



CORAL

CORAL, the skeletal deposit of marine polyps, often treated as a gem material. In classical Persian it was called *bossad* (< Mid. Pers. *wassad*; cf. the variant *vossad*, recorded in some old dictionaries, e.g., *Borhān-e qāṭe'*, ed. Mo'īn, s.v.; cf. Ḥamza Eṣfahānī [10th century], quoted by Bīrūnī, 1936, p. 191: “[Persian] *w/vassad* was arabicized as *bossad*”) concurrently with *marjān*, which has superseded the former in modern Persian. *Marjān* is the arabicized form of Iranian **margān*, from which Persian *morvārīd* (Mid. Pers. *morwārīd*) “pearl” is derived; contrary to general opinion, Syr. *marganītā* (and Gk. *margarītēs*) “pearl” may have been derived from it as well, rather than the reverse. Indeed, in the Qur'ān *marjān* was used in the sense of “pearl,” not of “coral.” The etymology of *margarītēs* (Parth. *mwrǰ'ryd*, Sogd. *mṛγ'rt*, Pahl. *mwlw'lyt*) is not clear. Ilya Gershevitch has rightly discounted Semitic etymologies (pp. 113, 120-22); he proposes a derivation from an elaborate reconstruction of Old Iranian **mrga-ah(a)r/ni-* “pearl oyster” (lit. Germ. “Vogel-Muschel,” cf. Av. *mərəga-* “bird” for the first term) and a past participle **-ita-* “came, proceeded [from]” or **-yata-* “held [by].” Harold Bailey (*Dictionary*, p. 335), on the other hand, was prompted to derive **margān* from the Indo-European base **merg-* “to press together,” which gave rise to words meaning “lump.” In his opinion the word **merga* may therefore have meant “round.” Another (obsolete) Persian synonym is *korūhak* (< Mid. Pers. *xrōhak* “coral”), which, according to Bīrūnī (1936, pp. 191-92), was applied to a kind of red coral comparable to a cockscomb (i.e., *korūh* = *korūs* “cock” + *-ak*, indicating smallness or resemblance: lit., “the little cock” or “something like the [comb of the] cock”).



Gemologists and other scholars of the early Islamic period generally agreed on the nature of coral but disagreed on the relationship between *marjān* and *bossad*. Despite Dioscorides' indecisive statement that coral "seems/is said to be a marine plant" (bk. V; p. 650 no. 139, s.v. *korállion*; Ar. tr. in Ebn al-Bayṭār, I/1, pp. 93-94, s.v. *bossad*), it was believed to be of a vegetable nature or something intermediary between plants and minerals (cf. Gk. *lithódendron*, a synonym recorded by Dioscorides and early translated into Arabic as *ḥajar šajarī* "arboreal stone") that hardens like stone when taken from the sea (see, e.g., Ebn Māsūya [d. 243/857], p. 59, s.v. *bossad*; Bīrūnī, 1936, p. 190; *Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, p. 10; Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī, p. 128). Although some scholars of the medieval period considered *bossad* and *marjān* one and the same thing (e.g., Ebn Māsūya, p. 59; Ebn al-Bayṭār, I/1, pp. 93-94 and s.vv. *ḥajar šajarī*, *marjān*), others distinguished them from each other. *Marjān* was said to apply to the *aṣl* (base, root, trunk) of the coral [tree] and *bossad* to its "branches" (e.g., Bīrūnī, 1936, p. 191, quoting Aristotle; cf. Bīrūnī, 1358 Š./1979, I, p. 129, where he noted that physicians and pharmacists deem more correct the view that *bossad* designates the coral tree), and also the reverse (e.g., Aḥmad Tayfāšī [13th century], quoted in Clément-Mullet, pp. 173-74; Tonokābonī, pp. 158-59, 806; cf. Moʿīn, III, s.v. *marjān*).

The origin or genesis of coral was the subject of fanciful speculation (see, e.g., Bīrūnī, 1358 Š./1979, I, p. 128: "according to some, *bossad* is thrown by fairies into the sea"); an apparently serious but utterly wrong explanation was provided by Demašqī (d. 727/1327; tr., p. 83).

Corals of various qualities and colors were reported (e.g., Ebn Māsūya, pp. 58-59). According to Moḥammad b. Maṣṣūr (15th century; pp. 253-57), coral comes in four colors: red, white, black, and dark; all the kinds of coral are soft and white as long as they are immersed in sea water, but they petrify in contact with air and take on different colors according to their different predispositions. According to Dioscorides' evaluation, the bright red variety of coral with a smooth surface and even texture, easy to break, was generally considered the best and valued as a gem. This choice variety was found mostly along the southern littoral of the western Mediterranean (Ebn Māsūya, pp. 58-59; Tayfāšī, in Clément-Mullet, pp. 174-75), whence, according to Tayfāšī, it was exported to the east, including Yemen, India, and China. Moḥammad b. Maṣṣūr (pp. 253-57) related that red coral was much esteemed in China and India, where most ornaments of the idols and of "the idol-faced" (i.e., the fair sex) were made of coral. The author of the *Jawāher-nāma* (pp. 293-95)



confirmed this statement, adding that “the infidels (*kāferān*) of Cathay prefer coral to jewels.” Concerning the white coral growing near “the ports of Hormūz,” he called it “good for nothing,” but black coral was considered *mobārak* (blessed, auspicious) in Yemen and Arabia and was used there, along with *yosr* (the aromatic wood of *Moringa pterygosperma* Gärtner) to make prayer beads.

In addition to numerous medicinal uses for coral (see, e.g., Tonokābonī, p. 159, for a comprehensive inventory), some magical properties were attributed to it: Carrying a piece of coral would prevent recurrence of epileptic fits (Šahmardān, p. 264; Tonokābonī, p. 159); gazing on it would strengthen the eyesight (Ṭūsī, p. 129); carrying it on one’s person would ensure immunity against the ruses of enemies (*Jawāher-nāma*, p. 295) and ward off the evil eye (Tonokābonī, p. 159).

The definition of *marjān* as “pearl” was preserved for centuries in Arabic and Persian literature. Pearls (*lo’lo*) were said to include *dorr* “large pearls” and *marjān* “small pearls” (Bīrūnī, 1936, pp. 137-38; Tayfāšī, in Clément-Mullet, pp. 17-18). The words *dorr* and *marjān* have sometimes been used together to emphasize this difference (for examples from Arabic poetry, see Bīrūnī, 1936, pp. 137-38; for Persian examples, cf. Rūdakī [d. 329/940-41], p. 26, who grieved over the loss of his lustrous teeth in old age, comparing them to *dorr o marjān* “large and small pearls”; for other examples, see Dehḵodā, s.v. *marjān*, especially Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow: “Thy body is [like] the *ṣadaf* [shell, oyster] and thy soul [like] *marjān* [pearl] in it”).

In classical Persian poetry *marjān* and *bossad* (in verse, also *bosad*) were used in comparisons with something bright red (e.g., lips, complexion, tulip; also *bossadīn* “coralline” to describe the color of lips, etc.) and as a metaphor for the lips themselves; *marjān* was also occasionally used to refer to blood and bloody tears (see Dehḵodā, s.vv.).



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