ABSTRACT: The motif known as the tree of life or the sacred tree is associated with mythology and religious beliefs in the art of the Near Eastern Bronze Age in particular Iran. The history of the motif goes as far back as the fourth millennium B.C. and the Uruk period. Its origin, meaning and distribution in the Bronze Age Iran, however, have yet to be studied. From which parts of the Bronze Age Iran is the motif known so far? What is the archaeological origin and mythological meaning of the motif in the region? On which categories of artworks and in which archaeological contexts the motif is attested? On the basis of hypothesis proposed by the authors, in the Bronze Age Iran, the motif comes from the areas related with the Mesopotamian urbanization. The research adopts an art history methodology with an approach to mythological texts of Mesopotamia in accordance with archaeological contexts, which, drawing on the ethnological paradigm of the cultural diffusionism. The motif of tree of life in the Bronze Age Iran has so far been reported only from southeastern region of Halil Rood.

Key words: Bronze Age; Iran; Jiroft; Mesopotamia; Sacred tree; Shahr-i-Sukhteh; Tree of life

INTRODUCTION

The motif known as the tree of life or the sacred tree is associated with mythology and religious beliefs in the art of the Near Eastern Bronze Age in particular the Iranian Plateau. The eternity of the sacred tree in Mesopotamian mythology is something beyond the physical realm and is intertwined with the human soul and the spirit of nature; it is not merely the tree itself that is worshiped, but the virtual essence embedded in it is at stake. The tree of life is inconspicuous, merely disclosed to those who have mastered wisdom and grasped the knowledge of good and evil of the universe and knowledge of the gods, because the wise is regarded as measuring up to gods. The tree of life possesses a healing property and confers eternity; and personification of gods in the sacred tree prevailed in the myths of a vast region extending up from the ancient Mesopotamian to India (Eliade, 1953: Ch. VIII). In the ancient Orient, the history of the motif goes as far back as the fourth millennium B.C. and the Uruk period; it is even regarded as the archetype of the sacred tree in the Garden of Eden in Judaism and the ancient Greek mythology (Parpola, 1993). The motif, based on the cuneiform tablets from the third millennium B.C., is in sacred and reciprocal relation with river, water and the water of life as well as the water of eternity in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh and the myth of the god Duzumi (James, 1967: 7-13), the mythoi that later inspire the Babylonian, Ugarit and even ancient Egyptian ones (Ibid., 14, 71-2).

In the Near Eastern art of the Bronze Age, the motif of the tree of life is attested as a cedar or a palm soaring upward with many branches, flanked on both sides by two ibexes or hybrid sacred creatures, or with gods and goddesses accompanied by the king or high priest protecting or worshipping it; alternatively, the tree is the central element in the scene of the king in the presence of a seated god, where the king stands before the tree and talks with the god with the tree separating them (e.g. Gombrich, 1995; Kleiner, 2011: 32-42). For instance, in the scene from the third dynasty of Ur depicting Ur-Nammu the presence of Ningal or Enlil, the sacred tree lies between the seated Enlil and the standing Ur-Namu who waters the tree (Madjidzadeh, 2001: xi, fig. 335-6), or the frescos from the palace of Maridating to the third millennium B.C. and the Middle Assyrian palace of Tukulti-Ninurta the tree of life is flanked by two ibexes (Madjidzadeh, 2001: 120, fig. 73; 167, fig. 115). And, the Early Elamitebowls from Susa, now in Louvre, depict ibexes or bulls on either side of the sacred tree (Madjidzadeh, 1991: 115, fig. 8; 120, fig. 16). The motif is found on artworks invariable media in the Near East, among them stone reliefs of Assyrian palaces in Nimrud and Dur-Sharukin, at Louvreand British Museum (Madjidzadeh, 1997:9, fig. 13; Madjidzadeh, 2001:ix, fig. 456-7), brick reliefs from the Early Elamite temple ofNinshushinak, at Louvre (Madjidzadeh, 1991: 163, fig. 94) and ceramics or cylindrical seals dating from the Uruk period or even middle Assyrian era (Madjidzadeh, 2001:ix, fig. 57; 158, fig. 103). The Ram on the
Thicket from the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Madjidzadeh, 2001:x, fig. 207-8) and the Lyre of Ur from the same cemetery, both of them now at British Museum (Madjidzadeh, 2001:x, fig. 209-11) are other characteristic examples.

