Research

Zarrīn Fām
Museum Studies Biannual
Volume 3, Issue 5
Fall 2025 and Winter 2026
Print ISSN: 2980 – X924
Online ISSN: 2980 – 9541

An Iconographic and Semiotic Analysis of the Representation of Power and Legitimacy in Abbasid Tiraz: A Case Study of a Silk Textile at the Tar-o-Pood Museum of Yazd

Sahar Abdolahi ✉ Postdoctoral Researcher in Archaeology, Department of Islamic Archaeology, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Mazandaran, Iran; Head of the Museum Management Office and Collections Custodian, Tar-o-Pood Museum, Yazd, Iran.

Received: 25 Nov. 2025 **Accepted:** 16 Feb. 2026 **Published:** 20 Feb. 2026

Abstract

Abbasid tirāz textiles constitute some of the most important material evidence for investigating the relationship between art, political power, and symbolic systems during the early centuries of Islam. The present study examines a silk textile attributed to the Abbasid period and preserved in the Tar-o-Pud Museum in Yazd. Based on the Kufic inscription found on the textile, the object is dated to approximately the third century AH. The study aims to analyze the technical, epigraphic, and iconographic structure of the textile and to elucidate its position within the symbolic system of the Abbasid caliphate. The research employs a descriptive-analytical, case-study approach based on direct observation of the object and comparative analysis with similar examples preserved in international collections. The findings indicate that the motifs of the lion, camel, archer, and cypress tree are organized within a multilayered visual narrative and represent concepts including political power, religious legitimacy, cosmic order, and the continuity of Sasanian pictorial traditions. Furthermore, the technical characteristics of the textile, including the creation of motifs through the interlacing structure of warp and weft and the repetition of the imagery on both sides of the textile, demonstrate the high level of technical knowledge and weaving expertise achieved in Abbasid workshops. The results show that this textile was not merely a decorative fabric, but rather functioned as a visual and ideological medium for representing the power and legitimacy of the caliphate. Its study can therefore contribute to a more precise understanding of material culture and textile art during the early centuries of Islam.

Keywords: Abbāsid tirāz; Islamic textiles; iconography; symbolism; Tar-o-Pood Museum of Yazd.

Citation: Abdolahi, S. (2026). An Iconographic and Semiotic Analysis of the Representation of Power and Legitimacy in Abbasid Tiraz: A Case Study of a Silk Textile at the Tar-o-Pood Museum of Yazd. *Zarrin Fām*, *3*(5), 175-197 (in Persian).
https://doi.org/10.30481/museum.2026.583212.1080

© 2026 The Author(s). This article is an open-access work distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). Citation and redistribution of this work are permitted provided the original source is properly credited.

1. Introduction

Textiles constitute one of the most significant categories of material culture in the study of Islamic archaeology and art history. Beyond their utilitarian and decorative functions, they provide invaluable information about economic structures, production technologies, cultural exchanges, and political systems. Unlike many artistic objects confined to ceremonial or courtly contexts, textiles permeated various levels of social life, rendering them reflective of a broad spectrum of cultural and ideological relations within Islamic societies. Among the diverse types of Islamic textiles, ṭirāz fabrics hold a distinctive position. These textiles were not merely products of advanced weaving skills but served as political and symbolic media for representing caliphal authority and governmental legitimacy. The inscribed bands woven into ṭirāz textiles, often containing the caliph's name, production location, and date, transform these objects into rare material documents for studying the administrative and political structures of the Islamic world. Scholarly research has demonstrated that Abbasid textile art was not founded upon a rupture with earlier traditions but rather on the reinterpretation of Sasanian, Byzantine, and Coptic artistic heritage. Motifs such as lions, royal hunting scenes, confronting animals, and the tree of life, which possess deep roots in ancient Iranian art, found prominent expression in Abbasid textiles, redefined within new political and religious frameworks. The iconographic study of Islamic textiles reveals that the imagery on these fabrics carried complex layers of political, religious, and social meaning. From this perspective, ṭirāz textiles can be understood as visual texts in which writing, imagery, and weaving technology collectively served to transmit concepts of power, legitimacy, and cultural identity. The silk woven textile under investigation, housed in the Yazd Textile Museum, represents an exemplary specimen of this artistic tradition. The presence of a lion, a camel, an archer, and a cypress tree alongside a Kufic inscription provides an ideal context for the simultaneous analysis of the object's technical structure, iconography, and symbolic system. This research endeavors, through the integration of archaeological art approaches, iconography, and symbolism, to elucidate the significance of this textile within the continuity of Iranian visual traditions and the ideological framework of the Abbasid Caliphate.

