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A SACRED CELESTIAL MOTIF: AN INTRODUCTION TO WINGED ANGELS ICONOGRAPHY IN IRAN

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Abstract

Through history many motifs have been created and over the centuries, some of them turned into very well-known symbols. One of these motifs is winged angel. This sacred and divine creature which appears in human-shaped, serves intermediaries between the God and people, and during history, indicates legitimating and bestows God-given glory. This article aims to present the results of exploring the historical background of the winged angels in Iran, in order to understand its precise concept; where it comes from and what it resembles. For this aim, its conceptual and figurative evolution from ancient times till contemporary era is taken into consideration. Examination of the winged angel indicated that Ancient samples and Qajari instances are similar to each other regarding their appearance, gender and general pattern. However, they show major differences in their function and perception of their original meaning.

Within this respect the illustrators of Qajar era were successful in copying the ancient samples in appearance but they incorporate a very new and different meaning: While ancient samples used them in kingly scenes and emphasized on bestowing glory and Farr, the Qajari ones displayed them in a very general form.

Keywords

Winged Angel, Nike, Farr, Qajar, Sassanian, Parthian, Zoroastrian, Ashi

1. Introduction

Contacts between Greeks and Persians started in second millennium when the Greeks settled in Asia Minor. This connection became closer when the Greeks interacted with the Achaemenid Empire. Persian Kings, especially Darius I, glorify a diverse imperial art and culture which amaze people from all provinces. As a result, many Greek specialists traveled to imperial centers such as *Susa* or *Pars* to be employed; the craftsmen, the physicians, the merchants, the worriers, the aristocrats and etc (Martinez, 2012). So the Greek culture began to spread in Iran Plateau. After *Alexander the Great* conquest of Achaemenid Empire in 4 century B.C, the Hellenism significances began to grow in the eastern territories. Meanwhile the Greek people influenced with Oriental culture; so as *pierfrancesco callieri* says the Hellenism was an intricate process between Persians and Greeks which the interracial marriages supported it. The Seleucid commanders were Greek but they had Persian blood in their veins too which affected them culturally (Callieri, 1393/2014).

2. Background of winged angel in Ancient world: Greece, Rome, Seleucid

Nike (figure 1) is the winged angel of Victory in ancient Greece who depicts as a goddess with widespread wings (Grant & Hazel, 1384/2005). Her counterpart in Rome was *Victoria* (figure 2). Both of them represent with attributes such as flying or with flowing wings, carrying a wreath, holding a palm branch or crowning a victor (Encyclopedia of Britannica, 2005). People worshiped Nike and Victoria to be victorious in any tasks or challenges they undertook.



Figure 1: Nike of Ephesus, 180-210 B.C (left) - Gold finger ring, 300 B.C (right)



Figure 2: Septimius Severus arch in Leptis Magna, 145-211 A.D (left) - Titus Flaminius Coin, 197 B.C (right)

In order to understand the concept of our purpose, we should look at Seleucid (312 B.C to 64 B.C) coins and coinage which they were a Hellenistic state. *Callieri* (1393/2014) believes that the Seleucid coinage reflects their religion and beliefs in Gods. For instance, the coin of *Alexander the great* (figure 3- left) which was minted in 323- 336 B.C, shows Nike the goddess on its reverse standing with spectacular body-length wings, wearing a long chiton and holding a laurel wreath. *Lysimachus*'s gold coin (305-281 B.C) also represents Nike the goddess on its reverse (figure 3- right): Athena-Nikephorus¹ seated left while Nike in outstretched right hand is crowning with wreath.

¹ Nikephorus is a Greek name means "carrier of victory" and uses whenever a God or Goddess carry the Nike on his hand to grant her.



Figure 3: coin of Alexander the great, 323- 336 B.C (left) - gold coin of Lysimachus, 305-281 B.C (middle)

In this case, Dr. Kyle Erickson² believed whenever Nike the goddess appears in Seleucid coins while crowning with a wreath or riding a chariot (Biga) comprise a victory meaning (Erickson, 2009); therefore he believes Parthian Coinage is closely related to these Greek meaning: They followed Seleucid's footsteps in iconography in their own special way.

