

# SEMIOTICS OF ANIMAL MOTIFS IN THE JEWELRY OF THE ACHAEMENID ERA

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## 1. Introduction

Cryptography and symbolism were tools for conveying knowledge in ancient times and are the oldest and most fundamental mode for expressing concepts. Evolving over time, symbolism has gradually become established in the thought of different nations and civilizations. Ancient man has long tried to visualize the concepts he had in his mind. By visualizing and giving an identity to his thoughts, he endowed them with a persistent power which has remained and continued for centuries, so that they have often come to possess a sacred meaning and a supernatural force. Man generally creates images and symbols based on his religious beliefs, by which he justifies the world and its phenomena, as well as expressing his feelings and emotions.

In addition to representing a concept, a symbol had a force for ancient peoples which caused its rotation in the universe. Symbols can also be considered artworks that have survived from earlier times and as an expressive phenomenon or medium for the transfer of ideas and information. No single artwork is able to make us directly familiar with the culture and insights of a special period in history, but it is useful and necessary to represent and understand the dominant symbols to learn about the cultural identity of a people in any society and time. Early myths and symbols, therefore, manifest the insights of primitive societies and their interpretation of the world.

The art of metalworking in various fields reached its zenith during the Achaemenid period. Most of the decorative motifs belonging to this era took the form of animals and beasts on utensils and especially ornaments, which besides an aesthetic function, had a symbolic function. A considerable number of conceptual symbols and mythical images can be found in the works of the Achaemenid era, all of which were influenced by the ideas, rituals and religious beliefs of the time. So far, several studies have been carried out on some of the more prominent symbolic images such as the lion and the griffin. One such example is that of Sadr al-Din Taheri, who studied the image of the lion in his paper entitled "The Archetype of the Lion in Ancient Iran, Mesopotamia and Egypt"; another is Hamideh Jaber Ansari, who studied the semiotics of the griffin and the evolution of its form in the art of ancient Persia in her paper, but no research has yet been done on the

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semiotics of animal motifs in the jewelry of the Achaemenid era. By exploring and examining, albeit briefly, the animal symbols used in Achaemenid jewelry, the present study may help us to understand more about the thoughts and insights of the era.

## 2. Symbol

In the Moeen encyclopedia, "symbol" is defined as: 1. representative; 2. manifestation and; 3. sign. "Symbol" can also be considered as synonymous with "cryptogram". A cryptogram or symbol is actually a known thing in the world which can be received and experienced through the senses; it also refers to something from the unknown and invisible world, or in a sense, to a concept behind what is apparent.

According to Jung<sup>1</sup> (1999), a "symbol is an idiom, a name or an index which, in addition to its conventional and evident meaning, has also a contradictory meaning. The symbol represents something vague, unknown or hidden for us. Consequently, a word or an index becomes symbolic when it conveys something more than its clear and immediate concept" ]1[. "The emergence of symbols and mythical figures can be a reflection of social, economic, political and religious ideas of each era and the era before it. There is no fully self-determined civilization that has no communication with other civilizations before it" ]2[.

"Symbolism is a requisite for human thought and every aspect of it should satisfy the human, intellectually, physically and emotionally" ]3[. "Symbolism invokes the thoughts and also guides the human towards the realm of thought without speech. Symbolic expression is indeed an interpreter of human effort to find and embody concepts which surround him beyond the darkness" ]3[. Symbols in artworks that have survived from ancient times can be used as an expressive phenomenon, containing information and meanings.

## 3. Symbolism and the importance of animal motifs in Achaemenid art

Throughout history, man has always exploited animals, raising them for his own interests and needs. "Animals have been worshipped in eastern civilizations because of their benefits for man or due to religious motives. Farming and animal breeding had a special place in the religion of the ancient Iranians and is evident from the various references to animals, including their description and classification, that are made in different parts of the Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrians and Middle Persian texts" ]4[. "For ancient Iranians, the main criteria for classifying creatures were their goodness or badness. The most important and the most interesting feature of ancient Iranian religion, especially of the Zoroastrian religion, was the classification of animals into useful and harmful ones, the creatures of Ahura Mazda and the creatures of Ahriman" ]4[.