2. Research Methodology

This research is conducted as a fundamental study employing a descriptive-analytical approach. Data collection was carried out through library research, documentary analysis, and direct observation of the textile. The study population comprises Abbasid-period ṭirāz textiles held in reputable museum collections, with the specific case study being the silk fabric preserved in the Yazd Textile Museum. The research process was executed in four distinct stages. The first stage involved examining the material and technical characteristics of the textile, including fiber type, weaving technique, warp and weft structure, and the execution method of motifs and inscriptions. The second stage focused on analyzing the Kufic inscription and its position within the fabric's visual structure. The third stage employed Erwin Panofsky's three-level iconographic model to study the pictorial motifs—lion, camel, archer, and cypress tree—at the pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation levels. In the fourth stage, a comparative analysis was conducted with analogous examples from the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and other international collections to determine the textile's historical and artistic position. Technical, iconographic, and comparative data were ultimately interpreted within the theoretical framework of archaeological art and cultural symbolism to elucidate the textile's role in representing power, political legitimacy, and the continuity of Iranian visual traditions within the Abbasid Caliphate.

3. Discussion

3.1. Material and Technical Examination of the Abbasid Woven Textile

The material and technical analysis of the Abbasid ṭirāz textile preserved in the Yazd Textile Museum, conducted through direct observation and structural analysis, reveals that the object belongs to the category of advanced courtly textiles of the Abbasid period. The weave structure employs a complex warp and weft technique in which the pictorial motifs were created not through surface painting or dyeing but through the internal mechanism of the weave itself. This method results in the complete visibility of the patterns on both sides of the fabric, a feature characteristic of prestigious Abbasid textiles. Examination of the raw materials indicates that the warp threads consist of silk fibers while the weft comprises vegetal or mixed fibers, a structure consistent with the "mulḥam" textiles documented in historical sources and archaeological samples. The yarn density, uniformity of weave, and precise control of warp and weft tension

collectively demonstrate the weaver's high skill and access to well-equipped, organized workshops. The weaving direction and the regularity of pattern repetition suggest that the overall design was pre-planned, and the weaver maintained complete control over transferring the design from the workshop pattern to the textile structure. Such a level of planning and precision is typically observed in courtly productions or workshops affiliated with the caliphal administration. Comparative analysis of the technical data with published examples from recognized Abbasid textile production centers, including Fustat in Egypt, Tinnis, and Khurasan, reveals similarities in the composite fiber structure, the method of creating patterns through weaving, and the two-sided motif feature. This comparison strengthens the attribution of this woven textile to the Abbasid weaving tradition and indicates that it was not a localized or limited product but part of an extensive network of luxury textile production in the early Islamic world. Overall, the material and technical analysis demonstrates that the studied textile reflects a high level of technical knowledge, production planning, and structural aesthetics, qualifying it as reliable evidence for studying the textile production system during the Abbasid period.

3.2. Epigraphic Analysis

The Kufic inscription woven into the structure of this Abbasid textile constitutes one of its most significant components, playing a decisive role in dating, attribution, and interpreting the object's function. The inscription was executed integrally with the fabric, not as an applied or embroidered addition, demonstrating careful planning before the production process and the central position of text in the overall composition. Paleographically, the inscription is rendered in simple early Kufic script, featuring elongated, angular letter forms devoid of vegetal ornamentation or the curvatures of Thuluth script. These characteristics align with the common Kufic styles of the second and third Islamic centuries, supporting the textile's dating to the early Abbasid period. The geometric order of the letters, uniformity of line thickness, and proportional spacing indicate the weaver's high skill in translating written forms into the language of weaving. The inscription's content, containing the name "Ahmad bin al-Hasan al-Nasir," presents particular significance and ambiguity from a historical interpretation perspective. Although extant sources do not definitively clarify whether this name refers to the patron, owner, or weaver of the textile, the inclusion of a personal name on a ṭirāz-type fabric indicates a direct connection between this textile and the structures of power, courtly circles, or elite networks. In the Abbasid ṭirāz tradition, the presence of names, especially in conjunction with symbolic motifs, often signified emphasis on legitimacy, social standing, and political identity. From a functional perspective, the combination of inscription with pictorial motifs elevates the fabric beyond mere decorative textile, transforming it into a textual and visual medium. Within this framework, the inscription serves not only an informative function but also acts as a legitimizing and sanctifying element, a role well-documented in Abbasid ceremonial practices of khilʿa bestowal and political gift-giving.