3. Winged angel in Ancient Iran

Before we get into this part, we should define one Special feature which has been frequently repeated in ancient Iran art. When Achaemenid Empire (700 to 330 B.C) expand its power through Persia and territories nearby, they could profit from those civilizations to synthesis a brand new art which was no longer belonged to Elamite, Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Assyrian or even Urartian: it was Persian Art. So, a very special Iranian feature created: *"receiving", synthesize and turned it to "novelty"*.

3.1 The winged Angel in Parthian era: Parthian kings (250 B.C to 226 A.D) didn't forget their Hellenic heritage, rather merged the Greek features into Iranian traditions (Colledge, 1380/2001). The influence of Hellenistic art and iconography in Parthian art and iconography is indisputable. Parthian didn't want to dissolve the existing system, so they showed tolerance towards all nations and all religions. Variety of gods and goddesses were allowed to be worshipped. So

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instead of demolishing the Greek traces, they preserved them with moderation and equality (Girshman, 1370/1991).

Parthian coins provide important information about the relationship between religion and kingship over more than four centuries (Curtis, 2012) and includes very important data such as cultural and political situations, Kings' victory and coin mintage and also a specific representation of reputation and authority of Parthian kings (Sinisi, 2012 b). From *Mithradates I's* reign, Parthian kings adopted the "Philhellenic" title in order to show conformity of Seleucids (Martinez, 2012). Curtis (2007) also emphasizes that it was important to use Hellenistic iconography, so it could be understood by the Greek inhabitants and convey a message: the Great King is a friend of the Greeks as well, a philhellene, who enjoys divine protection and authority. So besides the receiving authority and legitimating, the purpose of these Hellenic iconographies was to represent, visualize and embody of Iranian Gods (in Persian *Yazata*) into Greek figures. This was a phenomenon which had never been done before (Sinisi, 2008 & Curtis, 2007).

If we accept that the ancient Iranians had their own divinities that were closely associated with the God-given glory and kingly fortune, then it is possible that Parthians used the Hellenistic iconography of such deities as Heracles, Apollo, Athena and Nike/Fortuna for their own religious beliefs. In this case, both Iranian and Greek populations equally understand the messages through these iconographies: Hercules as *verethragna (Bahram)*, Apollo as *Mithra* and Nike as *Ashi*.

Now we can look at Parthian coinage. Nike the goddess is visible on the reverse of bronze coin tetrachalkous of *Mithradates I* (figure 4- left) who rides a chariot (Biga). She is standing on the right hand of Demeter with long wings and crowning with a wreath on the tetradrachm of *Artabanus I*. The obverse of *Orodes II*'s drachma (figure 4- middle) represents Nike the goddess, flying with her body-length wings while wearing long chiton and crowns Orodes II with a wreath and brings him God-given glory. There are two Nike the goddess represented on some coins such as *Phraates V & Musa's* drachma (figure 4- right) or *Phraataces*' drachma which represent one in front of the bust and the other at the back of the bust. We can also find Nike the goddess on other coins such as tetradrachm of *Tiridates I* and tetradrachm of *Vonones I*. Moreover there is a little floating Nike the goddess in *Gotarzes II*'s

inscriptions in Bistoun, Kermanshah province which is carrying a diadem as a symbol of victory (Kawami, 1392/2013).



Figure 4: tetrachalkous of Mithradates I, 171-138 B.C (left) - drachma's of Orodes II, 57-38 B.C (middle)- Phraates V & Musa's drachma 2nd century B.C- 4th century A.D (right)

We should mention the adjacent territories of Parthian in cultural exchanges. There are several Kushan coins with Hellenistic iconography. For instance we should mention a representation of *pharro*, the Kushan equivalent to the Iranian *khvarenah/khvarrah* (New Persian *farr*), who wears a diadem and a halo (Curtis, 2012 & Olbrycht, 2016). Elymaian coins also followed the Seleucid tradition: The motif of the enthroned Zeus leaning on a scepter and holding a small Nike the goddess on his outstretched right hand is very popular in elymaian iconography (Curtis, 2012).

Nike is one of the symbols and motifs that appear in Iran culture in order to the mutual influences between adjacent territories. This motif convey a political message: The King received God-given glory, so he is the rightful king on the throne (Curtis, 2007). This is how we can see the angels on the reverse of the coins that carries wreath or diadem and the king on the obverse has that wreath on his hair. Probably this is the Greek diadem which turned into Iranian concept and appearance (Shahbazi, 1391/2012: 51).