Decorative motifs in the engraving art of the Achaemenid era include animal and plant forms and others. Jewelry of the era includes bracelets, necklaces, earrings and rings, some of which were inlaid with turquoise, lapis, emerald, jade, crystal and onyx. The application of symbols, combined patterns and animal motifs is quite evident in Achaemenid art. "To define and express several specific features of kings or their territory, a combination of symbols and icons was used. This led to innovations in this particular art and imaginative creatures were created which included all positive traits together" ]4[. Artists demonstrated their skills in portraying real and mythical animals

and creatures in almost all objects and works produced during the Achaemenid era. In this period, the manufacture of jewelry was inspired by the world of animals and was an imitation of Mesopotamian art. It is evident from the images shown later in this study that most of the jewelry bears animal motifs indicating the position and importance of each; this is manifested through a symbolic concept which can be observed in the artworks of the era. A brief description of the semiotics of the animal motifs used in Achaemenid jewelry, including the lion, ibex, boar, calf, griffin and falcon, is subsequently given below.

### **3.1 Lion**

The lion is one of the animals that appears many times in Iranian art. In ancient Iranian rituals and religions, this animal represented several common concepts such as power and greatness and was the protector of temples and the tree of life. In Pahlavi texts, the lion is considered to be a member of the group of insects and the genus of wolves [5].

The image of the lion had a mainly symbolic function in Achaemenid art and was influenced by the beliefs and myths of nations such as Elam, Mesopotamia, Sumer, Akkad, Babylon and Assyria, so that the art of that period was a combination of these nations' cultural elements. The lion was the symbol of the god Mithra, a divinity in ancient Persia who was seen as the protector and guardian of the territory and due to his having great power, was often portrayed as a symbol of glory, dominion, authority and the majesty of kings, as well as a symbol of struggle, as can be seen in Achaemenid art. Finding statues of the animal in Iran and Mesopotamia also demonstrates that the lion lived in these areas in ancient times. The form of the lion statues makes it clear that there was a close relationship between the lion and sun worship, since in the ceremony of praising, in order to express their needs to the sun and in the fourth step of the Mehr Parasti religion, to attain a position of bravery, a mask was used in the form of a lion] 4[. "According to Bahar, the lion was related to death and overcoming the lion meant the start of a new life. On many Bakhtiari graves, there is an image of a lion standing on its four feet or sitting, which means that the lion is the ruler and protector of the dead" [5]. "The image of the lion had both positive and negative aspects. In Pahlavi mythology, the lion was one of the devilish beasts. Its killing was viewed as a great triumph. In Mithraism rituals, the fourth rank belonged to the lion and was considered the first in rank in this classification of top ranking" [6]. "In all Pahlavi texts, the killing of a lion was thought to be a great pious deed due to the fact it was considered as an insect" [5]. However, there are many narratives that show a positive attitude to the animal. First, the presence of the lion in different forms; because of its strength and ferocity, it was used to ward off evil forces and their harmful effects. "Mana, a magical power which was considered to be available in the image of the lion, was another motif found in many artworks from Mesopotamia, where the lion was often seen as the guardian of temples and palaces" ]7[. "On a plaque from the Achaemenid era, the lion can be seen as a talisman of power and kingship" ]8[.

"Among Iranian people the lion has always been considered as one of the most important archetypes. In Iran the lion, which is always seen placed at the side of kings, has become a royal symbol and is a sign of courage and strength" ]9[.

Most of the motifs used in Achaemenid art are related to the lion; extensive use of this motif in the works of the Achaemenid era, such as wall paintings, capitals, carvings

and reliefs, utensils, jewelry and so on demonstrates the sanctity and superiority of the animal over other animals and reflects the religious ideas of the ancients in Iran. All of them represent strength, power and glory; the condition of weakness and failure are not portrayed in any of them.



Figure 1. a) Gold armlet with lion-head terminals [19]; b) gold armlet with lion-head terminals from Miho Museum in Japan [19]; c) bracelet with lion-head terminals [22].



Figure 2. a) Gold bracelet with lion-head terminals [10]; b) gold armlet with lion-head terminals [18].

### 3.2 Wild Boar

“The wild boar is one of the animals that played an important role in supplying food for the Iranian people and was regularly hunted. In Persian mythology, the wild boar is a suitable symbol for representing the leading force of victory, courage, strength and power. In Avesta, the fifth manifestation of the Verethragna divinity (Bahram Yazata) takes the form of a saber-toothed wild boar that kills in one attack; it is also furious and powerful” [5].

As mentioned before, in ancient Iranian mythology, the wild boar was considered to be a symbol of Izad Bahram, the god of victory. For the people, the wild boar was a symbol of strength, courage, bravery and victorious force. The existence of this image on Achaemenid bracelets probably endowed their owners with a feeling of power, strength and courage.



