlaced circles. Each page's decoration includes a pair of wing-shaped motifs arranged symmetrically at the top and bottom, as well as a pair of lotus motifs on the sides of the rectangular frame.

The wing-shaped motifs are rendered in black and combined with *islāmī* (arabesque) designs. Like the lotus flower, the wing motif has its roots in pre-Islamic Iranian decorative arts, and here it is presented in a simplified form alongside arabesque patterns (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6).

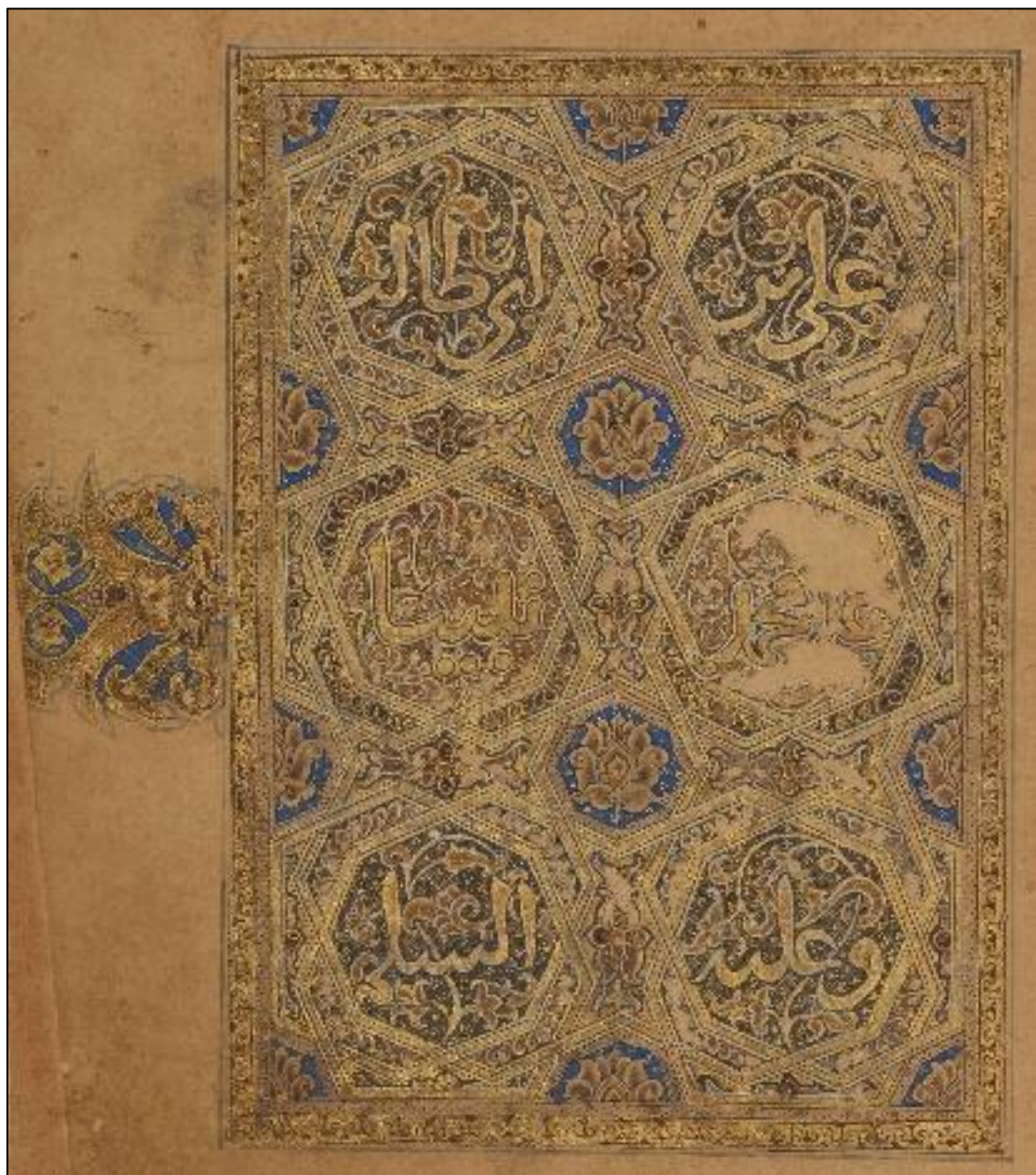


Figure 5. Illumination and calligraphy at the beginning of the Chester Beatty Qur'an by Ibn al-Bawwab ([URL1](#))

### b) Border Illumination

The second category of decoration in the Chester Beatty Qur'an involves the illumination of the page margins, which primarily consists of small medallions (*shamsahs*) indicating the chapters (*suwar*) and sections (*ajzā*). These marginal decorations include small medallions with the inscriptions “‘ashara” and “sajda” in their centers.

