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CHARLES ANTHONY STEWART

THE FOUR-PETAL ALMOND ROSETTE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Recent excavations by an international team of archaeologists at Usharal-Ilibalyk near Zharkent, Kazakhstan have revealed an extensive Church of the East (Syriac Christian) cemetery. Currently, more than 80 graves have been excavated with a current estimate of 500 total burials in the area. All the burials display homogeneous characteristics consistent with medieval Christian burial practice, including very few grave goods. One exception was a female burial which had a large amount of jewelry on the body. One artistic motif found on two silver bracelets and a ring was the four-petal almond rosette, a design with an artistic history beginning in ancient Egypt. This article traces this motif's development throughout the ancient Near East and its eventual adoption by Christians beginning in late antiquity throughout the entire medieval period across Christendom and now—as demonstrated by the excavations at Ilibalyk and other previous Central Asian archaeological sites—found along the trade routes of the so-called Silk Road as revealed at Ilibalyk. Christians appeared to adopt this design as a “reversible” or “ambiguous” image displaying both the floral motif as well as the image of the cross.

Key words: Church of the East, Nestorian, Christianity in Central Asia, rosette, Usharal-Ilibalyk, Kazakhstan archaeology.

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SINCE 2016 a team of international archaeologists have conducted excavations in the medieval city of Ilibalyk, directed by Dr. Dmitry Voyakin of Archaeological Expertise, LLC (Almaty, Kazakhstan) and the Margulan Institute of Archaeology of the Republic of Kazakhstan and funded by a grant from the Swiss Society for the Exploration of Eurasia.¹ This site is now partly occupied by the village of Usharal, located in southeast Kazakhstan near the modern city of Zharkent just 40 km from the Kazakhstan and China border. Usharal was established as a collective farm in the 1930s during the Soviet era. The archaeological site is currently 26 km from the Ili River, of which it took its name, and flourished between the 10th and 14th centuries. The city was known from Chinese and Armenian textual sources, particularly Kirakos Gandzaketsi's *History of Armenia* (completed in 1265) which specifically records the Cilician Ar-

menian King Hetum I's visit to the city while on his way to negotiate a peace treaty with the Mongols in 1255 (*Baipakov and Petrov* 2015). This northern trade route appears to have flourished in the 12th to early 14th centuries, first under the Karakhanid Turks and then the Mongols, specifically the Chagatai khanate.

Numismatic evidence provided the first clues to the site's connection with Ilibalyk which was verified by a joint study headed by the late Prof. Karl Baipakov (*Petrov et al.* 2014: 61-76). According to coin hoards found there, through both random discovery and systematic excavation, the city seems to have reached its full extent in the 13th and early 14th centuries. In terms of geography, the site is situated between two strategic mountain ranges; it lies 233 km southwest of the Dzungarian Gate and 165 km north of the Karkara Pass of the Tien Shan (Ili-Alatay) mountains. Ilibalyk was also near (18 km) the medieval city of Al-malyk, the capital of the Chagatai Khanate, located in northwest China today, which was fully described by medieval Chinese authors (*Bretschneider* 1888.I, p.17, 69-70). Topographical surveys of Ilibalyk revealed a medieval city covering 5 km² and its layout became apparent — consisting of a fortified *shahristan* admin-

¹ International participation comes predominately from the Tandy Institute for Archaeology (Ft. Worth, Texas, USA) but has now shifted to the Lanier Center for Archaeology, Lipscomb University, (Nashville, Tennessee, USA) under the auspices for Dr. Steven Ortiz and Dr. Thomas Davis.

istrative area containing a monumental bath house surrounded by massive ramparts and a residential *rabad* with significant evidence of industrial activity. At present Usharal village lies above the southern half of the site.

This lost city gained attention of local archaeologists when a schoolteacher from the region reported a large gravestone (1 m in length) that was inscribed with a large Maltese-type cross and an inscription in Old Turkic written in Syriac letters. The stone was eventually translated by renown scholar Dr. Mark Dickens, an expert in ancient Turkic and Semitic languages, who verified that the stone commemorated a priest by the name of Petros, and the stone also identified his father (Tegin) and his grandfather, Baršabbā Quč. While containing no Seleucid Era date (which is often typical for gravestones in the Zhetisu-Semirechye region from this time period), it did state that Petros died “in the year of the monkey” which is a known month in the medieval Turkic-Mongol calendar (*Dickens and Gilbert* forthcoming, see also *Baumer* 2016: 286).

The most significant finds from the above-mentioned 2016 excavations were an additional eight gravestones that were found in the northwestern *rabad*, or residential area of the city, including two with inscriptions — one in Old Turkic, the other in Syriac. These finds also enabled archaeologists to pinpoint the location of the cemetery. Since then, a total of 34 gravestones and more than 80 graves have been excavated. An additional 65 possible graves have been identified in the cemetery as revealed from the cleared surface. While the full extent of the cemetery is still being determined, the current estimate may incorporate a 4200 m² area. If the number of burials is extrapolated, more than 500 individuals may have been interred in the cemetery. If these figures are verified by future excavations, then the burials at Ilibalyk would constitute the largest Church of the East cemetery discovered to date in Central Asia.²

The burials are homogeneous and are characteristic of the reported excavations of other Church of the East cemeteries excavated more than 130 years prior by Nicholai Pantusov in the Chui Valley, which is located in modern Kyrgyzstan, also part of the Zhetisu-Semirechye region (*Pantusov* 1886: 74-83). The

burials display characteristics of typical Christian interment practices found in other sites dating back to late antiquity such as the consistent west-to-east orientation of the body (head at the west, feet at the east) and with the head raised by a soil “pillow” and the hands crossed at the torso (*Fox* 2019: 109; *Sweetman* 2019: 520).² Clearly all the burials at this particular cemetery, so far discovered, identified themselves with Christianity and, most likely, belonged to Church of the East while living as citizens of Ilibalyk.

Over the course of grave excavations since 2018, 18% of the graves have contained simple grave goods, such as ceramic sherds, stones, and some jewelry. Most of these graves contained juveniles and infants who possessed small glass beads either as necklaces or bracelets. Only 9% of the adult burials contained grave goods. One grave excavated during the 2019 excavation season was revealed by one of our professional archaeologists, Ms. Lauren Bryant. It involved a grave (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89) of an adult woman who was laid in a west-east orientation, with her head propped up facing eastward, while her hands were clasped together over her chest (fig. 1). This individual was adorned with jewelry, including two silver bracelets, two stone and coral-beaded bracelets, two earrings, and four finger rings. Our radiocarbon dating of the adjacent graves provide a date range between the years 1280 and 1320 CE. This article will provide, in a preliminary manner, both a comparative and iconographical analysis of the two silver bracelets and two finger rings that display the four-petal rosette design. Besides being a novel form of ornament in this region at this time, it seems that rosettes also conveyed religious affiliation.