Figure 3. Bracelet with wild boar head [18].

### 3.3 Ibex

“The ibex is an animal which was popular among the Aryan nomadic tribes because of its agility and the reason for which it was seen as the companion of Aryan immigrants for thousands of years. Early evidence shows that the ibex and wild ram were domesticated by man in the surrounding area of Choghagavaneh in northwestern Iran about 12,000 - 11,000 BC” [5].

For ancient people, the ibex had a mythological solemnity and a symbolic and sacred role. Among Iranian people and civilizations, and in the different arts, such as petroglyphs in the mountainous areas of Lorestan, in the Moghan plain and Khomein, and areas near water, and also on the bronze and pottery artworks dating back to millenniums BC ; an ibex with long horns indicated its symbolic role and was considered to be a symbol of water, rain, abundance and blessings, as well as of the guardian of the moon. In many cultures, the ibex is considered to be a symbol of fertility and blessing.

“In Lorestan, the ibex was in some instances considered as a symbol of the sun, and in others, as a symbol of rain. In ancient times, the moon had a close relationship with the sun. At that time, people believed there was a relationship between the tortuous horns of the ibex and the moon crescent, as they thought that the horns of the ibex could cause rainfall due to the shape of the horns which probably recalled the shape of the moon. It is evident that ancient Iranians believed in a relationship between the moon and rain. Among ancient Iranians, the horn was also known as the symbol of kingdoms, power, abundance of cattle, the body and fertility]4[.

“The image of two ibex on both sides of a tree is one of the ancient Elamite motifs and can also be seen in the series of the Assyrian tree and ibex. This famous Mesopotamian motif was extremely common in the art of the Achaemenid and Sassanid era” [2].

In ancient texts (Avesta), the ibex is also a sacred animal and remembered as one of the manifestations of the Verethragna divinity (Bahram Yazata).



Figure 4. a) Bracelet with ibex head [10]; b) gold bracelet with ibex-head terminals [10]; c) gold bracelet with ibex-head terminals [10]; d) gold bracelet with ibex-head terminals [10].

### 3.4 Ram

“The ram is one of the major animal forms, related to the gods of birth and fertility, it was worshiped in the ancient Middle East, Greece and Egypt. Images of rams have been found in the temple of the Mother goddess (Sumerian) dating back to 3500-3000

BC, and also on precious metals obtained from the royal graves at Ur, which date back to around 2500 BC" [7].

"Due to its importance in people's lives, the ram has been held sacred since ancient times. For early cattlemen and farming communities in the Iran plateau, the ram represented a symbol of superiority over other animals, especially sheep. For them, the ram was a symbol of heaven and the male God" [4]. In his encyclopedia of mythological beasts, Gholizdeh writes: the ram is an animal which, in addition to its many benefits, such as providing milk, wool, meat and leather, also represented power in warfare and invasion due to its physical force and tortuous, but sharp robust horns and great solemnity. It therefore became over time, a symbol for the god of war" [5]

"One of the ten bodies of the Verethragna divinity (Bahram Yazata) is the ram. In the records of Ardashir I, the ram is the sign of kingly Khvarenah (splendor)" [6].

The crowns of some Sassanid kings were also decorated with ram horns to reflect their charisma and success. In the past, a ram statue was placed in the coffin between the hands of the deceased. In Zoroastrian tradition, the ram was remembered respectfully. According to Avesta, the Verethragna divinity (Bahram Yazata) has the body of a ram. The ram is also a symbol of Khvarenah. Both of them (Bahram and Khvarenah) were the source of blessing and holiness for a Zoroastrian believer. Among Zoroastrians, it is believed that Farahvarha visits the earth every year in Farvardin (the first month of the year), to bring heavenly blessings.

Achaemenid artists used the image of the animal with magic designs on their utensils and jewelry, especially bracelets and armlets. As regards the conceptual meaning of the ram, it was seen as a sign of wanting to keep sanctity and blessing in their lives.

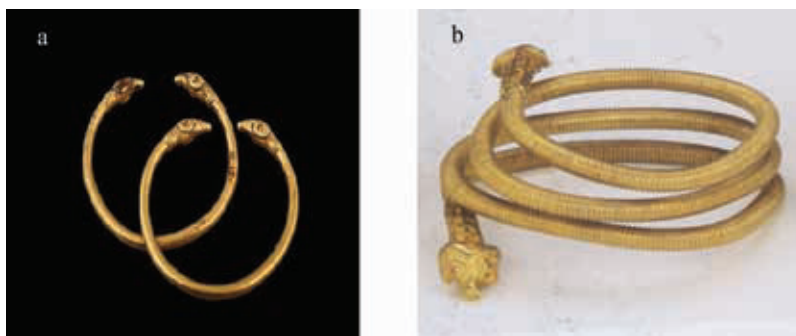


Figure 5. a) bracelet with ram heads [18]; b) bracelet with ram [10].