Although the headpieces (*saratranj*) accompanying the chapter names are similar to one another, none is an exact repetition. Most of the headpieces are composed of a combination of lotus flowers and leaves, symmetrically arranged on either side of the lotus.

In addition to the headpieces, the page margins are adorned with small “‘ashara” medallions, which indicate ten verses, and small “sajda” medallions. The verse-counting medallions vary slightly in design, and nearly all are composed of golden circles. The “sajda” medallions, however, are more elaborate, sometimes decorated with flowering vine motifs and arabesque designs.

In some pages, these medallions are created through interlaced squares or eight-pointed stars. At the center of these medallions, the word “sajda” is inscribed in gold in Kufic script on dark red, blue, or brown backgrounds. Occasionally, a small “‘ashara” medallion and a “sajda” medallion overlap at their edges, forming a unified decorative composition ([Fig. 6](#))



Figure 6. Composition of calligraphy and shamsa motifs in a Qur'an ([URL1](#))

### c) Illumination Resembling Paired Wings (Double Wings), Mostly in Chapter Headings

The final category of decoration in this Qur'an includes the chapter headings (suras), which are designed as rectangular panels bearing the chapter name in Thuluth or Naskh script. Each of these chapter headings is further adorned with a headpiece (sartranj) that is carefully integrated with the panel (Fig. 7).

The third category of motifs, which we have identified as resembling Sasanian double wings, consists of wing-like shapes extending from the center to the left and right. These motifs are decorated internally with feather-like designs. These tear-shaped or wing-like motifs—which are the focus of this article—also bear similarity to the lotus flower.<sup>11</sup> "This similarity in form and application has existed since ancient times in Iranian art" (Soudavar, 2003: 56), and it can also be seen in the Islamic period. This resemblance has led to them being considered alike, as both share similar formal characteristics. The terminal movement of both elements (the wing and the petal) is drawn as a transition from strength to delicacy. The lines within them, representing either feather lines or leaf veins, and the mirrored symmetry applied to both, make them appear very similar at first glance. In some examples, such as the double wings in the chapter headings of the Ibn Bawwab Qur'an, the presence of flowers and leaves alongside the decorative wings further reinforces this similarity—as noted earlier, this simultaneous use has been present in Iranian art since ancient times.



Figure 7. Appearance of motifs resembling Double wings on a page of the Chester Beatty Qur'an ([URL1](#))

The number of these motifs in this Qur'an is 120, which, apart from the surah headings, are also drawn in the outer decorations at the beginning and end of the Qur'an. Most of these examples generally correspond to the definition provided earlier. An interesting point about these motifs is that although they share a common overall structure, the curvature of the wings and the details within each motif vary, presenting a novel collection of creative designs. The arrangement of leaves and wings in combination contributes to the diversity among these examples. A selection of these motifs is presented below so that observation allows for a better understanding and judgment. As can be seen in some of the examples, the wing-like forms, whose feathers are joined together and have been abstracted, create a soft curve extending from both sides of the center, evoking a teardrop-like shape. Here, for a better visual understanding of the motifs, several more examples are analyzed ([Fig. 8](#)).



Figure 8. Some of the motifs used in the Chesterbeate Quran by Ibn Al-Bawwab ([URL1](#))

As can be seen in some of the examples, the wing-like shape, whose feathers are glued together and have become abstract, and the gentle curve on both sides of the center of the arc, evoke a teardrop-like shape. In the image below ([Fig. 9](#)), one of the motifs has been drawn and simplified. Using three colors, red, blue, and green, we have shown three types of wing-like drawings in one pattern. These three general shapes, with the decorations inside the wings removed, show that the teardrop-shaped arch, like the Sasanian examples, begins with a broad beginning or a gentle arch, then curves weakly, and finally, with a soft twist, evokes the end of the wing.



Figure 9. Line drawing of the overall Qur'anic motifs of Ibn Al-Bawwab

These forms are similar to the wing motifs of the Sasanian period, which overall correspond with Sasanian designs, and this may indicate that they were observed by the artist ([Fig. 10](#)).