Comparative Analysis

When this grave was excavated, silver bracelets in the form of an open bangle were discovered, one

applied to this branch of Syriac Christianity based around the Christological controversies of the 5th century AD. Nestorius, a bishop in Constantinople was condemned as a heretic by the Council of Ephesus in 431. While Nestorius was venerated by the medieval Church of the East, their documents do not espouse heretical teachings often ascribed to him. In 1994 Pope John Paul II (Roman Catholic) and Patriarch Dinkha IV (Assyrian Church of the East) signed a joint statement that ended a popular notion that the Eastern Church held those heretical doctrines, which had been maintained by the westerners for almost 1500 years (see the document Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East).

³ Children and infants appear to consistently have their hands placed at the waist, while adult burials have a variety of positions. The theological meaning behind the head raised to face the east appears to apply to the idea that the deceased will witness the return of Christ as coming from the east (Gospel of Matthew 24:27).

² I prefer the term “Church of the East” rather than “Nestorian”; in fact, at the moment our team of archaeologists cannot be sure which denomination of Christians settled in this area—either “Jacobite,” “Nestorian” or even Syriac-speaking Melkites. It is possible that many different sects lived here, belonging to different liturgical-language traditions including Greek, Armenian, Latin, and Syriac. The Church of the East, which is commonly referred to as “the Nestorian Church” or as “Nestorianism” is a misnomer



Fig. 1. Excavation of a grave at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by S. Dulle



Fig. 2. Upper torso of female remains in Locus 089 with personal grave goods. Photo by S. Dulle

encircling each forearm (fig. 2). The two bracelets were slightly different from each other in terms of size and details since they were manually wrought and incised; however, their overall decoration and style are the same and, therefore, functioned as a matching set (i.e. pendants). As found, each bracelet is somewhat ovoid with a diameter of around 7.5 centimeters at their widest points. Since they are “open” at the end, they could be adjusted by bending them to secure around the arm or the sleeve, depending on the size of the person. They were fashioned using

the repoussé method, forming a somewhat astragal profile, while their surface decoration was applied using the chasing technique; the interior surface was polished smooth. The decoration consists mostly of curved and straight lines and peck-marks rendered in an expressionistic manner—that is, lacking precision and exact symmetry. The terminal ends had incisions forming fleur-de-lis shapes, but these were mostly smoothed out, perhaps caused by constant rubbing on cloth when arms would swing at the sides of the wearer (fig. 3). It has been noted by previous scholars that the fleur-de-lis is a common motif in Central Asia and may have served as *tamga*; if so, its exact mean-



Fig. 3. Left arm and silver bracelet. Excavation of a grave at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by S. Gilbert



Fig. 4. Ilibalyk Rosette Bracelets (from right arm). Excavated at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by D. Sorokin



Fig. 5. Ilibalyk Rosette Bracelets (from left arm). Excavated at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by D. Sorokin

ing is unknown (Yatsenko *et al.* 2019: 8-42). The faces of the bracelets, located opposite of the openings, are decorated by four-leaf rosettes, which are a variation of the *mandelrosette* motif, with peck-marks between each leaf, and their floral-stigmas are represented by simple dimples (fig. 4). Each face is framed on both sides by chevron patterns beside a stylized fleur-de-lis turned at a 90-degree angle with their buds pointing towards the end; likewise, the terminal ends have a similar fleur-de-lis pointing towards the face.

These silver bangles, which have been dubbed the *Ilibalyk Rosette Bracelets*, were an important discovery since they conform to other artifacts found at other “Silk Road” sites with Christian associations and, thus, provides evidence of connections to a wider cultural phenomenon. For example, the open bangle form and the use of the *mandelrosette* mo-

tif are known from three Turkic-Mongol sites (two Ongut and one Naiman) in northern China (fig. 6). Regarding the Ongut examples, Catherine Delacour observed:

The flower motif with four petals is placed in the same way at the end of ornamental bands in gold of the Jin Period... This motif in itself is not very exceptional, but it seems to have been used above all by non-Chinese populations (Sogdians, Xixia and Jin). The Yuan would later popularize it in China (2005: 94).

Clearly the *mandelrosette* theme was widespread; however, in contrast, I suggest that the use of rosettes indicates that local peoples, whether Turkic, Mongol, Uighur, or Chinese were adopting designs developed in western Asia (that is, more common in Persian

Fig. 6. a. Left: Two Bracelets in Gold, with a four-petal flower found in the area of Ulanqab (China) (5.5 cm diameter, 1.4 cm wide) (Musée Guimet, MA 7077a-b) (From *Delacour* 2005: 94); b. Right: One of Two Bracelets in Gold found in Bortala (China), with a four-petal flower (Xingjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum Collection, Urumqi) (from *Mair* 2010: 94)



and Byzantine contexts), to decorate their traditional local forms of jewelry. Another quite similar example was found in Bortala (medieval Pulad), associated with the area occupied by the Naiman tribe (fig. 6b) (*Mair* 2010:157). Bortala is located just 200 km northeast of Usharal-*Ilibalyk*. Note that all these examples contain matching pairs, presumably found in funerary contexts, though their excavations were either not recorded or remain unpublished.

The style of these bracelets matched a small ring that was also discovered at the Usharal-*Ilibalyk* cemetery. It was found *in situ* in the same grave (where the bracelets were found), decorating the pinkie (i.e. the little) finger of the right hand (fig. 6). Measuring about two centimeters in diameter, the silver ring has a rectangular bezel with two *mandelrosettes* rendered in an off-centered manner so that they are not perfectly symmetrical. Between the petals and the sides of the bezel are peck-marks that serve as a background to emphasize the rosettes. The form of the ring closely resembles the form and style of several rings discovered in medieval settlements around the Aral Sea (*Baipakov* 2014: 427). A silver ring of almost identical form was also found in a grave in the Usharal-*Ilibalyk* cemetery (Field IV, Unit 5. Loc. 26) that was placed on the thumb of a child estimated to be between 3 to 5 years old. The bezel on that ring, however, was undecorated.

