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Detail of an Anatolian medallion rug (see p. 392)
Detail eines Anatolischen Medaillons - Teppich (s. S. 392)

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Türkmen Rugs and Early Rug Weaving in the Western Islamic World

Walter B. Denny
Frühe turkmenische Teppiche und ihre Erzeugung in west-islamischen Gebieten
Deutsche Zusammenfasung


Für die hier erörterten Ähnlichkeiten gibt es drei mögliche Erklärungen:
(1) Diese Formen haben sich voneinander unabhängig entwickelt und die Ähnlichkeiten sind rein zufällig;
(2) einer der Webereitraditionen wurde von der anderen beeinflußt und repräsentiert ein künstlerisches Echo dieser anderen Tradition oder;
(3) die Formen dieser Vergleichsobjekte gehen auf einen gemeinsamen stilistischen Vorfahren zurück.


Wir wollen uns darauf beschränken, die stilistischen Merkmale bestimmter Beispiele dieses Vermächtnisses zu definieren und nach Möglichen, die gemeinsamen kulturen Stammhaus für diese wenigen Exemplare zu proponieren.


Wir haben es zu so ausgedehnten Wanderungen gekommen! Dafür dürfte es zwei Erklärungen geben: die erste geht auf das oben genannte Wort 'Zauber' zurück - also die Symbolik. Die Menschen haben seit jeher visuellen Formen magische Eigenschaften zugeschrieben und die anthropologische Fachliteratur weist unzählige Beispiele für solche 'Teilsame' auf. Die zweite Erklärung liegt in der Annahme der Gültigkeit der Ornaments mit ethnischer Zugehörigkeit, ein bekanntes Prinzip in der Teppichkunst.

Es ergibt sich daher eine einfache Hypothese: die erwähnten Ähnlichkeiten gehen auf eine gemeinsame nomadische, turkische Abstammung dieser Formen zurück. Die an Hand visueller Beispiele so deutlich erkennbaren stilistischen Verwandtschaft ist durch viele weitere Argumente untermauert.


Was das weitumfängliche schriftliche Quellenmaterial betrifft, so ist es nicht sehr ergiebig, da die Argumente darin meist sehr zusammenhängen und lückenhaft präsentiert sind. Der vorliegende Aufsatz hat ebenfalls viele Lücken, wir werden aber unsere Argumente hoffentlich in einigen Jahren mit mehr Details untermauern können. Historische Daten eines alten Geschichtler sind in der Kunstgeschichte seitens bewußtlos, aber das erst recht der türkischen Stammeswanderungen und Anlieferungen, die in den Werken zeitgenössischer Historiker beschrieben wird, unterstützt die künstlerischen und stilistischen Argumente, die auf die türkischen Weber als Vehikel für die Verbreitung von Teppichnamentlichen hinweisen.

Das weiter oben definierte Konzept der 'Eignung' kann für eine Rechtfertigung der Ähnlichkeit zwischen antonischen und ägyptischen Mamlukenteppichen nur approximativ gelten, denn obwohl diese Ähnlichkeiten sehr verbreitet sind, sind sie weder sehr oft genug noch leicht zu finden und vor allem die einzigartige Farbgebung der Mamlukenteppiche führt hier zu Schwierigkeiten.

Die Symbolik darf auch in der Klarheit der Existenz und dem Charakter der Mamlukenteppiche in einem der Rollen des alles, was wir unter der Symbolik und der praktischen Fähigkeit der praktische Präge-erklärung von heute noch nicht möglich. Symbolik ist jedoch ein vielversprechendes und fruchtbares Forschungsgebiet bei diesem speziellen Zweig der Teppichgeschichte.

Einige Schlüssefolgerungen

Angesichts des ganz besonderen Charakters der historischen und geographischen Verbreitung noch erhaltener Teppichexemplare und angehörende aller uns bekannten stilistischer und technischer Informationen über Teppiche aus der Zeit vor 1400, ist das Konzept einer eindeutigen Beweisführung hier nicht anwendbar und die obigen Ausführungen sollen also nicht als 'Beweise' im strengen wissenschaftlichen Sinn gelten.

Unser Bemühung ging dahin darzulegen, daß die folgenden Faktoren, nämlich:
(a) Still - durch frühere und später Exemplare illustriert;
(b) Zeit - die kulturelle Kontinuität in der Teppichwelt und
(c) Raum - in Bezug auf Stammeswanderung und Anlieferung.

Zusammengekommen daraufhinweisen, daß die in diesem Aufsatz angebotenen Erklärung die einfachste und direkteste Beurteilung der stilistischen Zusammengehörigkeit und des stilistischen Erscheinens jeder Gruppe früher und später Teppiche darstellt.


Wir haben es heute also viel leichter als Experten der Generation Prof. Erdmanns und dürfen uns glücklich schätzen, daß wir mit unseren eigenen kunstgeschichtlichen Argumenten und Schlüssefolgerungen auf den von unseren Vorgängern errichteten Grundlagen weiterbauen können. Der Wert der vorliegenden Ausführungen für das in ständiger Weiterentwicklung befindliche Wissensgebiet, das wir gründen, liegt nicht in der Niemanderschrift an sich, sondern in der positiven Nutzungswertung durch andere Experten der Quellen, die wir fanden, der Methodik, die wir beschrieben und der Erklärungen, um deren Definition wir uns bemühen.