According to the objectivity matter of the authors, the motif of the tree of life in the artistic traditions of the Bronze Age and even the Uruk period of Mesopotamia has been explored from mythological and art history points of view, but its origin, meaning and distribution in the Bronze Age Iranian plateau have yet to be studied. Therefore, the present paper deals with the following questions:

From which parts of the Bronze Age Iranian plateau is the motif known so far? What is the archaeological origin and mythological meaning of the motif in the region? On which categories of artworks and in which archaeological contexts the motif is attested?

On the basis of hypothesis proposed by the authors, in the Bronze Age Iranian plateau, the motif comes from the areas related with the Mesopotamian urbanization, and, archaeologically, Mesopotamia is the origin of this motif, attested on the soapstone burial jars deriving from some graves in Jiroft; and its mythological meaning should be interpreted on the basis of Mesopotamian mythoi and in relation with the afterlife world and resurrection.

**METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

The research adopts an art history methodology with an approach to mythological texts of Mesopotamia in accordance with archaeological contexts, which, drawing on the ethnological paradigm of the cultural diffusionism, attempts at interpreting and explaining the presence of the myth in southern Iranian plateau in the socio-cultural contexts related to Mesopotamian urbanization. In the cultural diffusionism, the ideas, beliefs, techniques and socio-cultural elements disseminate through trade or even as a result of military actions to other regions and come to popular use there (Matthews, 2007: 19-22).

The mythological and cosmological meanings associated with the tree of life have quite well been described in a number of primary sources, among them Eliade (1953), James (1967) and Kramer (1961), in relation to the Mesopotamian mythology through the epic of Gilgamesh and the courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna (Kramer, 1961; Sandars, 1977). In Genesis 3.22, we read about a tree described as “the giver of eternal life.” However, these sources are silent on the Mesopotamian origin of the concept. However, as regards of art, and to determine on which artworks and artefact types the motif under discussion is seen one can refer to Y. Madjidzadeh’s *Elam: History and Civilization* (1991) and his three-volume series *Mesopotamia* (1997, 2000, 2001). Though he has described the motif of the tree of life as it appears in the artistic traditions of Sumer and Old Elam, the role of this motif in the love story of Dumuzi and Inannahas gone absolutely untouched in his publications (Madjidzadeh, 2000: 85). Other primary sources that simply introduce and describe the motif include P. Amiet’s *Elam* (1966), E. Porada’s *The Art of Ancient Iran: Pre-Islamic Cultures* (1969), E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art* (1995), A. Moortgat’s *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia: The Classical Art of the Near East* (1969) and Sir Max Mallowan’s *Early Mesopotamia and Iran* (1965). It should not go unmentioned however that none of these primary sources deals with the geographical distribution of the motif in the Bronze Age Iranian plateau and its relationship with archaeological contexts as well as the relation between its meaning and the myths of Mesopotamia or even of other regions.

**Archaeological evidence from the Iranian Plateau**

The motif of the tree of life or the sacred tree accompanied with such elements as deities and or ibexes or sacred bulls is ahitherto unreported evidence from the northern part of the Iranian plateau in the Bronze Age, e.g. the Kura-Araxes cultures and Urmian wares horizon in Azerbaijan, TepeHsarp III in Khorasan, northeastern Iran, Godin III-IV in Central Zagros or even forested highlands of northern Iran (e.g. Porada, 1969; Tala’i, 2009: 78-95, 114-25). Therefore, it appears that the motif should be looked for in the southern part of Iran in particular Trans-Elamite region and in the areas directly related with the Mesopotamian urbanization; the archaeological evidence of this, indeed, has already been attested at Shahr-i-Sukhteh and in Jiroft.