Another silver ring was found on the index finger of the left hand with a four-petal rosette motif formed by filigree work (fig. 8). Its diameter measures about 2.6 cm and the band is decorated with a chevron pattern resembling a braid, while three large granules flank each side of the rosette; one granule serves as the flower's stigma. Note that next to this was a gold ring located on the middle finger with a turquoise stone (fig.9), similar to examples found in the region of Otrar (fig.14). The bracelets and rings with this conspicuous *mandelrosette* pattern suggest that the motif is more than mere decoration (fig. 9), especially since these graves were marked with Christian gravestones above. In other words, since the individuals buried in this cemetery elected to announce their religious identity through the crosses and inscriptions on their tombstones, it is plausible that they exhibited similar behavior when they were alive by wearing these symbols on their bodies.

Iconographic History of the Four-Petal Rosette

Humans have been painting floral motifs since the dawn of civilization. At Çatalhöyük (Turkey), which is considered one of the oldest cities dating from around 7500 BC, images painted on the eastern wall of a shrine have been interpreted as cruciform flowers with flying insects (bees?); moreover, a sculpture



Fig. 7. Silver ring excavated at Usharal-Ilbalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV, Unit 7b, Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by D. Sorokin



Fig. 8a/8b. Silver ring (left hand). Excavation of a grave at Usharal-Ilbalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV, Unit 7b, Loc. 89) on 16 July 2019. Photo by D. Sorokin

carved from bone was discovered nearby representing a four-petal flower (Mellaart 1967: 163; Hodder 2005: 350, fig.16.13b). Without written texts it is impossible to interpret with certainty regarding what these Çatalhöyük images meant to the artist(s) and viewers; nevertheless, these examples indicate that four-petal floral motifs have deep roots in prehistory. Another common type of floral design is the *fleur-de-lis*, which is found across Europe and Asia, beginning in the earliest civilizations, from ancient Egypt and Greece to Mesopotamian and the Indus Valley. While it is possible that there is one source for the *fleur-de-lis*' origin and, therefore, one foundational connotation, its expansion into different societies and cultures casts

doubt that it held one universal meaning (Hamlin 1916: 40-72).⁴ The same can be said for the four-petal flower which, by the Middle Ages, could be found both in western Europe and Asia developing a divergence of significations.

There are many varieties of flowers that bloom with four petals. Depending on the region, these flowers would represent ideas based on the beliefs of the local culture. In artwork, these forms are commonly labelled *mandelrosette* ("almond blossom" in German), which describes the shape of the petal (i.e. almond-shaped) rather than the species of almond tree (*Prunus dulcis*), which actually has five-petals. The later medieval form known as the *quatrefoil* is a simplified derivation of this ancient type. In general, the best approach to analyzing these forms' symbolism is to deduce, based on the local and geographical context, whether the artistic representations served merely as decoration or, rather, if they conveyed specific iconography.

The earliest representations of rosettes are found in ancient Egypt and they are ubiquitous. The *Major Scorpion Macehead* and the *Palette of Narmer* both dating to the early 4th millennium BCE, have an eight- and six-petaled almond rosette, respectively, beside the main depiction of the king; in both cases, veins are inscribed within the petals, indicating a flower, and, yet, they hover in the sky like a star. These early Egyptian forms are deliberately multivalent—they symbolize both a terrestrial phenomenon (flower blossoms) and a celestial reality (radiating star). As a symbol it is poetically paradoxical—the earthly flower is temporary, whereas the heavenly star, seemingly, is eternal; likewise, the individual king is mortal, but the position of pharaoh persists for generations regardless of kings' death. Thus, the flower-star is a symbol of the pharaohs' divine right to rule (Millett 1991: 53-59; Wilkinson 2001: 100-103).⁵ The more naturalistic depiction of the almond-shaped-petalled flower can be identified as the species of the water lily, often called the "Egyptian Lotus" (*Nymphaeaceae*) and is the symbol of the sky-god Horus.⁶

Egyptian ideas spread throughout the ancient world through trade and military expansion. For ex-

⁴ Hamlin suggested that all fleur-de-lis and rosette patterns had a common source in Egyptian visual culture and represented the lotus which is still considered a plausible theory.

⁵ The *Major Scorpion Macehead* is located at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, and the *Palette of Narmer* is located at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Acc. No. CG 14716). The gods Amon, Ra, and Horus are associated with the largest star in the sky—the sun—and were symbols of the pharaoh.

⁶ For example, at the Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, Maryland) there is a bronze sculpture of the child Horus seated on a lotus blossom, dated between 664 and 332 BCE (Acc. No. 54.419).



Fig. 9. Artifacts from a grave at Usharal-Ilibalyk (Kazakhstan) (Field IV. Unit 7b. Loc. 89)
Photo by D. Sorokin

ample, at Heliopolis-Leontopolis (Tell El-Yahudiya, Egypt), which was a major trade center, stood the large Palace of Ramses III (dated to 1150 BCE) that was decorated with tiles in rosette shapes (fig. 10a); by the 2nd century BCE a Jewish temple was constructed nearby, which attracted Hebrew emigration to that area (Holladay 2001: 527-29). The Assyrians, having trade connections with Egypt, developed the eight-petalled rosette and it became common throughout Mesopotamia.⁷ Eventually the Medes and Persians, having conquered the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the 7th-century BCE, assimilated the latter's art, particularly the use of the rosette, including the four-petal type (fig. 11). Slightly earlier, the ninth-century BCE kingdom of Urartu (located in modern-day Turkey and Armenia) used the almond-rosette symbol on banners during religious processions (Özgüç 1967: 38-47).⁸ Apparently this specific Urartian form was adopted by the Achaemenid Persians, who had assimilated Urartian artistic styles, and this banner came to be known as the *Derafsh Kaviani* ("Flag of Kings"). In Persia, the image was interpreted as a four-ray star as well as a flower, so it was also called the *Akhtar-e Kāvīān* ("Star of Kings") and, eventually,

it became a military standard during the Hellenistic and Sassanid Periods (Khaleghi-Motlagh 1996: 315-316; Shahbazi 1996: 12-27). Clearly the flower-star association was retained from the earlier Egyptian connotation. With the introduction of Greek culture in Central Asia under Alexander the Great and his successors, it is possible that the motif's popularity spread as Hellenistic ideas and ornamentation came to be cultivated along trade networks, particularly in the Gandhara region (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan).