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In this article, Prof. Denny looks at rugs from a broad spectrum of areas and from the 15th to the 20th centuries. He notes that many of them bear strikingly similar motifs which he ascribes to common prototypes and demonstrates that these common forms are most closely related to those of the Turkmen nomads, and were probably brought westward in the Seljuk invasions of the 11th and 12th centuries.

Though a quick history of the central problems of rug scholarship involve works of art which no longer exist. With the exception of the Pazyryk finds and a few small fragments which offer little stylistic information, the earliest datable pile carpets to have survived into our time are from the 13th or 14th century. And while early Islamic and non-Islamic written sources team with references to carpet-like textiles from Anatolia, Iran, and the Caucasus, we have very little stylistic or technical information about these carpets. To make matters worse, the pictorial sources which are used to date early carpets, including both Islamic miniature paintings and European paintings, show no examples older than the earliest surviving examples of carpets themselves, thus casting little light on weaving from before the year 1400.

This paper has three purposes. The first is to shed some light on the artistic nature of the earliest surviving carpets, their stylistic lineage, and their symbolic meaning. The second is to comment on the use, misuse, and misuse of historical records dealing with carpets. The third is to draw some conclusions, or at least some current hypotheses, both substantive and methodological, from these first two concerns.

This paper begins, however, not with carpets of the 15th century, but with those of the 19th. Our chain of reasoning begins with a series of visual juxtapositions from relatively recent rug production. The first is that of a gül from a 19th century Salor chuval from southern Turkmenistan (fig. 1), with a similar form from a 19th century west Anatolian rug woven near the shores of the Aegean (fig. 2). The second is a knotted octagon (often called a 'small-pattern Holbein medallion') from another Salor rug (fig. 3), and a similar form in another west Anatolian rug (fig. 4).

The art historian, upon seeing these similarities, can choose from three possible explanations. The first is that these forms evolved separately, and that their similarities are simply coincidental. The second is that one of the weaving traditions was influenced by the other, and represents an artistic response to that other tradition. The third is that the forms in each tradition of invisibly share a common stylistic ancestor. At the outset, I propose that we reject the first explanation as there is a considerable fund of stylistic similarities between certain groups of Anatolian and Central Asian rugs. I further propose that we reject the second explanation, first because no vectors or motives for such a wholesale 19th century exchange of stylistic influence suggest themselves in the historical or art-historical literature, and second, because everything we know about the nature and pace of stylistic change in these two wearing traditions militates against the explanation. This leaves us with the third possibility: a common ancestor.

However difficult that ancestor may be to explain, it is not particularly difficult to find. If we look at the evidence for early rug designs in Western painting, in Islamic painting, and in surviving examples of rugs, we find several kinds of designs. There are similar patterns, in which repeating stripes or small-scale motifs appearly evolve from the technical nature of the weaving process itself; there are stylized patterns, geometrised representations of animal and plant forms symbolizing powerful forces of the natural or superhuman worlds; and there are repeating, self-contained polygonal or geometric motifs arranged in neat rows, which call by their conventional name of guļ. Rugs in this last category are, in addition, frequently associated with a geometric interface border of white on red, which has its stylistic origins in bands inscriptions using the Kufic script of the late Islamic Arab script. In these early guļ rugs we see forms strikingly similar to, or in some cases identical to, the two 19th century forms mentioned at the outset of this paper, and certain similar guļ rugs were woven into rugs over a wide geographical span in the 15th century as they were in the 19th. A Spanish rug in the Museum of Fine Arts, credibly dated to the 15th century (fig. 5), is strikingly similar to a roughly contemporary Anatolian rug (fig. 6) in the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Museum (T.I.E.M.) in Istanbul, both showing what we call the 'small-pattern Holbein design.' A so-called 'compartment' (or 'checkboard') rug from Anatolia or Syria (fig. 7), probably dating to around the same time or slightly later, shows astonishing similarities in its design to the field pattern in a very early and badly worn medallion carpet from north-west Iran and now in Boston (fig. 8). If we look to Islamic miniature painting of the 15th century, be it from Mawarannahr, Khorasan, Fuz, Gilan, Azerbaijan or Mesopotamia, the most commonly depicted rug is the gul-patterned rug. Even in the so-called 'Konya' carpets, which probably date from the 14th century in Anatolia, we find examples of patterns of interlace motifs, Kufic borders (fig. 9), and even guļ patterns (fig. 10), which suggest that these large and rough-woven carpets form a part of the same general family as the other carpets under discussion. This marked similarity among certain early rugs, as demonstrated by miniature paintings and by rugs themselves, is clear. What is not clear is why this similarity exists, and what it means in art-historical terms.