3.3. Detailed Iconographic Analysis of the Abbasid Ṭirāz Textile

3.3.1. The Lion: Continuity of Divine Glory (Farrah) and Royal Power

The lion has represented cosmic power, legitimate kingship, and divine glory (farrah) in Iranian visual tradition since the first millennium BCE. In the reliefs of Persepolis, the lion attacking a bull embodies the triumph of cosmic order over chaos and the cyclical nature of time. The transmission of this motif to Abbasid art demonstrates the conscious reproduction of Sasanian visual language within an Islamic context. In the studied textile, the depiction of a lion attacking a camel, rather than a bull, creates new symbolic significance. The camel in Islamic culture functions as a multifaceted animal: representing economy, trade, and caravan routes; signifying the eastern and desert regions of the caliphate; and serving in some texts as a metaphor for burden, endurance, and territory. Consequently, the camel-slaying lion can be interpreted as an allegorical representation of caliphal dominance over territories, resources, and commercial networks, demonstrating the adaptation of ancient motifs to new political realities.

3.3.2. The Young Archer: Human Agency, Territory, or Ideal King?

The presence of the young archer represents one of the most complex iconographic elements of this textile. In Sasanian art, the archer typically represents the royal hunter or mythical hero; however, the orientation of the arrow toward the lion in this composition transforms the conventional royal hunting pattern. Three primary interpretations can be proposed. First, the archer may symbolize territory, with the young man representing the territories under caliphal dominion, defining the relationship between centralized power and its provinces. This reading transforms the image into a representation of political equilibrium rather

than unilateral domination. Second, based on Iranian wisdom literature traditions, the archer may represent the ideal king who exercises self-control even over his own power, embodying political reason and justice. Third, the archer may represent legitimized human agency, with the young man symbolizing a society whose legitimacy derives from religion and possesses the capacity to manage political power. These multiple interpretive possibilities reflect the semantic richness of the textile's iconography.

3.3.3. The Cypress Tree: Cosmic Axis, Religion, and Cultural Continuity

The cypress is one of the most enduring symbols of ancient Iran. In Zoroastrian tradition, it represents immortality, the connection between earth and heaven, and natural sanctity. The transmission of this symbol to Islamic art demonstrates the process of Islamizing ancient symbols without eliminating their fundamental meaning. The placement of the cypress behind the archer creates a semantic axis: human → religion/sanctity → power. This arrangement presents religion as the mediator between humanity and political authority. At the iconological level, the textile presents a multilayered narrative of Abbasid political order. Contrary to the absolutist representation of power in official art, this textile reveals a network of interacting forces: royal power (lion), territory and economy (camel), human agency and society (archer), and religion and legitimacy (cypress). This visual system reflects Abbasid political thought, in which the caliphate constituted not merely military power but a structure legitimized through religion, tradition, and cosmic order.