Four-petal blossoms are found in the Buddhist art of the Gandhara region though they are not common. Because the Greco-Bactrians had a profound influence on the development of figurative and decorative art of this area, I assume that the four-leaf blossom in Buddhism was influenced by earlier Greek and Persian artistic tradition (Fourcher 2014: 1905-1951; Brancaccio 2006). In turn, Gandharan art would also influence the development of visual culture in Central Asia as Buddhism began to spread northwards to Mongolia and China. Note that the numbers four and eight are central to Buddhist doctrine, as in the concepts of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, often symbolized by the eight-petalled lotus. The four-petal rosette form, as developed by the Romans, is strikingly similar to those reproduced during the Middle Ages in India, for example, there is a relief of a four-petalled lotus on a pilaster in the Vishnu Temple in Hampi, India, manifesting the same style. Today the symbol is commonplace among modern Hindus who refer to it as the *Muladhara chakra*. As mentioned above, in Egyptian art, Horus

⁷ For example, the floral decoration in sculptures of women found in Nimrud (Iraq), dated to the 8th century BCE, made from ivory (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Acc. Nos. 54.117.8 and 52.23.3).

⁸ For example, there is a bronze plaque that shows a winged deity standing on a lion while a priestess presents a banner to him (Musée du Louvre, Paris, Acc. No. AO26086). Other Urartian examples of this motif are illustrated in T. Özgüç's 1967 article.



Fig. 10. Types of Four-petaled Rosettes. Drawing by C. A. Stewart

often sits on a lotus blossom and in Gandharan art, Buddha often sits on a lotus, and I know of at least one example, in Manichaean art, where Jesus sits on a lotus, clearly influenced by Syriac Christianity (*Gulacsi* 2009: 91-145). This motif probably influenced Sufi mystics of Islam who envisioned similar flower thrones.⁹

The eight-petaled types of Egypt and Assyria, sometimes reduced to four-petals, assimilated with the local motifs already developed in Anatolia and the Aegean. The earliest examples in Greece appear as early as the ninth century BCE, and may depict the four-leaf variety of carnations (*Caryophyllaceae*) that have bilateral heart-shaped petals common to the eastern Mediterranean region.¹⁰ The Romans assimilated Greek artistic style and these floral motifs were adopted by Jews and Christians; as such, the form persisted throughout the Middle Ages to the present-day (fig. 10a). A variant of this type, which represents the many varieties of four-petal primroses (*Onagraceae*)

developed during the Roman period and, later, became a common motif in Early Christian mosaics and frescos; this version has brown sepals between pink or red petals (figs. 10b, 12). The term *primrose* is derived from the Latin word *primus*, indicating that the flower was the first blossom during springtime and, as such, represents the idea of “new life.”¹¹

Another variety of carnation has almond-shaped petals with four pointed sepals between each, and these flowers are sometimes referred to as “Mossy Sandworts” (*Moehringia muscosa*). These forms are also commonly depicted in Archaic Greek artworks, specifically black-figure ceramics, dated to the sixth century BCE and, presumably these forms were adopted by the Etruscans.¹² By the fourth century BCE the symbol became associated with the similar eight-rayed star motif, associated with the Argead Dynasty of the Macedonian kings, thus it is known today as the Macedonian Star or Vergina Sun. In Roman art, these floral forms persisted, but lost their associations with royalty. By the end of the third century CE, the heart-shaped and the almond-shaped types merged together. For example, the heart-shaped petals began to be dominated by larger almond-shaped sepals, so that the sepals came to resemble almond-shaped petals (figs. 10c, 13a, d, f). Alternatively, these artistic forms may have been interpreted as a variety of

⁹ The Sufi poet Hafez of Shiraz (1315-1390) described himself sitting within a blossom: “A true saint/Is an earth in eternal spring/ Inside the veins of a petal/ On a blooming redbud tree/ Are hidden worlds/ Where Hafiz sometimes/ Resides” (Ladinsky 1999: 125-126).

¹⁰ Regarding the heart-shaped petal, in the Greek Geometric period, cruciform or four-leaf flowers, may be interpreted as decorating some amphora, as found on the examples located in the Eleusis Museum (Greece), dating from 850 BCE; however, these are too abstract to be certain. The earliest examples of four-petaled rosettes (often called lotus), both the heart-shaped and the almond-shaped types, are clearly depicted on Cypriot Bichrome ware and Archaic ceramics dating as early as 850 BCE, found in the Cypriot Collections located in the Metropolitan Museum (New York), Cyprus Museum (Nicosia), and the Larnaka District Archeological Museum. Often these Cypriot forms are considered “Orientalizing” since their themes and styles show much influence from Egypt and Mesopotamia. A better-known example of rosettes is found on the well-known Peplos Kore (c.530 BCE) (in the Acropolis Museum in Athens). Recently, this type found in an important Jewish context at the mid-first century synagogue mosaic in Migdal (Israel), identified as the town of Magdala mentioned in the New Testament. Another early example of a four-petal flower is found on a marble pyxis where a floral motif in painted in purple, dating to the fourth-century BCE (now at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, no. A11372).

¹¹ In Late Antiquity and through the Middle Ages, both in Byzantine and Syriac Christian contexts, the flowering cross symbolized paradox that death of Christ brought eternal life, as conveyed by the rosettes on the cross on the *Harbaville Triptych* (Musée du Louvre, Paris, Acc. No. OA3247); these ideas are based on scriptural passages (John 1:29, Romans 8:37; 2 Corinthians 2:14) and the writings of Ephrem the Syrian (*Dauvilliers* 1956:11-17). For a general account of flower symbolism in Christian Art is the entry on “Flowers and Fruit,” see *Jones et al.* 2013: 2012.

¹² Regarding the almond-shaped petal, one of the earliest examples is found on the well-known Cesnola Krater dated to around 750 BCE in the Metropolitan Museum (Acc. No. 74.51.965) and is also considered as having an “Orientalizing” style. This motif continued into the Archaic Period, as displayed on the Euboean black figure Hydria, dated to 550 BCE, located in the Ure Museum at Reading University (Acc. No. 51.1.2). A brilliant example of an almond-rosette is found on the Etruscan goldsheet and granulation baule, dated to circa 500 BCE (Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Acc.No.8731&A-1863).