Before attempting to answer these questions, which form the main thrust of this paper, we must make the boundaries of our enquiry very clear. It is not the purpose of this paper to determine the artistic origins or stylistic groupings of any of the finjla, bidd, zhibiya, quli, musell, Jeffrey, or mahfura mentioned in early Islamic Islamic references, or their woven siblings so prominent in Greek, Iranian, or Armenian written sources. Of these weavings two things are absolutely certain: first, they existed in the Near East from early medieval times, and even before the arrival of Islam in some cases; second, we have virtually no idea what these carpets looked like or how they were woven. Under these circumstances, we should not be surprised if the small and literally rugged hand of surviving early carpets
is the beleaguered subject of a sort of cultural competition or art historical siege. If the playwright Pirandello could write a play called '50 Characters in Search of an Author,' we might describe some recent rug writings as 'Weaving Traditions in Search of a Rug.' We see authors, armed to the teeth with the evidence of ethnic or family tradition, church or mosque architecture, epigraphy, and paleography of varying quality, travel accounts, chronicles, inventories, bills of 'fading, religious memoirs, and other weapons from the armory of history, all competing for a rather small and formal group of 'characters.'

We restrict our task in this paper to (a) defining the stylistic characteristics of certain examples from this rug legacy, and (b) proposing, on the basis of the best evidence, a cultural family tree for this small number of objects.

The Repertoire of Common Forms: What are they and why are they common?

We are now ready to ask our basic question again. Why do certain rugs look alike, and why do they contain the same basic vocabulary of forms? One reason, which certainly explains the Spanish variants on our rug forms, is the age-old notion of propriety. The history of art, and especially that of the decorative arts, is replete with examples of stylistic traditions which spread and endure because they satisfy widely-held expectations of appropriateness. This 'iconography of style' can be seen in our expectations that a proper bank building resemble, in some way a Roman temple: that a proper luxury automobile contain vinyl or metal simulating leather and it is a tattooed carriage; and that a proper sculptural monument erected at public expense use the style and imagery native popular in the period following the American Civil War. If we look at early carpets, both those depicted in paintings and those which have survived, we find that this sense of propriety is fully-developed by the 15th century, at about the time when examples begin to survive in significant numbers. In order to look like a proper carpet, a painting should either (a) utilize gilt-like medallions; (b) utilize larger octagonal gilt-like forms, either in rows, or in 2-1-2 alternation with smaller gilt-like forms. In short, a proper carpet should look in some way like either a 'small-patera' Holbein' or a 'large-patteren Holbein' rug, no matter where it was woven, or if one expected to be able to be sold to the demanding 15th century customer. The consequence was that rugs of the Near East not only looked like each other, but rugs woven in Spain looked like rugs of the Near East. And the rugs with gilt-like forms set the style.

Propriety, then, accounts both for the persistence of certain kinds of designs, and for their wide geographical acceptance. But propriety is largely a notion rooted in social class; it may explain why commercial carpets look the same in Anatolia and Spain, but does not explain why court, commercial, and nomadic rugs may share stylistic similarities in the Middle East. It does not satisfactorily explain, for example, why we find the turreted octagon or 'Salar gul' in rugs of 15th century Anatolian commercial production, in 19th century Kurdish village rugs, in 20th century Caucasian rugs, not to mention in Baluch weavings of all kinds.

Before seeking further explanations, let us look at some more forms. Visual evidence for pervasiveness of certain stylistic devices and forms encompasses both space and time. The first category includes such devices as the 'snowflake' medallion (fig. 11). We have already seen this form in a 'compartment' rug (fig. 7), and in the Boston medallion carpet (fig. 8), which appears to be from the Türkmen principalities of north-west Iran in the later part of the 15th century. If we take the stylistic back-bones from dateable north-west Persian medallion carpets woven under the Safavids. The same forms are found in early Spanish rugs, in the large-pattern Holbein variants, and to a limited extent on ceramic building revetments and ceramics as well (figs. 17-18).

In the matter of time, we may cite the appearance of many gul-like forms over the centuries. Perhaps it is disconcerting to see a form in the complex design of the silk Mamluk rug of the 16th century (fig. 15), now in the Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna, which strongly recalls the Tekke 'archetypal' gul of 18th century Central Asia (fig. 16), since these two societies would seem to be so strongly separated by distance and ghana neglect that mention the nature of their populations, languages, economies or climates. It is perhaps easier to reconcile a similarity between the Viennese Mamluk and the large-pattern Holbeins (figs. 17 and 18) since west Anatolia seems to have spawned examples of Holbein rugs, in a virtually unbroken stream over the centuries, but we may deem it more than passing interest when we see this same form in Spain, Egypt, the Caucasus, or Iran.

Few rug forms are more dispersed, in time as well as area, than the 'Salar gul.' We see it as a secondary and primary element in large-pattern Holbein rugs from early times onward. The 'magic' of this form, which certainly goes beyond notions of propriety, has propelled it into unusual neighborhoods. We see the Salar gul in the weaving of the Turkmen tribes. We see it in the weaving of Shah Sevan Vinaids in north-west Iran, in the weavings of Kurds from Azerbaijan, and in the south Caucasus, in rugs of the Kazak group, in north-west Anatolian rugs from the Bergama and chenakale market areas, and even in modern flat-woven rugs of Macdonald and commercial rugs of the Arab district (fibs. 19-24). How do we explain these remarkable migrations of this new group?

The answer to this question probably resides in two areas. The first, already alluded to above in our use of the word magic, involves the symbolization of this age-old human trait to ascribe powers to visual forms, and anthropological and historical literature abounds with examples, from crosses which ward off vampires to the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, which was invoked to protect Constantinople from the Ottomans in 1453, without conspicuous success. This generalized apotropaic function ascribed to certain simple forms no doubt contributes to their popularity and their spread.