### 3.5 Calf

Another important and religious animal present in the beliefs of the ancient Iranians is the calf, whose holiness has continued among some Indian and Iranian nations, up to the present.

"In ancient Iran, the calf was considered the most useful livestock among all the others. The bull or ox, which served in cultivating and plowing the land, in addition to being considered as a basis for nutrition, were thought of as being of precious help in the farm life of those days [11]. "In ancient Iranian mythology, the calf was a unique creature and a symbol of growth and the germination of plants, and from whose bones,

blood and other members, mountains, rivers and other phenomena were created respectively" [4].

"The bull is the most obvious symbol of the male gender in nature and namely a symbol of strength and reproductive power. It has been linked to the sun, gods and heaven and has been known as one of the ultimate sources of fertility and similar to the gods of creation" [7]. "In Mesopotamia and adjacent areas, moreover, images of bulls were linked to the sun, gods, heaven and water as a source of fertility and life" [7].

"In Aryan myths, the calf is sacred and the representative of power and strength" [11]. "Basically, giving credit to the calf among the Indian and European people may be due to the fact that calves were the largest and most valuable domesticated animals they had, before the horse and the camel were domesticated (though the camel was domesticated somewhat later). Traditionally, the calf was the best gift and the best way of asking for redemption that men could offer the gods" [5].

Given the above-mentioned facts, the image of the calf, together with the winged calf, which can be seen in many works of the Achaemenid era, have been used as a symbol of blessing, creation and growth.



Figure 6. Gold bracelet with calf head [18].

### 3.6 Griffin

The griffin (an old French word) is a legendary creature with an ancient ancestry. This animal is usually portrayed with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion, sometimes with a crown and clawed feet. The griffin is the symbol of an extraordinary and powerful creature. Since it is a combination of the lion as the king of animals and the eagle as the symbol of the king of birds, it involves some features belonging to the two holy creatures and some concepts dedicated to the griffin. The lion was the symbol of the Mithra divinity in ancient Persia and was introduced both as the protector and guardian of the territory and a manifestation of power and strength. In ancient Iran, the eagle also represented religious beliefs and with its wide wings was a sign of superiority and support and a manifestation of the God of ability. In mythology, wings are generally used to depict divine and supernatural creatures. The wing symbolizes the superior position of God and divinity. The wings indicate the strength of the relationship between gods and humans while expanded wings represent the support of God [3].

“The most important symbol attributed to the griffin is the sun. Experts of ancient art see the griffin as an eastern creature and a symbol of sun and light. The griffin is a symbol of the great power of the king, his extraordinary strength and the ability of his troops and his strength as protector and guardian. Felicitousness and blessedness are other concepts related to the animal, so that its image on textiles and utensils had the meaning of goodness and blessing for their owners, at the time of the Sassanids” [12]. The griffin brought blessing and goodness to the owner’s life. The existence of the image on artworks from the Achaemenid era, especially jewelry, indicates the importance of the imaginary animal at that time. The griffin might, therefore, provide a kind of strength, power, and support and care for its owner.

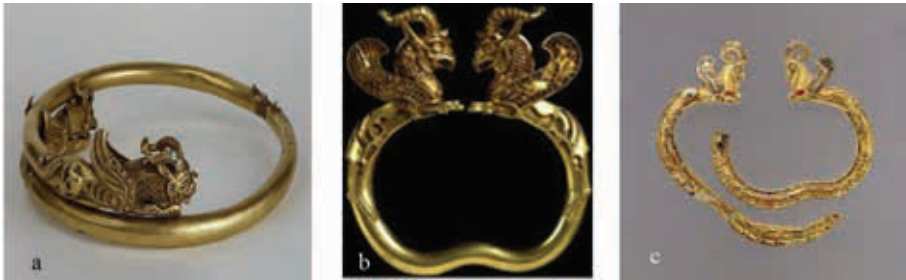


Figure 7. a) Gold armlet with griffin head [13]; gold armlet with griffin head [19]; c) gold armlet with griffin head from Miho Museum in Japan [21].