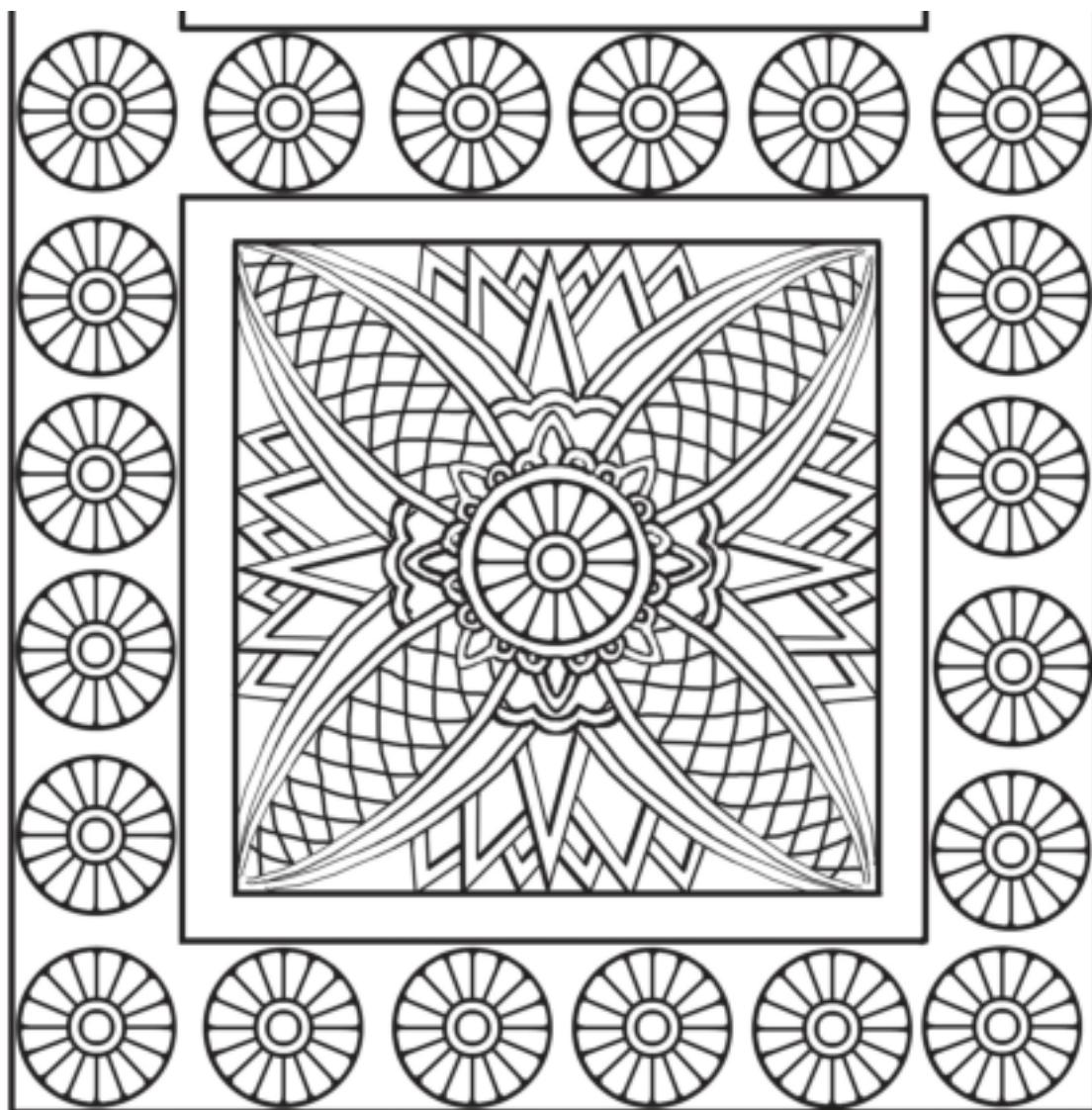


Fig. 11. Drawing of the design of the gypsum floor slab of the North Palace of Ashurbanipal II at Nineveh (Iraq), dated to 645 BCE; today housed at the British Museum, London. Drawing by C. A. Stewart

dogwood blossoms (*Cornus*) which grow throughout Europe and Asia; one European variety is called “coronarius” referring to how these plants were used as garlands to crown the head; perhaps, that led to later folk tales that associated such flowers with the Crown of Thorns of Christ.

Though Christians did not create the four-petal almond-rosette, they adopted and adapted its symbolism to serve their doctrines. The motif in Early Christian and Byzantine artworks was ubiquitous, decorating mosaics, frescos, tiles, manuscripts, jewelry, ivory containers, and monumental sculptures; for example, the floor mosaics at the Church of the Nativity (Bethlehem, 4th c.), Aquileia Cathedral (Italy, 4th c.), and Basilica of St. Euphemia (Grado, Italy, 6th c.); ceiling mosaics at San Vitale (Ravenna, Italy, 547 CE) and Hagia Sophia (Constantinople 6th c.); the

frescos at the Red Monastery and the White Monasteries (Sohag, Egypt, ca. 6th-7th c.), and Agia Paraskevi (Yeroskipou, Cyprus, 7th-8th c.) (*Totev* 1999: 28; *Gerstel* 2001; *Miles* 2019; *Neal* 2005: 48, 268, 328; *de Villard* 1925-26: plate I.15, II.209; *Lassus* 1947: 300, fig 109).¹³ The use of the four-petal rosette was par-

¹³ For example, the portions of a chancel screen, purported from Constantinople, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Acc. No. 47.100.47R). Earring, 6th-7th c., Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens (Greece) (Acc. No. BXM 173); Nechkalce, 6th c., Canellopoulos Museum (Athens, Greece) (Acc. No. Π513); a chancel screen from the Leonides Basilica (Corinth Museum, Greece) (Acc. No. 747). The Brooklyn Museum has many examples of four-petal rosettes depicted within textiles, dating mostly from the 5th to 7th century: Acc. Nos. 64.114.244, 64.114.247, 64.114.250, etc.



Fig. 12. Four-petaled rosette. House of Dionysius, Paphos, Cyprus. Floor Mosaic. Third century CE

ticularly common in the so-called aniconic frescos produced in the eighth and early ninth century in the eastern Mediterranean. As argued by Nichole Thierry, regarding Cappadocia, aniconic and figurative art was painted prior to and during Iconoclasm (Thierry 2002: 114-142). Eighth century churches in this group include Agios Basilios (Sinassos), Ağaç Kilisi (Ihlara), and Al Oda (Isauria). Manolis Chatzidakis and his colleagues also dated several churches with four-petal rosettes on the Aegean island of Naxos to the eighth century, such as the Panagia Protothrone, Agios Ioannis, and Agios Artemios (fig.13f) (Chatzidakis 1989). In these churches, the motif is ambiguous, since the context cannot assist us in determining if they are stars or flowers — so it has been suggested they are both (Stewart 2008: 98-105). This development was significant because Islam was expanding into Christian lands (including Armenian, Byzantine, Syriac, and Ghassanid domains) during the seventh and eight centuries, thereby assimilating Christian ideology with local artistic traditions and styles.