The second answer has to do with the association of gul forms with tribal and ethnic identities, a principle now well-established in rug literature, and the rationale for our term Salar gul. This specific, as opposed to general, symbolism spreads with the migration of peoples with whom it is associated. It is reasonable to suppose that the identification of particular gul forms with particular tribal groups in 19th century central Asian Türkmen society has cost some linguistic misreadings and the migrations of such forms in past times, and thus Türkmen weaving (so popular with 20th-century collectors) may provide us with the key to understanding who wore at least some of the very early rugs, and why they were woven in so many places under so many circumstances.
Türkmen Rugs and Early Rug Weaving in the Western Islamic World

The Hypothesis and its Methodology: Style, Written Sources, and Back-bearings

All of the leads to a simple hypothesis: the similarities which we have indicated in the carpets discussed above are due to a common, nomadic, Turkish ancestry of these forms, and of many of the weavings using these forms as well. The relationships so strongly suggested by our visual evidence are supported by evidence of Turkic migrations and settlements by evidence of the persistence of tribal identities despite great migrations and time spans, and by various types of collateral evidence.

But is this methodology valid? There exists today an element of revisionism in rug literature that suggests that nomadic societies were not the perpetuators of artistic traditions over the centuries, but were in fact reeds bending hither and thither in the stylistic wind, adapting forms and styles willy-nilly from their more sophisticated city-dwelling neighbors.1 Moreover, it has recently been suggested that the gul form itself might not have originated in the nomadic tribal traditions, but in the court rugs of Timurid times.14 These are serious questions, and before we embark on setting out our historical evidence, we should consider them briefly.

Is it in the nature of art to mirror changes in society and culture. The classic explanation of the extremely slow pace of stylistic change in the art of ancient Egypt, for example, is rooted in the rigid and conservative nature of the values of Egyptian society and culture. It is certainly true that the curve representing the rate of change in all kinds of social organization, urban, rural, or nomadic, is logarithmic, rising, as it were, at an ever-increasing rate. But we cannot dissect a very recent part of this curve with a high rate of ascent, such as nomadic art and society of the early 20th century, and draw from it conclusions about a much flatter part of the curve several centuries ago. In short, just because in a recent period of enormous changes to their societal and cultural norms, certain nomadic tribes have readily adapted their rug weaving to designs of urban and commercial origin, we should not necessarily suppose that such an adaptation could have occurred at a similar pace or to a similar degree five hundred years ago.

The notion of artistic conservatism associated with nomadic Turkish societies in much of the rug literature has a firm foundation in fact, and does not necessarily represent a romantic conception of these societies and cultures. There is an overwhelming body of evidence which attests to the survival of traditional nomadic Turkic customs even during transitional periods from nomadic to semi-nomadic and then to village or urban patterns of living; from shamanism to Islam; from ghazi warriors to bureaucrats. One has only to examine the court cultures of the urban Timurids, Mamluks, Ak Koyunlu, Safavids, Mughals, or Ottomans, in which horseback councils, ceremonies in tents (figs. 25 and 26), and similar nomadic rituals were preserved centuries after "urbanization", to realize that nomadic customs of great cultural importance continued to be practiced long after what appeared to be fundamental changes in living patterns, and that even long after their economic or military d'ère had vanished.17 In the realm of the visual arts of Turkic peoples, we need only look to the persistence of traditional forms in the rug or standard, the bayrak or pennon, the tugra or royal signature, and the various damgha derived from nomadic brands-mark, not to mention a wealth of other signs and symbols.18 The destan or tribal romances lingered on in village folklore, just as tribal names mentioned almost a millennium ago by Mahmud of Kashgar are still immediate and living parts of traditions of villages and tribes in Pans, Azerbaijan, Anatolia, and Transoxiana to this very day.19 The implications of this evidence blur that sharp distinction between city and country, between urban material and nomadic boy or tribe, which we find so frequently in the rug literature. The Qashqai notable who leaves behind his Mercedes and his comfortable air-conditioned apartment in Shiraz to participate in the dusty summer migrations is a living testament to this blurring. Thus when we examine the notion that Türkmen rugs as we know them today are descendents of nomadic rugs copied from other rugs "invented" by professional artists of Timurid court cities, we might want to remember that these princes who lived in Shiraz, Herat, Samarkand, and Bokhara were in large part individuals who were only a generation or two removed from a nomadic or semi-nomadic life style, and who, according to historical sources, still preserved many of the customs, beliefs, and attitudes of nomadic peoples.20

The other argument against both modern Türkmen rugs and early Holbein rugs stemming from lost works that are the spontaneous creation of court artists, has to do with the basic nature of Islamic court art itself, which has certainly been subjected to exhaustive study in recent years.21 Islamic court artists, were naklashan - men of the pen. Their training proceeded through calligraphy with its demanding yet supple discipline to the various specialties of the Islamic library - binding, miniature painting, and design.22 Islamic court art is generally distinguished by its "reach" into various media, and by the presence, of a naklashan-centered style across a wide range of media, but always centered in the Arts of the Book and thus immeasurably helping art historians in questions of dating and relative chronology.23 In fact, those rugs depicted in 14th and 15th century Il-Khans, Jalayirids, Timurids, and Türkmen court art are quite striking in that their designs and their style are more a part of what we know from a vast body of evidence to be the book court art traditions of these times. When rugs do become a part of the court style. It is due to the gradual intrusion of the forms of the Art of the Book into rug-weaving, which is well-documented in Islamic painting as occurring toward the end of the 15th century.24 And as in miniature paintings took a bit more sophisticated, a bit better-articulated, and a bit more complex than the small-pattern Holbeins which have survived into our day, it is because the court artist was trained to transmute reality into accord with his canons of high finish, perfection of articulation and detail, and what the late Eric Slochter called "cold fluency of execution".24