Figure 10. Drawing framework for designing motifs in Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quran

These patterns are similar to Sassanid wing motifs, which are generally similar to Sassanid motifs and could be a reason why the painter saw them (Fig. 11).

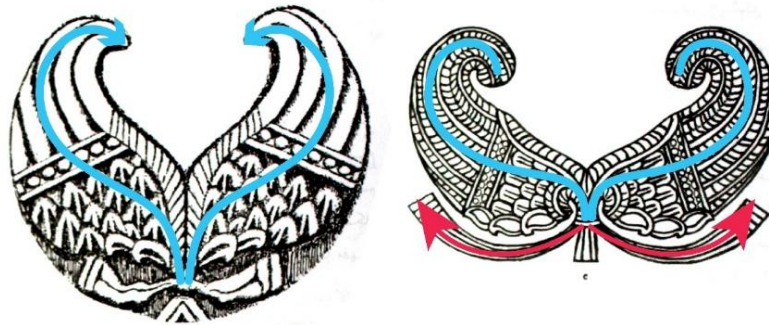


Figure 11. Drawing framework for designing motifs in Sasanian biplane motifs (Rezaei Bagh-Bidi, 2014)

Another issue that is worth considering in Ibn Al-Bawwab's modeling of ancient examples is the use of a round, Diadem-like shape (or Dihim in Persian). The association of a circle and two wings in Iranian art has a pre-Sassanian history, for example, the Forouhar emblem in Persepolis. The continuation of this motif in historical abstraction during the Sasanian period led to a pattern that shows a circle with two abstract wings inside (Fig. 12).



Figure 12. The presence of two wings in a round shape, related to a Sassanid period motif (Soudavar, 2003).

Now, comparing another visual element such as the circular or Diadem-like shape among some of the motifs, and considering that there is a great similarity in the shape of the wings and the central Diadem in the Quranic motifs of Ibn Al-Bawwab and the Sassanid motifs; This assumption can be strengthened by the fact that Ibn Al-Bawwab borrowed the motifs of the Sassanid period from the double-winged designs to design the motifs, or at least derived the initial model and idea from them. As can be seen from Figure 13, in some examples of motifs in Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quran, two wings with a circular axis evoke a Diadem-like shape in the middle. (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. The round shape of the Diadem in the middle of the motifs in Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quran

Now, after examining the form of a few examples of Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quranic designs and Sasanian biplane designs, we can take a look at Ibn Al-Bawwab's other designs. This view, apart from stating the point that the original text was the motif of Sasanian biplanes, and that Ibn Al-Bawwab used it as a pretext. His creativity can be seen in the fact that by maintaining the integrity of several visual elements, including the curved leaf-like form, the thin drawing of feathers, and the circle or dieh in some examples, he was able to creatively create examples that are not identical (copies), and each pattern is distinct from the other motifs while remaining faithful to the overall design (Fig. 14).

## 5. Conclusion

The similarities between the Sasanian biplane motifs, which of course have roots dating back thousands of years, and the motifs found in the Quran of Ibn Al-Bawwab (kept in the Chesterbeattie Museum) are very great. This similarity is so great that it can be theorized that the person who drew the Chesterbeattie Quran was copying an older model. Through the lens of the design and drawing of Sasanian biplanes and the designs in Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quran, we can observe graphic similarities that can strengthen such a theory. In the formal comparison between the motifs in Ibn Al-Bawwab's Quran, we witness a consistent whole. This consistent whole includes tear-like motifs that are covered inside by feather-like decorations. The outwardly curved, symmetrical shape gives the motifs a sense of soaring and flight. The shape of these motifs is an abstracted form of two wings, with feathers gathered and extending upwards from both sides, ending in a soft curve at the end of the wing's movement. The same definition can be applied to the motifs common to Sassanid biplanes. In addition, the characteristics and symbols of Sassanid motifs in the period in which Ibn Al-Bawwab lived can be recognized from the practice of using Sassanid motifs in other common industries in his environment. Besides, like the Buyid rulers' concern with the closeness to ancient Iranian thought, Ibn Al-Bawwab also perceived this closeness and depth and applied it in his works. In this regard, Ibn Al-Bawwab's life in Shiraz and his proximity to Persepolis, which was one of the rich sources of motifs from the ancient Iranian world, could have led to a deeper understanding of

him. This knowledge, along with Ibn Al-Bawwab's practical ability in painting, led to the creation of a motif in the Quran that was both in line with the Quran's decoration and was an appropriate choice due to the religious importance and status of the motifs of the two wings. The continuity of this motif in the art of the early Islamic period suggests that Ibn Al-Bawwab and the creations attributed to him were one of the intermediaries in the influence of Sassanid motifs on the motifs of the Islamic period.



