Abstract

Psychotropic plants on Achaemenid–style vessels

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Three important plants dominate the vegetal decoration of Achaemenid-style vessels:

- The opium poppy or *papaver somniferum*. The petalled element on top of the seedpod is the inspiration for the creation of multi-petalled rosettes. They are usually called long petals and they are one of the most popular decorative elements. Their connection to an existing plant was not attempted until recently, as it was thought that those render a stylized imaginary flower.

- The so-called lotus, but really a water-lily:
  - The white lotus or *nymphaea alba*. On the vessels appears the flower consisting of rounded petals with parallel ridges.
  - The blue-lotus or *nymphaea caerulaea*. On the vessels appears the flower consisting of pointed petals, often called lanceolate leaves.

- The almond tree, represented by its fruits, usually called lobes instead of almonds.

The three plants appear in a similar way on vessels fabricated in different workshops during the Achaemenid period, within and also outside the geographical boundaries of the Persian Empire. It is also important that they appear on the decoration of shallow and deep bowls, which are vessels used for libations or ritual drinking.

They are not wide-range edible plants, on which the local populations would rely for survival. In that case they would have righteously gained their place in the decoration of valuable vessels. Moreover, they are plants which in the historical period grow only in certain parts of the ancient world, while their depiction is ubiquitous. It is probable that the artisans in certain areas sometimes depict plants they have never seen.

It is therefore evident that their recurring appearance, regardless of nutritional importance or local cultivation, is due to their ideological and religious importance. And they all share common properties: they are important psychotropic plants and some also powerful poisons.