3.4. Comparative Archaeological Analysis

The comparative analysis with the analogous example in the Cleveland Museum of Art reveals that the similarities between these two textiles extend beyond common characteristics of ṭirāz textiles. Beyond sharing technical structure, weaving technique, Kufic inscription type, fiber composition, and overall compositional system, the precise continuity of motif rhythm, the direction of pictorial elements, geometric proportions, and the placement of animal motifs suggest a connection extending beyond stylistic similarity. The sequence of motifs demonstrates that the visual boundaries at the end of the studied textile correspond remarkably with the beginning of the motifs in the Cleveland example, as if both fragments were part of a continuous repetition in the weaving process. This correspondence appears not only in the placement of principal elements but also in the distances between motifs, the extension of weave lines, the sequence of the inscription, and the overall compositional order. This evidence supports the hypothesis that the two fragments likely originated from a single larger textile or from a single production cycle in a royal workshop, subsequently separated through cutting, erosion, or collection dispersal. The comparison with the Cleveland specimen and other museum examples demonstrates that the studied textile, with its multilayered and dynamic visual narrative—in which multiple simultaneous actions are depicted: the lion attacking the camel, the archer targeting the lion, and the symbolic presence of the cypress as a vertical axis of meaning—distinguishes it from the simpler animal motifs in comparable works and reflects a more advanced stage of conceptual planning. The comparative analysis confirms that Abbasid art, especially in the domain of textiles, was founded not on rupture with the past but on the reinterpretation of pre-Islamic symbols. The lion motif in all comparative examples, including both the Cleveland textile and the study specimen, consistently remains a symbol of power and sovereignty, but the replacement of the bull or mythical animals with the camel creates new geographical and economic connotations appropriate to the Islamic worldview and caliphal territory.

3.5. Genealogy of Motifs on the Abbasid Ṭirāz

The ṭirāz essentially functioned as a "textual and visual" medium: inscribed bands in Kufic, Thuluth, or Naskh script on a silk or "mulḥam" foundation, typically recording the caliph's name, workshop type, and date, while in the khilʿa ceremony, they represented both political allegiance and legitimacy. This political and ceremonial function explains why, alongside inscriptions, powerful symbolic motifs—royal power, apotropaic protection, and the garden of paradise—were employed. The "combat scene" and "lion-camel fight" demonstrate the transformation of ancient cosmic symbolism into political and geographical allegory. The Kufic inscription in the center, surrounded by or interwoven with band motifs, effectively creates a "two-channel reading" of the garment: one channel declaring political allegiance and the other announcing divine glory and symbolic protection. The archer motif, often depicted within pearl medallions, was inherited from Sasanian royal imagery into the early Islamic period, serving as a metaphor for capable, orderly, and defensive kingship. The cypress tree, deeply rooted in Iranian culture, symbolizes longevity,

freedom, immortality, and the "axis of the world," and its presence on courtly ṭirāz reinforces the stability of state and religion as well as the sacred dignity of the khilʿa garment. The dating of the studied textile to 203 AH (circa 818 CE) coincides with the caliphate of al-Ma'mun, a period when the center of Islamic power shifted from Baghdad to Merv in Khurasan, leading to unprecedented patronage of Iranian artistic traditions. This historical context further reinforces the textile's significance as a symbol of cultural continuity and political legitimacy in the early Abbasid period.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrate that the Abbasid ṭirāz textile preserved in the Yazd Textile Museum transcends its identity as a mere decorative fabric to constitute a visual and ideological medium within the cultural and political structure of the Abbasid Caliphate. The iconographic analysis of the lion, camel, archer, and cypress motifs reveals their organization within a coherent visual system, each bearing specific symbolic meanings that collectively represent the political and cosmic order envisioned by the Abbasid Caliphate. The lion embodies political power and legitimate sovereignty, the camel symbolizes territory and economic resources, the archer represents human agency and political reason, and the cypress signifies sacredness, immortality, and religious legitimacy. The comparative analysis with analogous specimens, particularly the Cleveland Museum textile, establishes that the studied specimen, while sharing common characteristics of Abbasid courtly textiles, occupies a distinguished position in terms of narrative structure and symbolic richness. The simultaneous presence of these four motifs in a unified composition creates a more complex narrative than comparable examples, reflecting a higher level of conceptual planning in the design process. The principal innovation of this research lies in its integrated analysis of technical, iconographic, and symbolic data from an Abbasid woven textile. The results confirm that ṭirāz textiles should be recognized as important material documents for studying political culture, power legitimacy, and the continuity of Iranian visual traditions in the early Islamic centuries. Greater attention to interdisciplinary studies in textile archaeology can open new horizons for understanding the art and material culture of the Islamic world, revealing the sophisticated ways in which woven objects served as vehicles for transmitting ideology, legitimating authority, and preserving cultural memory across centuries of transformation.