### 3.7 Duck

“Ducks and wild geese are the subject of many Chinese and Japanese legends and are considered to be a favorable theme in ceramic decorations. A pair of orange ducks (*yuan-yang* in Chinese, and *oshidori* in Japanese) is thought of as a symbol of fidelity in marriage, because it is said that these ducks have the same mate throughout their life” [7]. “The head of the swan is a favorite and popular image among the Scythians” [14]. and can be seen in the utensils and jewelry of the Achaemenid era. The Scythians were one of the nations subordinated to the Achaemenid Empire.

The duck, as one of the Celtic animal symbols (Celtic race), is a symbol of honesty, simplicity and ingeniousness and a bird that is very sensitive to its surroundings. It is also an elegant and agile bird in the water. This bird is viewed respectfully because of its beauty and compatibility, as it can adapt easily to new climates and circumstances [23].

As Afhami states in his doctoral thesis, the gifts received from the Scythians in the reliefs of Persepolis are described as follows: there are Sakās, including six persons wearing pointed caps and having smooth beards. They were Iranian people who had brought some gifts to present to the Achaemenid king. The gifts included: sturdy horses with adorned tail and mane and well-built, full lace, bracelet with animal heads, Median mantles, Median pants with socks. On the eastern stairs, Khwarazmian / Sogdians / Sakās of the hauma cult, are five persons whose gifts included: Median dagger with scabbard and hardware, armlet, battle-axe and horse [15]. Considering the aforementioned, it may be said that some of the jewelry of the Achaemenid era were gifts offered to the king by the nations subordinated to the Achaemenid Empire.



In addition, the symbolic meaning of the goose has been explained by Esfandiar Kohenoor in his book *“The Position of Symbolic Motifs in Traditional Arts of Iran”* as follows: alertness, wakefulness, mental purity, egoism, spirit, love, pride, imagination, stupidity and gullibility [16]. In ethnic and mythological beliefs, it has been described as a symbol of heraldry and an ingenious person.

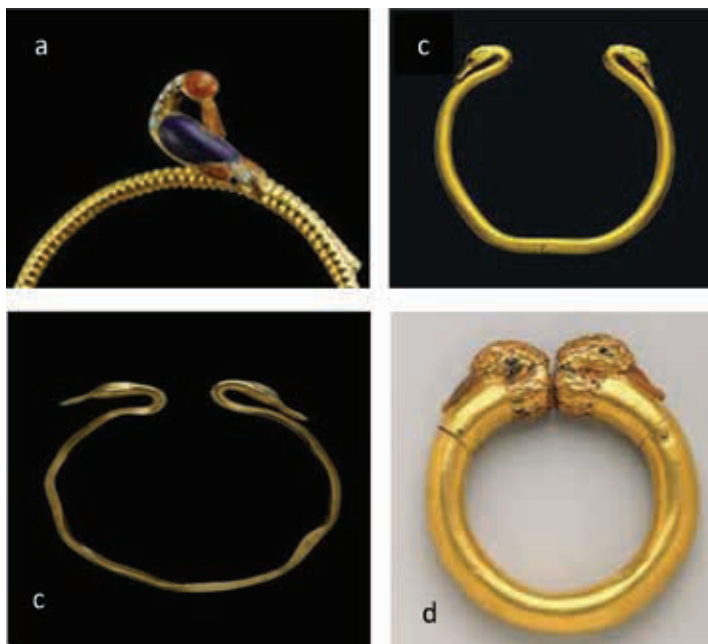


Figure 8. a) Bracelet with duck motif [20]; b) gold bracelet with duck head [19]; c) gold bracelet with duck head [10]; d) gold bracelet with duck-head terminals [21].

### 3.8 Falcon

The falcon, often translated as the hawk, “is one of the swiftest-winged birds, as it flies like an arrow which is shot from a bow and carries its hunted prey in its claws ripping it with its sharp beak” [11]. “The falcon, which like the eagle, is a symbol of royal authority and is a magical bird with mysterious forces. Ahura Mazda recommends Zarathustra to smell a falcon’s feather and rub it on his body, thereby voiding the enemy’s sorcery. In Persian mythology, anybody who carries the bone or feather of this bird cannot be killed or overcome by any mighty man” [11].