Figure 14. Calligraphy from the Quran by Ibn Al-Bawwab

## Acknowledgements

With gratitude to Dr. Mohammad Khazaei, who motivated me to reach this topic.

## Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

## Material and Moral Sponsors

Tabriz Islamic Art University

## Access to data

The raw data of this study are in the possession of the authors and can be accessed by correspondence.

## End Notes

1. Tabbaa (1991) argues that because Ibn Bawwab was buried near the grave of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, he must have been Sunni. However, his service as a minister in the Buyid court—renowned for its Shi'a orientation—provides a more reliable indicator of his religious affiliation during his lifetime. On the other hand, Tabbaa attributes many advancements in the visual understanding of Islamic calligraphy and ornamentation to the Sunni-Shi'a conflicts. While this claim is partially valid, it overlooks two critical points. First, he assigns the innovation of these styles to the Ismailis of Egypt, although Iran was geographically and culturally much closer to the developments in Baghdad. Second, he neglects the influence of Iranian nationalist movements, which were embodied by scholars and artists in the Abbasid court. Figures such as Ibn Muqlah and Ibn Bawwab, whose lives were sometimes endangered in ways connected to their Iranian heritage, exemplify this intersection of artistic innovation and national identity.

2. The Buyids' appreciation for the arts can, to some extent, be attributed to the influence of Iranian Sufism and the Shi'a tolerance of the Buyid rulers. For further details, see Kramer (1996: 82).

3. Tabbaa (1991) suggests that the Ghaznavid and Seljuk adherence to Ibn Bawwab's script represented a form of flattery toward the Abbasid caliphate, a claim that merits further reflection.

4. The Chester Beatty Qur'an (MS. K. 16) is a small Qur'an manuscript comprising 286 pages, measuring 13.5 × 17.5 cm. The written area on each page measures 9 × 13.5 cm, with fifteen lines of text per page. The first six pages, made of bright white paper and added later, are dedicated to a biography of Ibn Bawwab in Persian, adapted from Ibn Khallikan's work. The writing, illumination, and headings appear on the main pages of the Qur'an.

The final page includes a colophon noting that the Qur'an was written by Ali ibn Hilal in Baghdad in 391 AH: *"This Qur'an was written by Ali ibn Hilal in the city of Salam in the year three hundred and ninety-one, praising God Almighty for His blessings, praying for His Prophet Muhammad and his family, and seeking forgiveness for his sins."*

The main text is written on fine, durable, pale brown paper, typical of the period. The script is executed in dark brown ink. The current binding is of European style, which unfortunately resulted in the loss of parts of the margins, including some marginal decorations such as headpieces and small rosettes. Most scholars agree that the Chester Beatty Qur'an is the only complete surviving Qur'an in Ibn Bawwab's hand (Khazaei, 2009).

5. Islamic ornamentation, in general terms, is a broad concept that encompasses numerous visual traditions across Iran and the Muslim world. Even the first category—narrative representation in painting—can, from one perspective, be regarded as decorative, or at least as containing decorative elements. However, particularly in Iranian art, decorative art exists beyond these two preceding categories and, at the same time, as a synthesis of them, maintaining an independent identity.

The concept of *ornamentation* in Iranian art cannot easily be equated with the term *decorative*. Contrary to the views of some Orientalist scholars—who have attributed the extensive use of ornament to a mere filling of space or to *horror vacui*—ornamentation in Iranian and Islamic art

should be understood differently. In Iranian-Islamic art, ornamentation constitutes the central core of visual presence within the work. The absence of this visual element on a page signifies not merely a lack of decoration, but rather an incompleteness of the work itself.

Ornamentation in Iranian art is not a fragment of an overall design; instead, it forms the totality of the composition. Each ornamental element aligns with the overall movement of the design and achieves its completion within it. This integrative process itself defines the unity and totality of form and pattern in Islamic art.