The Evidence in the Written Sources: A Brief Synopsis

If the reader now allows that nomadic artistic forms could have survived through the centuries, and that the forms we refer to as guls do have symbolic attachments, both general and specific, to certain groups of people, and through all sorts of historical and geographical change, then the next step for bustressing arguments will prove to be quite interesting. The primary reason for the culture of historical evidence to the dusty summer headway in rug scholarship has not been the fault of those who were presented with arguments based on historical data, but rather of those who presented the arguments. The historical material supporting the concept of Türkic cultural and social continuity is vast, but it
has not been presented coherently or in detail. In this paper we will strive for the former, in the hope that the latter may follow within a few years.

Our first source on tribal groups of any importance is the well-known Divan-i Lü'lu' al-Türk of Mahmud of Kâshgâh, written around the year 1014. The basic tribes or boyuk listed by Mahmud, together with their damgas or brand-marks, were augmented slightly in the early 14th century by the Ilkhanid historian and Prime Minister Rashid al-Din in his Collection of Histories or Janâl al-Tawarîkh. We can trace the movements of these basic tribal groups (boy, fa'mat, ashireh, oozdeh) through written sources and literary traditions of 15th-century Türkmen states, through the patterns of migration into Anatolia of Türkmen groups from the 11th century onward, through the records of the ‘Beylîk’ principalities of Anatolia after the collapse of central Seljuk power in the 13th century, and through the meticulous records of settlements, taxation, and tribal military levies kept by the Ottomans throughout the history of their empire. The settlement patterns in Anatolia have been published in extremely raw form in a massive work by Deren Ozel. Faruk Sümer has listed both settlements and dispersion patterns for a number of tribal groups; histories of the White Sheep and Black Sheep principalities are now available. We find in Anatolia firm evidence of settlements of the Chavudur (Chodor), the Salur (Salor), the Eymut (Imeti), the Tekke, and the Sary. The same tribal groups, which were fragmented and dispersed all over the Middle East over the centuries, are found in Fars, Azerbaijan, Gilan, Tabasistan, Khurasan, and of course in Transcaspia, where large numbers of them remained to the present day. While raw historical data in and of itself is seldom conclusive in art-historical matters, the patterns of Türkmen migration and ‘bylestîme’ or settlement revealed in the work of contemporaneous historians certainly support the stylistic and artistic evidence pointing to Türkmen weavers as the vectors for the spread of our familiar rug forms.

Moreover, the various Turkish states and principalities nourished an awareness of their Türkmen past. The Ottomans appear to have stemmed from a branch of the Chavudur; the White Sheep Türkmen thought of themselves as descendants of the Bayundur. The damga of the Kayîgî served for hundreds of years as the arsenal-mark of the Ottoman armories (fig. 27). The Salur or Salor served as Atabegs of the Seljuks in Fars in the 13th century, and the tribe played a major part in the settlement of Rum (Anatolia) after the battle of Malazgird opened up Asia Minor to Türkmen migration.

It is the history of the Salghurs which promises to yield the most interesting light on the development of Türkmen weaving as a whole. The predominance of Salor weaving among the Türkmen themselves has been mentioned in the literature. Of far more interest however is the information imparted by the 17th century Chaghâstây historian Abû Ghâzi Bahadur, Khan of Khiva, who wrote that the Yomud, Tekke, Ersari, and Sary Türkmen tribes stemmed from the Salor boy of the Oghuz. Major groups of Salor settled in Anatolia in the Nîde, Kar, Tarsus, and Konya areas, and several Yorûk groups claimed descent from the Salors as well. Given the assimilation of the Salor to Türkmen weaving, both in the 19th century and in the traditions of Türkmen peoples, the Anatolian/Central Asia continuum so clearly seen in examples of rugs themselves does not lack for historical support in the written sources, coincidentally rendering the etymology of the tribal name itself (sal- to let go, to spread out, to send forth branches or shoots) symbolically appropriate.

The Case of Mamluk Carpets: Propriety, Symbolism, or Ethnicity?