The eagle is also one of the manifestations of Indra and Agni in the Vedas which may not be unrelated to the image of the Verethragna divinity (Bahram Yazata) in the form of a falcon [17]. “In Avesta and Pahlavi texts, the falcon has been mentioned as a symbol of cosmos for Khvarenah” [5]. The motif of the Varghan (duck), in the form of an eagle, can be seen in the Achaemenid flag and is mentioned in Avesta; it can be visualized as a “falcon” or eagle, which is known as a fast bird and the special bird of Bahram (Izad) or a symbol of the god of victory [5].

Table 1. Types of motifs used in Achaemenid period jewelry and their symbolic meanings. Source: Writers

Motif	Symbol
lion	courage, strength, power, glory, dominion, guardian and protector of territory
wild boar	leading force of victory, courage, strength and power
ibex	water, rain, abundance, blessings and guardian of the moon, fertility and bliss
ram	god of war, blessing and holiness
calf	blessing, creation, growth, charisma, success and fertility
griffin	strength, support, care, sun and light, the mighty power of the king, protector, guardian, felicitous and blessed
duck	beauty, agility, honesty, sensitivity and compatibility with surroundings
falcon	power, victory

## Conclusion

A symbol acts in art at various levels and according to beliefs and social traditions which inspire the artist. On the one hand, symbols and motifs seen in the artworks of ancient civilizations are the signs of different peoples and a nation's cultural identity and, on the other, they can represent their thoughts and perceptions. By knowing the significance of their symbols, we can obtain a picture of the thoughts of our predecessors. This study has aimed to recognize the symbolism in animal motifs in the jewelry of the Achaemenid era. According to the study, animal motifs and symbols used in the jewelry of the era can be classified into three main categories: 1. The impact of the sovereignty and power of the king: found in the images of lion, wild boar, ram and griffin which are the symbols of power, authority and majesty of the King, protector and guardian. All of the motifs used in the Achaemenid accessories are intended to describe the main characteristics of their government. 2. Religiosity, reflection and influence of faith and religion: in the rituals of Mithra and Zoroaster, each of the images of lion, wild boar, ibex, calf, falcon and ram had a position and rank and were considered sacred. 3. Those influenced by the arts of other subordinated nations, such as the image of the duck, which was the result of influences from the art of the Scythians.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), Swiss psychiatrist and thinker who is known for his works on the psychology and representation of his theories as analytical psychology. Along with Sigmund Freud, Jung is considered as one of the founders of modern psychoanalysis and according to Frieda Fordham, the researcher of Jung's work: "Jung has completed what Freud has not mentioned".

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## Internet Resources

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### Biographical notes

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Author of the books "*The aesthetics of flower and bird in Hafez's poems*" and "*Arabesques in Iranian art and Iranian gardens*".

### Summary

Achaemenid art is a combination of different nations' art and a reflection of thought and religion of the era. Plant, human, animal motifs and a combination of them have been used in the art of the Achaemenid era. But the abundant use of animal motifs, especially in jewelry, has distinguished the Achaemenid art. The present paper aims to study the animal symbols in the jewelry of the Achaemenid era. Following a definition of the symbol, it evaluates the role and status of animal symbols in Achaemenid jewelry by categorizing and analyzing those motifs. Descriptive-analytic method has been used in this paper and data has obtained from library research. According to the results of the study, it can be found that the symbolic animal motifs were used in the jewelry of the Achaemenid era to express the power and majesty of the king and the sovereignty; they demonstrate the Iranians' particular viewpoint toward the world, religion and custom of the era and artistic qualities of the related nations.

### Riassunto

L'arte Achemenide è una combinazione di arte proveniente da diverse nazioni, un riflesso del pensiero e della religione dell'epoca. Motivi riconducibili a piante, genere umano, animale e alla combinazione di essi sono stati utilizzati nell'arte dell'era Achemenide. Ma l'uso copioso di motivi animali, soprattutto nella realizzazione dei gioielli, ha distinto l'arte Achemenide. Il presente documento mira ad analizzare i simboli degli animali nei gioielli dell'era Achemenide. Seguendo una definizione del simbolo, si valuta il ruolo e lo status dei simboli di animali nei gioielli Achemenidi attraverso la classificazione e l'analisi di questi motivi. Il metodo descrittivo-analitico è stato utilizzato in questo studio e i dati sono stati ottenuti dalla

ricerca bibliografica. Secondo i risultati dello studio, è possibile dedurre che i motivi animali simbolici sono stati utilizzati nei gioielli dell'era Achemenide per esprimere il potere e la maestà del re e della sovranità, mostrando il particolare punto di vista degli iraniani verso il mondo, la religione e gli usi dell'epoca e le qualità artistiche delle nazioni connesse.