**Shahr-i-Sukhteh**

Covering a total area of 17ha during its Period I occupations (c. 3000 B.C.), Shahr-i-Sukhteh (recently better known as the “Burnt City”) lies in southeastern Iran, at the cultural and natural border between the Iranian plateau and the Indus Valley. The site was a major industrial, trade and population center in the region during the third millennium B.C. and maintained contacts and trade ties with Mesopotamia and the Indus valley as well as Elam, Kerman (Tel Iblis and Tel Yahya) and Khorasan regions (Madjidzadeh, 1989: 159); it has come to form, together with the Halil basin, the so-called Trans-Elamite region. Shahr-i-Sukhteh got so close to urbanization but climatic changes probably hampered its entrance to it (Madjidzadeh, 1989: Ch. XI). Of the four occupational periods identified at the site, a terminus a quoem of c. 3000 B.C. is suggested for the earliest Phase 10 (Period I), on the basis of a proto-Elamite tablet, while Phase 1, the latest dated phase (Period IV), is
dated as late as c. 1800 B.C. (Piperno&Tosi, 1975). A burial contained a ceramic painted bowl of a buff ware with painted motifs of a tree and an ibex; the vessel was dated to the Early Bronze Age and mid-third millennium B.C. (Piperno&Salvatori, 1983; 2007).

**Jiroft**

The early 2000s excavations in Jiroft region, Kerman, yielded soapstone or chlorite vessels at Mahtut Abad, Hossein Abad, Chehr Abad, Mokhtar Abad, Reza Abad, Rig Anbar and Miyaneh cemeteries; these are decorated with the tree of life or the sacred tree motifs in the form of a palm flanked by ibexes, or standing or recumbent lions next to the palm (Madjdizadeh, 2003: 39, fig. 23; 40, fig. 31; 47, fig. 34; Perrot, 2003: 101, fig. 27; 105, fig. 39: 112, fig. 42). However, Madjdizadeh (2003, 2008) suggests these finds outdate the related materials from Susa and Sumer, and he dates them to the beginning of the Bronze Age. Indeed, the idea that the settlements of Halilbasin, known as Jiroftculture, are indigenous, independent and earlier in date than those of Sumerian and the Early Elamite periods has faced criticism (e.g. Muscarella, 2005, 2008; Basello, 2006). At the moment, any discussion on the civilization of Halil Rood outdating or postdating the cultures of Old Elam and Sumer will require archaeological investigations of the Chalcolithic Age background in the Halil basin and southeastern Iranian plateau.

**DISCUSSION**

In the southeast of Iranian plateau, from the Trans-Elamite region, the naturalistic relief motifs carved on vessels of gray chlorite are not restricted to Jiroft and Halil Rood basin; related materials with a cross-cultural style are also found in other territories in the province of Kerman, which were also exported to Sumer, at such sites as Tell Yahya, and Tell Khabis, modern Shahdad (Pittman, 1984: 13-31). However, the tree of life or the sacred tree is so far exclusively attested at the excavated sites in Jiroft.

The archaeological contexts in which our motif is found are clearly different in Halilbasin and Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, it comes from several contexts of everyday life among them temple walls and cylindrical seals, while in Halil Rood it is merely found on chlorite vessels deposited in burials. This particular context reveals a significant association between the motif and the beliefs related to afterlife in the Trans-Elamite culture. In addition, the motif could have originated from Mesopotamian mythical and religious narrations in that it is totally unattested in southern Iranian plateau during the Chalcolithic Age (e.g. Tala’i, 2011: 120-2), while it is seen on the cylindrical seals deriving from southern Mesopotamia dating from Uruk period. Furthermore, the literary texts on the Sumerian tablets give us a clear picture of the myth of Dumuzi and his courtship with the goddess Inanna as the role of the sacred tree. Here, the tree of life or the sacred tree is a gift from Sumerian gods to Inanna and Duzumi and the means of their revitalization, and in some ways it epitomizes the spring, flourishing and continuation of life in the world (e.g. Kramer, 1961; Madjdizadeh, 2000: 85; Bienkowski & Millard, 2000: 96). Moreover, Porada (1970), drawing on the deciphered texts of TchoghaZanbil, describes ibex in the contemporary sacred beliefs as symbols of masculine fertility and protective powers of the sacred tree. In addition, the myth of Etana, the Sumerian king of Kish, is depicted on the chlorite vessels from Jiroft burials along with snake and eagle representations, motifs that were also reflected in the Sumerian written literature (Madjizadeh, 2000: 363-9; 2011; Perrot, 2003: 105, fig. 126b). However, no written mythoi are currently known from the Trans-Elamite region (e.g. Vallat, 2003; Basello, 2006).