To this point, we have suggested a number of reasons why certain rug forms familiar over a wide range of Islamic weaving in the 19th century might have had an important set of historically-identified ancestors in the 15th centuries, and that these ancestors in turn may have stemmed from a common source. Propriety, and probably to a lesser extent the general symbolism of an apotropaic form, are useful explanations of why a Spanish manufacturer should use an Anatolian or at any rate a Near Eastern stylistic model for weaving in the 15th century. The migrations and settlements of Türkmen tribes can offer a satisfactory explanation of why we see early rugs from Azerbaijan, central Anatolia, and the Aegean littoral of Asia Minor, all using the same repertoire of basic forms, while the evidence we have suggested regarding the persistence of tribal traditions in Turkey may explain why these same forms are found in a similarly widespread distribution in the 19th century. Moreover, while the style of the rugs under discussion does not suggest the direct influence of the shape or iconographic language of Islamic art, but rather traditional designs in a "Turco-Islamic style," it does fit quite comfortably into the general Islamic stylistic use of calligraphic and geometric forms, its affinities with architectural decoration, and its occasional evidence of the imagery of Chinese art that so profoundly changed the course of Islamic art after the Mongol invasions. The small group of rugs under discussion, so important in the surviving artistic legacy of those times, makes its own identity plain, inclusively by its Islamic style, and exclusively by its lack of stylistic affinity to any known aspect of the art of other peoples or traditions found in Anatolia at the time of the Turkish invasion and settlements from the 11th through the 15th centuries.

Taking this information in hand, let us turn briefly to a more difficult and more complicated test case. While it is not the purpose of the present paper to deal exhaustively with the peculiarities of the Anatolian/Mamluk artistic interconnection of the 13th through the 16th centuries (a task to be explored in the next International Conference on Oriental Carpets), it would be useful before concluding to test both the strengths and the limitations of our method of analysis and our conclusions by looking at the tradition of Mamluk carpet weaving with relation to propriety, symbolism, and tribal identity.

The argument for propriety (i.e. that a rug must look like a popular or general conception of a rug) can only be applied in a very superficial way to justify the resemblances between the Anatolian and Egyptian Mamluk carpets, for the simple reason that these resemblances, although they exist in abundance, are neither obvious nor easy to find, and however intriguing our comparisons may be in black- and white-photographs, the unique color scheme of Mamluk rugs complicates the case for propriety immeasurably.

In fact, the case for propriety being an explanation of the style or even of the existence of Mamluk rugs works only in a back-handed way, and then in conjunction with the ethnicity argument. For of course, the Mamluks were Turks who adhered in varying degrees to Turkish tribal customs, a Turkish language, and a Turkish identity throughout their tempestuous rule of Egypt from the time of Baybars I onwards. Indeed, it is
this ethnic affinity, together with the undisputed cleverness of the Caliphean merchant community in exploiting the lucrative European markets and in tapping the flow of money across the Mediterranean trade routes, that explains why all other explanations fall, why Egypt (of all rug-weaving sites the only one that does not conform geographically, demographically, or socially to the rest of the traditional ‘rug belt’) should be for a brief time the site of rug production. Perhaps it is a sense that somehow the production of rugs was an appropriate traditional enterprise for the rules as well as a means of economic competition with the rival Anatolian regimes to the north, that led in 15th-century Cairo to the creation of what appears to be that rarest phenomenon in the history of Islamic art—a synthetic artistic tradition without embedded social roots. For Mamluk rugs constitute a stylistic bouillabaisse of artistic motifs gathered from every root and cranny of the artistic environment in Egypt, cooked up in a totally original color scheme. In the more complex multicolored examples especially, we see a survival of textile patterns, men gül motifs, stylistic florets and jatsam of south Anatolian or Syrian ‘chess-board’ rugs and west Anatolian ‘para-Mamluks’, and echoes both stylistic and technical of its early Italian medallion carpets from the Ak Koyunlu empire, with which the Mamluk domains shared a long frontier throughout the 15th century. The larger part of the vocabulary of Mamluk rugs is understandable in this context: what is unusual is the syntax and grammar of the artistic language, which constitutes a sort of two-dimensional projection of a fantastic Mamluk ruggaras ceiling onto a wool floor.

Symbolism may play a larger role in the explanation of the existence and the design of Mamluk carpets, although the precise form that explanation may take is not clear at present. Charles Grant Ellis has boldly proposed a pan-Asianic symbolic meaning for the great Mamluk medallion designs, whether Ellis is correct or not, it seems likely that neither the explanation of the gül and its tribal identity, nor a vague generalization goaded by a sort of multi-purpose apostrophe ‘blue bead’ in carpet form, can explain the unusual style, form, and technique of Mamluk carpets entirely. The many questions it promises much, and certainly needs further exploration, in this extraordinary chapter in the history of carpets.

Some Conclusions

Given the peculiar distribution of surviving examples of carpets in both an historical and geographical sense, and given the rest of our listic and technical information about early carpets, the popular conception of a ‘reliable case’ is in the present instance inapplicable. This study makes no claims to a ‘proof’ by scholastic standards. The word ‘proof’ carries for a ‘reasonable doubt’ in the rug literature these days, we may have failed even to reach that Anglo-Saxon legal definition of proof. What we have attempted to do is demonstrate that within the fairly strict limits defined at the beginning of this essay, the weight of (a) the evidence presented by early rugs and later examples, (b) the evidence for cultural continuity among rug weaving groups (time), (c) the evidence for tribal migrations and settlements (space), taken together point to the explanation we have offered as the simplest and the most direct assessment of what we perceive as the stylistic commonwealth and the legacy of an important group of early and later carpets.

It is important to note that these conclusions may resemble to a limited degree those arrived at by Professor Erdmann over twenty-five years ago, the route by which they have been reached is substantially different. First, we have thought it most prudent, given the complete confusion of early written sources and the virtual lack of very early carpets themselves, to refrain completely from speculating on the implications of the history of the knotted-pile technique, no matter how tempting that enterprise appears in the light of the evidence we have presented. Second, we have been able to survey a much wider range of easily available historical sources and secondary studies which illuminate the period under examination.