Almond rosettes are quite common in Islamic Umayyad art. For example, the mosaic at the Panagia at Madaba dated to 767 displays the four-petal motif. The Frescos at Qasr el-Heir el Gharbi (eighth century) and tiles of the mihrab at Qairawān (ninth century) have prominent almond rosettes (fig. 13a) (Schlumberger 1946-48: 86-102; Creswell 1958: PL. 62a). Considering these examples, apparently Islamic rulers employed Christian artisans and they preferred floral decoration because it could be interpreted as a natural element without any doctrinal symbolism. Oleg Grabar hypothesized that Christian art already

developed aniconic characteristics prior to the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem and, therefore, it was a matter of course for Islamic believers to adopt Christian ornamental forms (Grabar 1977: 45-52; Grabar 1984: 17-92). Moreover, as Islam expanded into Egypt and Persia, it would have encountered other variations of the four-petal motif. By the twelfth century, as Islam spread into Central Asia, Turkic art began to display the motif (fig.14).

Christian Iconography

Because the Usharal-*Ilibalyk* cemetery was used by Christians, who used gravestones with symbols and inscriptions, it follows logically that the use of the four-petal rosette held specific Christian connotations. The use of the six-petal rosette was quite common in synagogue art of the Jewish community in Palestine as early as the first-century CE. For example, the so-called *Magdala Stone* displays a conspicuous relief of the rosette on top of a stone structure of uncertain function (Aviam 2013: 205-220). This flower is a stylized symbol of a star and, as such, is a prototype of the later hexagram, now popularly called the “Magen David” developed by the fourth-century CE (Goodenough 1957: 197-201). According to an apocryphal tradition, King Solomon had a magical ring with six-pointed star which allowed him to control demons who built the Temple of Jerusalem; this story was passed down through the generations by Jews, Christians, and Muslims (McCown 1922; Charlesworth 1976: 197-199; Duling 1983; Milstein 1999). Pentagrams and hexagrams are quite common motifs during the Middle Ages, both in Europe and Asia, and should be considered an abstracted variation of the rosette. Likewise, the so-called “Solomon’s Knot” may have been an abstracted form of the four-rayed star, resembling a cross and a flower. Within the fourth-century Chorazin synagogue, a basalt Seat of Moses was discovered and decorated with an Aramaic inscription and a four-petal almond-rosette displayed prominently on the backrest (fig. 13b) (Ory 1927: 51-52). I interpret this rosette as a representation of a star. Christianity, having emerged and developed its visual art from the Jewish community, adopted these symbols, especially the four-petal flower, for a variety of reasons. Islam, having arose later, adapted these geometrical motifs from earlier Jewish and Christian artworks; hence the motifs, such as the six-pointed star and a three-petal and four-petal almond rosettes are seen on Karakhanid coins.¹⁴

¹⁴ For example, the silver dirhams minted at Bukhara by Ilek Ali b. al-Hasan, dated to 1028 CE and later Ibrahim b. Muhammad and Sanjar b. Malik Shah, dated to 1150 CE.

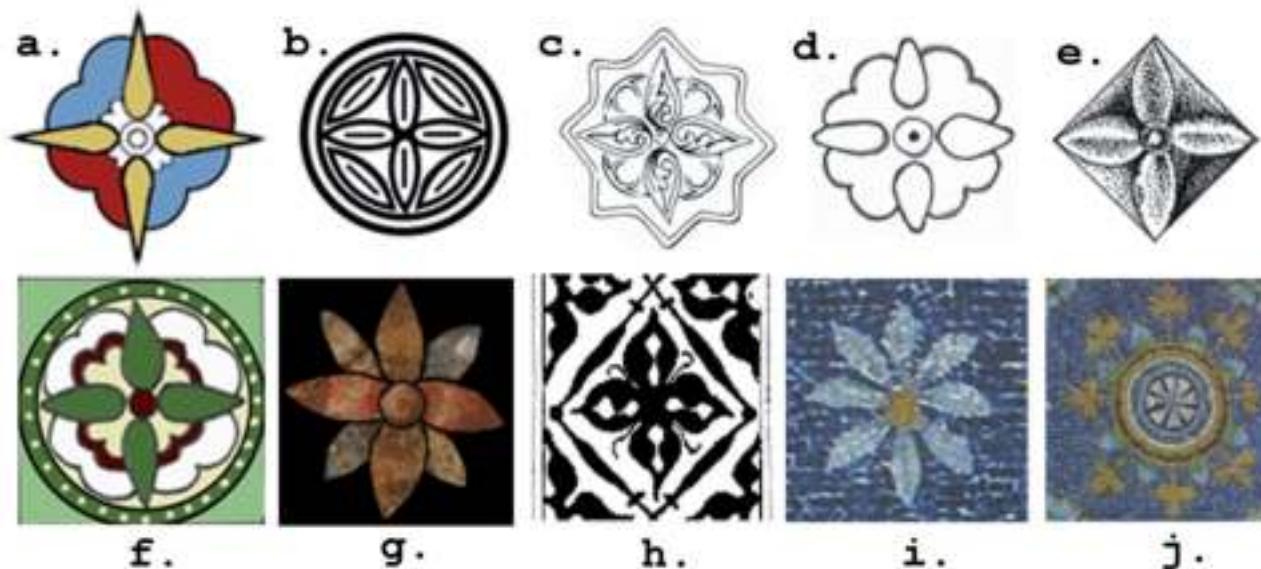


Fig. 13. Reconstructions of almond rosettes from various contexts: (a) Umayyad Palace Qasr el-Heir el Gharbi, Syria; (b) “Seat of Moses” Chorazin synagogue, Palestine (5th c.); (c) Agia Sophia, Thessaloniki (7th c.); (d) Sassanid Persian glass bowl (6th c.); (e) cornice from Agora, Salamis (Cyprus) (4th c. BCE); (f) Agios Artemios, Naxos (8th c.); (g) Late Roman fresco, Anatolia (3rd c.); (h) Church of Theotokos Pammakaristos, Constantinople (11th c.?); (i. and j.) Stars on Galla Placidia Mausoleum Vault, Ravenna (5th c.) (from C.A. Stewart 2008)

The Hebrew scriptures are replete with passages that define the symbolism of the flower. In the book of Exodus, God tell Moses how to create a monumental lampstand called the menorah; it has seven branches and each terminal was decorated “with cups made like almonds, each with capital and flower” (25:33-34, 40; 37:19-20). These passages emphasize that this artwork was God’s design and, as such, it was a divine symbol. Over the centuries, scribes have translated this passage as if the flowers were almond blossoms or, alternatively, that the petals are almond shaped, and artists have made corresponding replicas. The seven branches came to represent the seven days of creation and associated with Tree of Life described in the book of *Genesis*; thus, the flowers symbolize life (Adler and Eisenstein 1906: 493-495). Christians adopted the symbol of the menorah, as described in the Bible in the book of Revelation (Chapter 1); according to Clement of Alexandria (50 – 215 CE):

...the lamp [in the temple]...shows the motions of the seven planets...the golden lampstand conveys another enigma as a symbol of Christ, not only in respect to its form, but its radiance of light...[as noted in the book of] Hebrews 1:1 on those who believe in him and hope, and who see by means of the ministry of the first-born. And they say that the seven eyes of the Lord “are the seven spirits resting on the rod that springs from the root of Jesse” (*Stromata* 5.vi).