Boyce (1381/2002) believes that Nike the goddess is the figural and visual representation of *Ashi*, as Zeus represents *Ahuramazda* and Apollo represents *Mithra*. Avestan word *Ashi (aši)* is attested in *Gathas*, the oldest text of the Zoroastrianism and means "that which is attained" and "reward for deed". In *Yasht 17*, Ashi is unambiguous divinity or yazata. So as a divinity of reward for deed and fortune, Ashi depicts as a victory divinity in battlefields and she implicates prosperity, fortune and glory (Hosseini, 1389/2010).

We would like to suggest that Iranian derived benefit from a well-known global symbol and grant it an Iranian concept: $Farr (kh^w arnah^3)$. As Nike the Greek goddess supports victors and grant glory to them, Farr is a power that grants royal glory and empowerment to the possessor of Farr (Gnoli, 1999). So Iranians had Gods and Goddesses which counterbalanced with the Greek Gods and Goddesses. The glory, divinity and legitimating in Iranian culture and collective unconscious synthesized with Greek concept of Royalty and God-given Victory and adopted the visual and figural sample to complete the representation of this concept. Curtis also emphasizes that the Hellenistic iconography of an investiture scene showing the king in the presence of a goddess resembling Nike, Tyche or Athena can be understood within the Iranian concept of kingship and the Avestan *Farr*, the God-given glory, fortune and splendor (Curtis, 2012).

3.2 The winged Angel in Sassanian era: when the Sassanian reign (224 A.D to 650 A.D) began, the Greek cultural impacts have been notably diminished. Sassanian kings didn't show hostility towards the Greek culture but the priority was given to the culture of their Iranian ancestors (Girshman, 1379/2000). After battles between Roman and Sassanian Empire and with the victory of *shapur I*, some prisoners transported to the east as craftsmen. These craftsmen played an important role in developing Sassanian arts within the cultural interactions with Rome. But we should mention that Sassanian ruler established Zoroastrianism as state religion basically the concept of legitimating and divinity became a principal issue for kings. And additionally we know God and relating issue such as Beliefs are answers to existential concerns about a crucial subject (Samraj, 2016) Such as kingly glory and to be legit in this study.

Winged angel motif can be observed on reliefs and silver vessels in Sassanian era. Those intended reliefs situate at the *Tang⁴-e Chowgān* by two sides of *Bishāpur* River in Kazeroun, Fars province. The relief of Bishāpur 3 (the victory of shāpur I over roman Emperors) (Hermann, 1983) has five horizontal registers which carved in concave shape. The relief has been damaged but the main scenes are still obvious. The king, Shāpur I and his horse can be seen in middle of the relief while the Roman Emperor *Gordian III*'s body is underneath the king's horse, *Philip the*

³ A divine power in Zoroastrian religion means glory, fortune, and splendor which related to prosperity and kingly majesty which have descended from heaven to whom deserves it.

⁴ Valley

Arab kneeled and *Valerian* being captured. Over the king's head there is a little angel that looks like a Roman *Putto⁵* and He is the one who bring the diadem to the king as a symbol of victory and legitimating. In this case Canepa (2009) emphasizes that Sassanian triumphal art incorporated many Roman triumphal concepts.

We can see this little angel in the relief of Bishāpur 2 (also the victory of shāpur I over roman Emperors) (Hermann, 1983). In this relief (figure 5- left), Shapur I has defeated the Roman army and sat on his horse with glory. The *Gordian III*'s body is underneath of king's horse while *Philip the Arab* kneeled and is begging for life and peace and *Valerian* standing beside the king as a prisoner and his hand was held by the king. Over the king's head, a Putto brings a diadem to the king and carries him divinity, merit and legitimating. Also, in the Iwān of *Khosrow II* (the Arch of Khosrow II) at $T\bar{a}q$ -e Bostan in Kermanshah province, there are two winged female figures (figure 5- right), who completely wear Roman. They have body long wings, wear chiton and visualize in flying style and they carry a very elegant diadem with their right hands. This could be a symbol of investiture of Farr to kings. Here Canepa (2009) believes that this carving (winged angels) resembles the integration of roman motifs with indigenous ornamental elements.