6. Although distinctions can be drawn between Iranian and Arab ornamentation—particularly in later periods and in the use of design and color—this issue constitutes an independent subject of study and therefore falls outside the scope of the present discussion.

7. Encyclopedia of Islam

8. Alongside these classifications, several scholars (Grabar, 2008; Necipoğlu, 2000) generally divide Islamic ornamentation into three main categories: geometric, vegetal, and epigraphic. Among Iranian scholars, however, these classifications have been further refined. For example, Taghavi-Nejad (2017: 112–116) proposes a sevenfold categorization of Islamic motifs, including geometric, vegetal, arabesque (*eslimi*), animal, human, object-based, composite motifs, and calligraphy.

9. European familiarity with Islamic art first emerged through encounters with Jerusalem, which led to the perception of this artistic tradition as inherently Arab. Consequently, later scholars described arabesque ornamentation as a form of Arab decorative art (Akasha, 2001: 15). However, these motifs bear no intrinsic connection to Arab visual culture. This assumption—and the terminology derived from it—resulted in a fundamental misunderstanding that became permanently embedded in the discourse of art history: the designation of a broad category of ornamental motifs used across Islamic lands as “Arabesque.” Despite its widespread usage and its functional role in Iranian art, this term remains highly problematic and continues to invite extensive critical discussion (Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World, 2009, vol. 8: 604).

In this study, a distinction is maintained between *eslimi* (arabesque) and vegetal motifs. Another weakness of the commonly accepted classification lies in the inclusion of inscriptions within the category of ornament. The semantic and expressive dimension of inscriptional writing clearly outweighs its purely formal or visual aspects. The purpose of employing script in inscriptions is more explicit than that of ornamental motifs: writing, once manifested, immediately calls for reading and conveys meaning, whereas ornament requires interpretation, symbolic decoding, and contemplative engagement.

Nevertheless, the pervasive acceptance of this classificatory system has inevitably influenced the present study, particularly in positioning inscriptions within the broader framework of decorative elements in Islamic art—an approach that is adopted here with caution and, in certain cases, provisionally accepted.

10. The analysis of the decorative elements in this Qur’an is highly significant within the study of Islamic decorative arts, as well as in understanding its influence on later works. For instance, the use of vegetal (*islāmī*) and geometric motifs in this Qur’an, along with its exquisite coloring, clearly demonstrates the connection between the artistic values of Ibn al-Bawwāb’s Qur’an and the continuation of this tradition in subsequent manuscripts and other artworks.

This connection can, for example, be observed in the illumination of the poetry collection *Diwān of Sālim ibn Jandal*, currently housed in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, which was likely copied and illuminated about sixty years after the Qur’an. The decorative program of this *Diwān* bears strong similarities to Ibn al-Bawwāb’s Qur’an. Such influence is particularly visible in the design of *islāmī* motifs and small rosettes, reminiscent of the *‘ashara* and *sajda* rosettes found in the Qur’an.

The presence of *islāmī* motifs in Nishapur ceramics of the fifth century AH, as well as in Qur’ans attributed to the Qarmatians and produced during the Seljuk period (6th–7th centuries AH), cannot be overlooked. For instance, the *islāmī* decoration on the last page of Ibn al-Bawwāb’s Qur’an was directly employed in the ornamentation of a Seljuk Qur’an now held in the Berlin Museum. Such

similarities between the illumination of Ibn al-Bawwāb's Qur'an and later artworks indicate the substantial influence of this masterpiece on the development and formation of artistic practices in subsequent periods.

Another important feature of Ibn al-Bawwāb's Qur'an is the use and adaptation of pre-Islamic Iranian motifs, such as the lotus flower and wing-shaped designs derived from Sasanian art. With his artistic ingenuity, Ibn al-Bawwāb was able to transform and reinterpret these motifs, emphasizing their decorative aspects and giving them a completely new and distinguished character (Khazaei, 2009).

11. It should be noted that in Islamic-period motifs, there is a significant similarity between the double-wing motifs and other designs. Another widely used element from the Sasanian era, which entered Islamic decorations and is very close in form and shape to the double wings, is the motif of palm leaves. The strong formal similarity between the double wings and palm leaves makes it difficult to distinguish them accurately in many designs. This similarity can be clearly observed in Sasanian double wings alongside palm-leaf motifs surrounding pomegranates in stucco decorations found in Kish (Krüger, 2017: 359).

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