Third, we are fortunate in enjoying a technology which allows for easy and quick travel, and convenient means of obtaining visual data through high quality color slides and publications; this means that a relative newcomer to the field today, once having completed the obligatory study of languages and methodology, may master in only a few years or even months a mass of substantive material which scholars of Erdmann’s generation acquired only after decades of scholarly labor and frustration. In short, we must all count ourselves fortunate to be able to stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us, as we form our own art-historical arguments and conclusions.

This paper of necessity has been an outline, a prospectus, for the ideas which it proposes. As such, if it is to have any ultimate value for the cumulative process we call the history of art, it will not be in these written words, but in the quality of the use others may make, in agreement or disagreement, of the sources we have introduced, the methodology we have defined, and the explanations we have attempted to offer.

Notes

1 For ideas and support in dealing with this problem I am especially indebted to Charles Grant Ellis, Jon Thompson, Julia Weber Bailey, and Anthony Landreau. I am also indebted to the many museum curators and collectors who have made possible the both the photography and the study involved in the preparation of this paper over many years, especially Selma Dinarz-Daipinar of Istanbul. Three changes have been made in the written version of this paper. First, the number of illustrations has been drastically reduced from the 34 pairs of slides shown in Washington, Second, the historical source material has been presented in much greater detail. Third, the writer has taken advantage of the eighteen-month hiatus between delivery of the paper and completion of the written version to include some limited reflections on certain studies published in the intervening months.

2 The two major compilations of documentary evidence on early Islamic textiles give perhaps
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22. Salor gil on Baluch rug, Chorsan, early 20th C./Salorengil auf Baluch-Tschepich, Chorsan, frühes 20. Jh. Private Collection


the best indication of these limits. See Maurice Lombard, Les textiles dans le monde musulman VIII. VIII siècle, Paris 1978, and K.B. Serjeant, Islamic Textiles: Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest, Beirut 1972.

1 See the evidence presented by Amy Briggs in 'Timurid Carpets' in Art Islamica, VII, 1, 1940, pp. 20-54; by K. Erdmann in Europa und der Orient 1914, Berlin and Mainz 1961 (and by John Mills in a fine series of articles dealing with documentation of early carpets in European painting, which have appeared in recent issues of Hal).

4 It will be obvious to the reader that no originally-delivered paper could encompass this topic in detail; the present written version, however, much augments the Washington talk, incorporates more, than a fragment of the text prepared by the author over ten years. It is hoped that the bulk of this material may eventually find publication in a longer study on the subject.

5 The peculiarities of Turkic etymology, problems of orthography, and other factors cast doubt on the gul/gil distinction proposed by Mostova, although it is essentially criticized by M. David in 'Turkoman Rugs: The Birth of a New Mythology' in Tribal Visions, Novao, California, 1980, p. 1.

6 See R. Ettinghausen, 'Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West and the Muslim World' in A Colloquium in Memory of George Cerny, New York 1976, pp. 28-47, and the paper by Dr. Irene Blumen to be published in the proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Oriental Carpets in Hal, 5, no. 1.


8 Check the evidence amassed by A. Driss, op. cit. Further treatments of this evidence have been made by Dr. Eleanor Sims in a paper delivered at Washington in November, 1980, and by Julia Weber Bailey in a paper delivered to the New York Rug Society in February, 1982.

9 See R. M. Niefsthal, 'Primitive Rugs of the "Konya" Type in the Mosque of Beysehir' in Art Bulletin, XIII, 1931, pp. 177-226, and K. Erdmann, 'Der Türkische Teppich des 15. Jahrhunderts, Istanbul, i.e. translated as History of the Early Turkish Carpet, London 1977, pp. 1-26; see also O. Aslanpas and Y. Durul, Seçizkula Hanınlık, Istanbul, x.d. ed., pp. 17-39. In all of the arguments currently raging among these early carpets, including the much-mangled Marco Polo quotations, no one seems to have noticed that there is virtually no firm evidence at all for a 13th century dating or for the assumption that the Konya rugs were 'original equipment' in the Azeddin mosque. There can be no doubt whatever that in style these carpets form part of an Islamic tradition, but their date is definitely an open question.

10 On terminology, see F. Spuhler, 'Bitat' in Encyclopédie de l'Islam (hereafter EI), New Edition, Supplement Fasc. 3/4, 1981, p. 136; also W. H. Worrell, 'On certain Arabic terms for "rug"' in Art Islamica, I, 1934, pp. 219-222, and II, 1934, pp. 65-68. The works by Serjeant and Lombard (op. cit.) term with references to rug-like textiles of all kinds. Of particular interest are the terms qitwārin, with its curious parallels to the gul, and nusnajīn.

11 See, among others, L. Ambray, 'On the origin of the Dragon and Phoenix Rug in Berlin' in Hal, 1, 1981. An Armenian provenance is argued for the rug in question (a) on the basis of an ethnographic hypothesis based on a reversed photograph of the rug, and (b) on the basis of the fact that the 20th century Turkish word for 'dragon' is a Persian loan word, thus the 'concept of the dragon did not exist in the Turkish mind'. Not one word is said about the style of the carpet. Ambray's observation about the color similarity between the 'Gohar carpet' and a rug dated to 1905, however, is both perceptive and intriguing.