The situation at Shahr-iSukhteh is however utterly different from Mesopotamia and Halil Rood, and one must refrain from judging simply on the basis of the similarity of the motifs or even archaeological context. According to Analytical Archaeology, anyanalysis of a given archaeological attribute requires an archaeological assemblage (Clarke, 1971) while at Shahr-iSukhteh we have only a single example not an assemblage. Therefore, we are not allowed to judge the influence of Mesopotamian mythology and literature on Shahr-iSukhteh and Baluchistan region simply on an individual ceramic bowl! Indeed, the motif of tree of life is absent from the art of Chalcolithic Age in southeastern Iran and the Great Khorasan (Tala’i, 2011: 120-2, Ch. III) and even the Indus Valley (Pittman, 1984: 79-88). Analysis of the naturalistic tree and ibex motif on the Shahr-iSukhteh bowls is not indicative of any element of the myth of Dumuzi and Inanna or any Mesopotamian literary and religious influences. However, a number of decorative motifs on soapstone vessel from Jiroftare attributable to the epic of Gilgamesh and the myth of Dumuzi and Inanna or Etana on the basis of the Sumerian mythological and literary texts, a fact that to some extent distinguishes the nature and meaning of the tree depicted on the Shahr-iSukhtehvessel from related motifs attested in Mesopotamia and Halil Rood region.

**CONCLUSION**

The motif of tree of life in the Bronze Age Iranian plateau has so far been reported only from Halil Rood region; it is notable, however, that archaeologically the motif is as yet unattested in the Chalcolithic
assemblages in this region. Therefore, it appears that in terms of the cultural diffusionist paradigm one can safely postulate a Mesopotamian and Sumerian origin for the belief in the tree of life or the sacred tree, which was borrowed into southeastern Iranian plateau and Trans-Elamite region through cultural and social interactions and trade ties. This claim finds further support in the fact that the Sumerian literary texts describe mythological characters of this tree in relation with the deities Dumuzi and Inanna. Here, we place more emphasis on the Sumerian literature and mythology because, in spite of the close socio-cultural and commercial-political interactions between Elam and Sumer, no archaeological evidence of the epic of Gilgamesh and myths of Dumuzi and Inanna or the king Etana has so far become available from the Elamite literature. Thus, the Sumerian literal influences on Trans-Elam and Halil Rood region is far more documented than those of the Old Elam or Susiana.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Motifs</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Photo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ceramic bowl, pedestal base, buff ware, painted decorations, wheel made</td>
<td>Tree and an ibex</td>
<td>Shahr-i-Sukhta, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>National Museum of Iran, Tehran (<a href="http://www.wikimedia.org">www.wikimedia.org</a>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Soapstone bowl, pedestal base, relief decorations</td>
<td>Tree and ibexes</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Madjidzadeh, 2003: 39, fig. 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Soapstone bowl, pedestal base, relief decorations</td>
<td>Tree and ibexes</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Madjidzadeh, 2003: 40, fig. 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Soapstone bowl, flat base, relief decorations</td>
<td>Tree and ibexes</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Perrot, 2003: 101, fig. 27</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Soapstone bowl, relief decorations</td>
<td>Tree and ibexes</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Perrot, 2003: 101, fig. 27</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Soapstone vase, relief decoration</td>
<td>Tree and lions</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Perrot, 2003: 105, fig. 39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Soapstone vase, relief decoration</td>
<td>Tree and lions</td>
<td>Jiroft, SE. Iran</td>
<td>3rd Millennium B.C.</td>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Perrot, 2003: 112, fig. 42</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Additionally, the difference between archaeological contexts of this motif in southeastern Iranian plateau and Sumer must be emphasized; in the former region it is not attestable but inburial contexts. Therefore, in this case too, our approach to the Sumerian literature can contribute to our understanding of the meaning and connotations of this motif in the beliefs and culture and art of the settlers of southeastern part of the Iranian plateau during the Bronze Age, which as regards mythological concepts and cosmological interpretation of the motifs can suggest an urge to eternal life and resurrection. Indeed, this conclusion is more relevant to Halil basin on the basis of the archaeological evidence from Shahr-i Sukhteh is still too limited.

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