Figure 5: The relief of Bishapur 2 (left) - details of Iwan of Khosrow II (the Arch of Khosrow II) in Taq-e Bostan (right)

⁵ a figure in a work of art depicted as a chubby male child, usually naked and winged

This concept is observed in Sassanian silver vessels as well (Harper, 1981): For example the silver and gold plate with investiture scene or the silver and gold plate with royal hunting scene (figure 6). This last plate with hunting scene shows the king who rides a roaring horse while wears gilded armor and holds jeweled halter of his horse. The flowing ribbon which is a sign of his legitimating can be seen at the back of his head. While the king fights and hunts the lion, boar and elephant, a cupid with gilded wing brings a gold diadem with pendant to him; symbol of victory and merit.



Figure 6: silver gold plate with royal hunting scene

4. Winged angel in Islamic Iran: From Arabs invasion to Qajar dynasty

The Arab invasion of Persia led to eclipse of Sassanian Empire in 7 century A.D and Muslim Arabs Army dispersed the Islamic state through Persia from west to east. The fall of Sassanian Empires and the raise of Muslim rulers caused strife in society, conflicts between two populations and eventually divided the society into conqueror and defeated (Golgziher & nath, 1371/1992). Since the Arab rulers sometimes behaved brutally towards Iranian, humiliated them or calling them names, Iranians decided to establish movements against Arabs and retrieved their identity, glory and power. *Shu'ubiyyah* movement was one of the most effective movements in 8 and 9 century A.D. Preserving Iran culture and heritage, revival of Persian identity and creation of equality between Arabs and Persians were their primarily concerns (Momtahen, 1370/1991). In order to achieve these goals, Persian Muslims in Samanid, Tahirid and Saffarid dynasty adopted the court system, tax system, coin minting and etc from their ancestors specially Achaemenid and Sassanian Empires; Meanwhile some nobles and elites endeavored to translate many books and manuscripts from middle Persian (*Pahlavi*) into Arabic such as *Calila e Dimna*

by *ibn al-muqaffa*'. Moreover Creation of *Shāhnāma* (book of the kings), a magnificent epic book of the kings by *Ferdowsi* which reminded the ancient Iran kings, empires, myths, legends and tales, caused the population being familiar with their history; In Buyid Dynasty, the rulers used the Sassanian title *Shāhānshāh* (the king of the kings) once again to revive their ancestors legacy.

During the first three centuries (7-9 A.D) of the Muslim settlement in Iran, no special art and architecture has been appeared, but after this dark era, the Iranian background in art and architecture helped Islam culture to build up a brand new art (Pakbaz, 1384/2005). However there were no motifs of winged angels or any figural motif in this time, but little by little as we mentioned in the past paragraph, some movements caused the interest in arts began to grow.

We're not sure who illustrated a manuscript for the first time but there are some samples of religious book decoration in Abbasid Caliphate (8 to 10 century A.D) which had simple patterns. In the decades and centuries after, complex embellishment such as gilding and illuminating and jeweled has risen, and artists applied animal motifs and human figurative art once again (Canby, 1381/2002). But Mongols invasion to Iran (13-14 Century A.D) should take into account, as they had dramatic and significant impacts on Iran art and illustration. They had many destructions and massacres in the first place and the Artistic spirit has diminished for many years. But the migration of the craftsmen from eastern cities to the west in order to serve the rulers developed art and architecture again (Mohammadi, 1389/2010). Although there was a second invasion to Iran by Mongols that led by Hulāgu. Besides of the destructions, they found Iranian's culture magnificent, so the art especially illustration and miniature flourished. As a result many books such as Shāhnāma, Panj Ganj, Me'rajnama⁶ and zafarnama has been illustrated by the supports of Ilkhanid rulers (13-14 Century A.D) and Timurid rulers (15 century A.D) such as Shāhrukh, Bāysenkar Mirzā and Ulugh Beg (Pakbaz, 1384/2005 & Canby, 1381/2002). Here we can find the first winged angels after centuries. They appeared in illustrated books and manuscripts whether in religious, epic or poetic context. They have Mongolic significant such as round faces, almond-shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, Chinese-like dressing but was shown in the ancient Iran's traditions and Islamic principles.