Clement is referring to the menorah as a celestial symbol at a time when the cross was not used

by Christians. Later, the cross would replace the menorah as a celestial symbol. Note also that the almond blossom is also described in the Bible from the book of Numbers (17:8), where Aaron’s wooden rod sprouts leaves and almond flowers, symbolizing God’s choice in determining Israel’s clan of priests. Likewise, the “rod of Jesse” conveys, as quoted above, similar imagery for the royal genealogy of Christ. A non-canonical source is told regarding Joseph, the husband of Mary, who had a miraculous rod from which a dove emerged, directly referencing the book of Numbers (*Protoevangelium of James* 9). In medieval Christian art, Joseph is identified by his “flowering rod,” while Mary’s chief symbol becomes the white lily—abstracted to the fleur-de-lis. According to Isaiah 28, beauty itself is symbolized by flowers and, this is adopted within the New Testament (James 1:11 and Peter 1:24). Jesus, himself, used a metaphor of blooming lilies to describe God’s provision for humanity and, as such, these flowers symbolize blessing (Matthew 6:28, Luke 12:27).

The cruciform (that is, the cross form) was multivalent and related to the Tree of Life. Images that I have termed the “flowering cross” were developed wherever Christianity had spread, particularly in the Byzantine Empire, Armenia, and areas where Syriac Christianity flourished. Perhaps the earliest examples of these forms are found in the ancient churches in modern Syria and Iraq, and conspicuously in the Armenian stone crosses (*khachkar*) (Jeni 1995: 227-264; *al-Ka’bi* 2014: 90-102; Karim 2004). In Christian literature and art, when crosses sprout leaves and blossoms



Fig. 14. Finger Rings from Otrar. Note the center ring has the mandelrosette form while the right ring has a hexagram, a symbol associated with King Solomon. 13th century [K. Baipakov and N. Aldabergenov (2005) *Омпарский оазис* (Almaty: Baur Publishing): 69.

like a living tree, the artists are referencing the Tree of Life described in the books of Genesis and Revelation. In the latter, it states “To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7; 22). The “eating” here is connecting the Tree of Life (both in the past, within paradisiacal Eden, and the future, in heavenly Paradise) with the Cross of Golgotha, remembered through the eating of the Eucharistic meal in the present.¹⁵ This idea is developed by Latin apologist, Justin Martyr (fl. 2nd century), who wrote that Christ’s “crucifixion was symbolized by the Tree of Life planted in paradise...” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 86). Likewise, a popular Syriac Christian text, dating to the sixth century or earlier, emphasized:

That Tree of Life which was in the midst of Paradise prefigured the Redeeming Cross, which is the veritable Tree of Life, and this it was that was fixed in the middle of the earth. (*Spelunca Thesaurorum* fol.6b; col. 1).

Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 AD), who taught in the great Christian school of Nisibis (now in modern Turkey), had earlier emphasized this poetic and mystical relationship in his *Hymns on Paradise* (XV.2; XII.10) and *Hymns on Virginity* (XVI.10) (*Brock*

1990). When Ephrem mentions the “middle of the earth” he was referring to Mesopotamia (“middle of rivers”)—that is, the Middle East, which he would have considered Central Asia as part.

The motif of the flowering cross is common to both the eastern and the western Christians. The masterpiece known as the *Harbaville Triptych* illustrates how complex the message behind the “simple” cross can be; it has five flower blossoms, referencing to the five wounds of Christ (hands, feet, and heart) during his crucifixion.¹⁶ As such, the cross is a formally-abstracted representation of the divine Christ himself, as identified by his monogram IC XC (*IHCOCY XPICTOC*) and his triumph (NIKA) over death. The two cypress trees bow down to him, which abstractly represent the “prince of the apostles” Peter and Paul (this is the common *Traditio Legis* motif), while the 24 stars convey the 24 elders around the throne of God in paradise (Revelation 4:1-4). Another striking example, that continues this ancient message, is the late-12th-century apse mosaic at San Clemente in Rome; here the cross is the Tree of Life sprouting from a green bouquet that represents the Garden of Paradise, planted quite literally in Mesopotamia represented below by the four rivers Pishon, Gihon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates from which two stags drink (Psalm 42:1). Note the *staurogram* above the cross at San Clemente—this is to emphasize the fully-divine “Word of God” while representing the fully-human body of Christ on the cross. Altogether there are 50 spiraling tendrils that sprout from the cross that represent 49 years of enslavement to sin and the 50th year of liberation, that is the “Year of Jubilee” (i.e. Day of Atonement, based on Leviticus 25:10-11).

As such, there is a relationship between the four-petal almond-rosette and the flowering cross

¹⁵ One of the earliest descriptions of Christian worship is the *Didache*, which stated “Now concerning the Eucharistic meal, we [literally] give thanks. First, concerning the cup [we pray]: ‘We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of your servant David, which you made known to us through your servant Jesus. To you be the glory forever.’ And concerning the broken bread: ‘We thank You, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through your servant Jesus’” (§9). As Jonathan Draper explained: “the brief proclamation of ‘life and knowledge,’ allows one to recognize... that the tree of life really played a role in the [early Christian] liturgy”; *The Didache in Modern Research* (Leiden, Brill), 263.

¹⁶ See note 11 above.



Fig. 15. Capital from an Early Christian basilica, dated to the 5th or 6th century, located at the Tigranakert State Historical-Cultural Reserve, Armenia

motifs. This is due to the illusion known as the “reversible image” (or “ambiguous image”). For example, there is a capital from an Early Christian basilica, dated to the 5th or 6th century, located at the Tigranakert State Historical-Cultural Reserve (Armenia), which depicts a four-leaf flower with incisions delineating veins; however, the negative spaces in-between the petals form a flared cross (fig. 15). *So is this a cross or a flower?* The best answer to this question is that it was meant to be both. This type of cross is well known throughout the eastern Mediterranean region, particularly in Syria and Anatolia; its typology is classified as the “Bolnisi Cross” based on two monumental examples carved on the Bolnisi Sioni Cathedral (Georgia) which is accompanied by an inscription dated to the year 494 CE (fig. 16). The paradoxical, or ambiguous, nature of such an image emphasizes the paradoxical nature of many of Christ’s parables and other New Testament doctrines: for example, Jesus is both a man *and* God; God is both one and three; Mary is both a virgin *and* a mother; and the cross itself was both an instrument of divine death *and* a device leading to eternal life (Baugus 2013: 238-251; Botha 2002: 34-49; Murray 2004: 158-162; den Biesen 2006).

Paradoxes in literature and illusionism in art has a deep tradition. As Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) recounted an ancient anecdote regarding how the Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius measured the skill of the artist based on how well they could “trick the eye” (*trompe-l’œil*) (*Naturalis Historia* 35.65) (Gordon

1979: 5-34. Gombrich 1956; Levine 2016: 29–42.¹⁷ The three-dimensional illusions of frescos and mosaics, as well as the life-like qualities of naturalistic sculpture of the pagan Greeks and Romans, were not fully embraced by early Christians, since these artistic forms were considered deceptive. However, early Christians did embrace the illusion of the reversible image and visual *double-entendre*, as described by Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215 AD):

The scriptures, then, permit us using the finger-ring of gold, but this is not for ornament, but for sealing things which are worth keeping safe at home, and is part of the exercise of housekeeping...Our seals will [depict] either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre...or a ship’s anchor...and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to delineate the faces of idols...nor a sword, nor a bow [because] we are peaceful; nor drinking cups, being temperate (*Paedagogus* 3.59.2-60.1).

Clement’s instructions served three purposes. First, the symbols he suggested were *not* rooted in paganism, but belonged to wider human society and

¹⁷ Well known surviving examples of Roman illusionism are Heraclitus’ Unswept Floor (ασπάρωτος οἶκος) mosaic found in Pompei and the frescos of Villa Boscoreale dating to the first half of the first century.



Fig. 16. Inscription and cross relief from the Bolnisi Sioni Cathedral, dated to 494 CE and is today located at the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi



Fig. 17. Finger ring inscribed in Latin with the legendary names of the Three Magi of Persia (Kaspar, Melchior, and Baltasar). 12th-13th century. Found in Dalsland, Sweden (now in the Historiska Museet, Stockholm)

nature. Second, these images were mnemonic devices to remind Christians of scripture and doctrines (such as Peter fishing and baptism). Third, these images were ambiguous symbols since, to the average pagan, such images were mundane and generic, however, to initiated Christians “in the know,” such symbols encoded dogmas. Note that Clement was writing at a time when Christianity was illegal and, to escape arrest and persecution, Christians would avoid conspicuous displays of their faith. Later, Augustine (354 – 430 CE) would describe how the Greek word and the symbol of the *fish* (ἰχθύς) formed a statement of faith: “Jesus Christ God’s Son, the Savior” (*Civitate Dei* 18.23). The popularity of the fish symbol eventually gave way to the cross as the primary symbol of Christianity because it also a functioned as a mnemonic device fulfilling Christ’s direct commandment to remember his death on the cross and his promise of eternal life through resurrection (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Christian symbolism became very complex as the religion developed an entirely new worldview accompanied by another set of visual images that illustrated scriptural concepts and stories (*Finney* 1994: 99-145). Layers of complexity was described by Gregory Nazianzen (329–389 CE) who explained how symbols have several layers of meaning:

We are soon going to share in the Passover, and although we still do so only in a symbolic way, the symbolism already has more clarity than it possessed in former times because, under the law, the Passover was, if I may dare to say so, only a symbol of a symbol.

Likewise, I suggest that the Christian almond-rosette was a symbol of a symbol; that is, the flower symbolized the life-giving cross, which itself was a symbol of God’s sacrificial love for mankind. As such, the rosette form was also paradoxical, because it functioned as both a beautiful ornament as well as a simple sign of a complex belief system. Moreover, because it is a reversible image, Christians could use it to disguise their faith during times of persecution, while openly expressing their belief. This concept is important for the Usharal-*Ilibalyk* Christian community who may have been experiencing mistreatment as the Chagatai khans at Almalyk began to exhibit intolerance towards the end of the thirteenth century.

Regarding Christian art there is one additional symbolic layer that the almond rosette conveyed, which is relevant regarding its use by residents of Central Asia. As described above, the ancient rosette could be interpreted as either a flower or a star, or both, depending on its context—this is the case with the earliest examples in Egypt and Persia. I propose that this is also true with its interpretation in medieval Christian art. The flowering cross motif is related to the jeweled cross (*crux gemmata*). In Byzantine art the jeweled cross is a celestial symbol, as displayed at the apse mosaic at Sant’Apollinare en Classe (Italy, 549 CE); nearby at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (450 CE), the dome mosaic conveys the idea that the cross is the brightest star of the sky, that is, the cross is like the sun.

This may be related to the vision of the bright Chi-Rho monogram, resembling an asterisk, in the sky which Constantine reported to witness on the eve of his victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.28-31); note that his later battle standard, called as the *Labarum*, resembled both the Roman “trophy of the cross” as well as the Persian *Derafsh Kaviani*. The cross and the Chi-Rho motif have been inextricably connected ever since. The eastern star motif and the flowering cross was an “Asian symbol” in a geographical sense since, as I described above, the cross was associated with the Tree of Life,

which was believed to stand somewhere in Asia where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers converged. Likewise, the celestial cross, that is the rosette as a four-rayed star, was a phenomenon that guided the Asian magi from Persia to the Christ child in Bethlehem. This is exemplified by a medieval ring, perhaps contemporary with those discovered at Usharal-*Ilibalyk*, which prominently displays a four-rayed star or four-petalled rosette, with the names of the three magi from Central Asia (fig. 17).

In summary, this article had three main purposes. First, it introduced the general characteristics of the Christian cemetery uncovered at medieval city of *Ilibalyk* dating to the end of the 13th century. Second,

it described and analyzed the type of jewelry that archaeologists have uncovered so far within one of the most conspicuous graves. Because the jewelry's form and decoration have parallels to other artifacts found around the *Zhetysu-Semirechye* region, these objects suggest a widespread fashion trend was developing during this time period. Finally, this article has proposed what the four-petal almond-rosette may have symbolized to a Christian community within the *Chagatai Khanate*. By providing a historical overview and primary sources, a complex message emerges; that is, the motif symbolized both death (crucifixion) and life (flower) which was fitting for a Christian burial and their hope of resurrection.

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