⁶ Me'raj is a Physical and Spiritual Journey (Ascension) in Islamic beliefs.



Figure 7: Folio from a Haft Awrang by Jāmi, angels carrying trays of light to the poet Sa'di (left), folio of Khosrow in Shirin's Palace from Khamsa of nizāmi (middle), Part of the 'Assassination of Khosrow Parviz' folio from Tahmāsp Shāhnāma (right)

Safavid (15-17 Century A.D) rulers also attempted for Excellency of art. *Shāh Esmā 'il I* gathered many artists and craftsmen in *Tabriz* and planned an artistic development movement. His descendants especially *Shāh Tahmāsp* followed him: the results would be creation of series of finest manuscripts with miniature and painting such as *Shāhnāma* (known as *Tahmāsp Shāhnāma*), *Jāmi's Haft owrang (Seven Thrones* by *Jami)* and *Nizāmi's Khamsa* and many others (Pakbaz, 1384/2005). The book decorating and gilding or illustration had been lessened by the accession of the *Shāh 'Abbās* as his interests had been in architecture and urban planning (Pakbaz, 1384/2005 & Welch, 2011).

5. Winged angels in Qajar dynasty

Just like centuries ago, Iran faced a revival in its culture again in Qajar era (18-20 Century A.D). This revival which was a result of past movements, insisted to divide Iran's history into two phases⁷: first, Ancient Iran and second, Islamic Iran. In this theory, ancient Iran was magnificent, civilized and advanced which Arabs invasion and retarded Islamic culture ruined it (Bigdaloo, 1380/2001). Qajar rulers, Statesmen, nobles and elites got familiar with their

⁷ Archaism

ancient background, history and legacy by interactions with India and acquaintance with Iran's forgotten history by manuscripts and books such as *Dasātīr*, *Shāristān-i Chār Chaman and Dabestān-i Mazāhib*; being familiar with *Āzar Kayvān* and his party successors; Discovery and excavations of ancient Iran civilizations and specially deciphering the cuneiform of Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian scripts (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1395/2016). So despite the Arabs invasion to Iran, Iranians' memories and knowledge of their ancestors remain strong during Islamic Iran, therefore Ancient Iran's motifs continue through Islamic Iran to enrich Persian Artistry. It's good to know that revival of the Sassanian Rock relief in Fath'Ali Shah's reign was a conscious attempt by him to associate his kingdom with the glories of Ancient Imperial Iran (Lerner, 1998).

We can find first and foremost Qajarian winged angel in *Fath'Ali shah*'s rock relief in *Tang-i Allāhu Akbar* in Shirāz, Fars province. Fath'Ali shah seated on a *takht* (throne) which is supported by two winged angels and two male figures -probably his successors- stand each side of him. On the left, supporting the throne's right front corner, a winged angel bends its left knee with right hand crossing its chest. Its left counterpart damaged badly. Their wings can be seen to either side of their head (Lerner, 1991). On the other hand there is a similar folio from an illustrated Qajari Shāhnāma known as *Dāvari Shāhnāma* which has been illustrated by *Lotfali Suratgar* (Dāvāri Shāhnāma, 1274 AH). There is a folio in this Shāhnāma that shows *Khosrow II* (*Parvēz*) seated on three floored throne (takht-i tāqdēs) while winged angels (Putti) carry the third floor on their hand. But there's two more: two winged angels carry pearl strings over the king's head; a very traditional symbol of Farr, legitimating and merit in Iran imperial history.

We can observe these winged angels in religious buildings which investiture Farr and fortune to the visitant and pilgrims. There are two pairs of winged angels in $\bar{A}z\bar{a}di$ courtyard in *Imām Rizā* Shrine in Mashhad, Khorasan province, eight pairs in *Tekieh Mo'āven ol-Molk* in Kermanshah Province, one pair in *Atiq* courtyard in *Fātima al-Ma'sumah* in Qom Province, two pairs in $\bar{A}q\bar{a}$ mausoleum in Tehran Province, seven pairs in *Tādj al-din qarib* tomb in Shiraz (figure 8- left), eight pairs in *Shāhzāde Ibrāhim* tomb in Kashan province (figure 8- right) and etc.



Figure 8: the wall of Tādj al-din qarib tomb in Shiraz (left) - the ceiling of the Shāhzāde Ibrāhim tomb in Kashan (right)

These winged angels are dressed in a knee-length Jāma or just a skirt, they depicted with colorful three rows wings and the most important one, they depicted with poly-lobed jeweled crown. The distribution in religious building shows that these angels strongly relates to the divinity and intermediary between Gods and humans.

Religious buildings are not the only buildings that winged angels could be found. Government buildings such as telegraph station in Kashan had this embellishment in order to wish the good luck and fortune for visitors. Other public places like *Bāzār* also granted this Good fortune to anyone came to buy and sell stuff. A good sample is *Bakhshi Timcheh* (arcade) in Kashan (figure 9- left) which two splendid winged angels are shown while they're flown. They are naked and just wear some pendant and have deep blue wings. They had magnificent jeweled crown and a necklace. The portal of one Bath (*hammām*) in Isfahan (figure 9- right) and the wall of the other bath in Kashan, vividly shows investiture of Farr and fortune.



Figure 9: Bakhshi Timcheh (arcade) in Kashan (left) - Shāhzādeha hammām (bath of princes) in Isfahan (right)

Winged angels decorated the houses as well. Royal mansions such as *Golestan Palace* in Tehran province which was the residence of Qajar kings for so many years, is shown these winged angels in portal of palaces. Other houses and mansions such as *Borujerdis house* (*Khāneh-ye Borujerdihā*) in Kashan, *Nārenjestān* or *Qavam Garden* of Shiraz, Fars province, *Zinat ol-Molk House* in Shiraz, Fars Province and other houses in Shiraz, Isfahan, Tabriz (figure 10- right), and etc. They granted luck and fortune to the ones who live in this house. Apart from these samples, one of the most impressive examples of winged angels are seen on the tombstones which primarily show the granted Farr, luck and fortune to the dead one, meaning they are under supports of Gods even in their afterlife. The tombstones of the Cemetery of *Takht-i Foulād* in Isfahan Province (figure 10- left); the tombstones of Qajar kings such as *Nāsser al-Din Shāh*, *Fath'Ali shāh*, *Muhammad shāh* and other peoples like *Hamdam ol-saltana* are good samples for this category. There are winged angels in many other places: on the lower part of a wall (*ezāreh*) of palaces and Castles, on the front page of newspapers, on medallions and etc. This procedure diminished when Pahlavi dynasty wore the crown in the beginning of the 20th century.



Figure 10: one tombstone of the Cemetery of Takhte Foulād in Isfahan (left) - Wall of the House in Tabriz (right)

6. Conclusion

We don't know for sure which territory used the winged figures for the first time, but probably should be attributed to Persia (Iran) and Mesopotamia. There were some winged figure in Elamite and Achaemenid Empires but they didn't represent as an individual. It is indisputable whenever a new dynasty came to throne, they need a powerful imperial set ups to legitimize their reign. Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanian and even the Islamic dynasties tired to provide these set ups by using some God and Goddesses Iconographies on coins, reliefs, vessels, painting and etc in order to be legit. We found out ancient motifs, referred to the Greek concepts and iconography of victory and legitimating such as Nike the goddess but understood by Persian population in an Iranian context, as they had their own Gods and Goddesses with granting legitimating and Farr such as Ashi. We found out the ancient Iran motifs used in the victory scenes, enthronement scenes, and bestowing legitimating scene, while the Qajar winged angels rather used in scenes with granting good fortune and luck. In this case, we inferred Qajari kings tried to associate their kingdom with the glory of ancient imperial of Iran in order to being rightful and legit. Accordingly we noticed that Qajar widely distribution of winged angles in ordinary scenes led to diminish the concept of legitimating. As it could be a sign that they really wanted to show themselves legit, it could have been a sign of their religious beliefs as well. But we would like to suggest that Qajar artists and kings reached the same point as their ancestors: They received motifs with different meaning and understandings form their ancestors, inspired by them and then created a brand new concept in compliance with their beliefs even though in a very ordinary way.

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⁸ Note: The entire References match with APA style and since the authors used Persian scripts as well, these Persian references are written in Bibliography, just in Romanized dates according to the APA Citation Style Guide for Persian resources. Available for download:

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