12 Beyond the Boston carpet illustrated, we might mention the Dumbarton Oaks carpet recently acquired by the Textile Museum (see L. Mackie, 'Two Remarkable Fifteenth Century Carpets from Spain' in Textile Museum Journal, IV, 4, 1977, pp. 28-30); two large-pattern Holbein carpets from Spain in the Textile Museum, R 344.2.1 and R 344.2.2 illustrated in the same work in figs. 14 and 15; another small-pattern Holbein in the Textile Museum, R 344.3.1; a Europeanized 2-1/2 carpet R 44.0.1; and the Hispanic Society of America fragments H 323 and H 3220, illustrated in (misapplied) by G. L. May in Rugs of Spain and Morocco, Chicago 1977, pl. 156-7.

13 The large-patterned Holbein variants include the Philadelphia Museum rug, fig. 15 in Dimand and Maley, Oriental Rugs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1973; numerous rugs in the T.I.E.M., 1975, nos. 291-3; one noted in Dimand and Maley, op. cit. (fig. 154); and the Divriği mosaic rug 217; see B. Acem, 'Divriği Ulu Camii'nda"de Kilim', see Divriği Ulu Camii ve Darüşşifan, Ankara 1978, color pl. 5.

14 Ettinghausen, op. cit., gives examples of architectural use of the gul/gil border; the parallels are strongest in the 15th century architecture of Timurid and Turkmen Iran and Central Asia.

15 See Murray Eltant, 'The Development of Village and Nomad Rug Designs', this issue, p. 336, see also Michael David's article in Hal, 4, 1, 1981, pp. 142-146. There is no doubt that nomads borrowed forms from the art of the city in exactly the same way that today's Belgian and Pakistani rugs utilize nomadic gul forms. This does not mean however that some forms also did not endure over time: the overwhelming evidence is that many forms did.

16 Eltant, 'Speculations around the Development of Turkish Rug Designs' in Tribal Visions, Novao, California 1980, pp. 21-32. Eltant's article is essentially a review of Briggs (op. cit.). The problems with the Eltant article are rooted in such principles: miniatures illustrated by Briggs are Jalayrid and Türkmen as well as Timurid; Eltant's concept of the realism of Islamic art is at variance with forty-two years of scholarship in the interval since Briggs' publication; and too few a line has been drawn between 'city' and 'nomadic' societies.

17 The historical literature abounds in evidence of the survival of nomadic custom, vocabularly, social conventions, and names long after nomadic life-patterns have been abandoned. In this connection I recall the touching cartoon of a Turkish peasant who, before retiring for the night, tethers his tractor to a nearby tree with a short length of rope.


19 The survival of certain elements is documented in literally dozens of studies in the history of Turkish folklore, literature, and culture. See Part III, 'Destanlar' in F. Sömer, Çiçekler, Türkmenter, Ankara 1973, pp. 372-422. Similar survivals exist of course in most traditional societies.

20 Most contemporary chronicles underline the fluid delineation between nomad and city dweller in Timurid, Jalayrid, Ak Koyunlu, and Kara Koyunlu society in the 15th century, and the restlessness of allegiance and life-style is certainly seen in the behavior of the Türkmen allies of Beyazid I at the Battle of Ankara in 1402. See, for example, Nizār muddān Sāmī, Zafarnāme (translated by
See the chapter "Sahur" in Sümer, op. cit., 1972, and the section "Salğurhisiler" in C.E. Bosworth, The Islamic Dynasties, Edinburgh 1967, pp. 125-126. On the role of the Türkmens following Malazgird, see N. Kaymaz, "Malazgir Savaşları ve Anadolu’nun Fatih ve Türklemesine Dair" in the commemorative volume, Malazgirt Armaganı, Ankara 1972, pp. 259-268, where, incidentally, a distinction is made between Seljuks and Türkmen. See also M.F. Köprülü, "Oğuz etnologtisine dair tarihi notlar" in Türk Muzeum, 1, 1925, where Köprülü posits a Salor origin for the Karamanlidos, the rulers of 15th century "Turkomania" and probably the rulers of Konya when the "Konya" carpets were woven. But see also Ş. Tekinbasi in İslam Anıtkatı, ddbt, in his article "Kermanshâhe" where he proposes an Ajar origin. Another list of place-names derived from the Oghuz boys is published by O.L. Burrell, Les Déportations centrale et orientale dans l'empire ottoman in Revue de la Faculté des sciences économiques de l'Université d'Istanbul, II, 1949-50. Two major works shed considerable light on the Turkish settlement of Anatolia. These are C. Cahen, Pré-Ottomans Turquie (English translation) New York 1968, and S. Vryonis, The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Turkicization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1971.

24 See Bogolyubov, Tapisseries de l'Art Central, St. Petersburg, 1908: I rely on an English translation made by Amos Bateman Thacher; the discussion in this unpublished work occurs in Bogolyubov's introductory section on Turkish art.

25 See the article by B. Spuler, "Albu'lu Ghați Bahadur Khan", in EJ, New Edition. Sümer discusses the Şehereşer Tekme as an historical source at some length; see, for example, Sümer, op. cit., 1972, p. 344.

26 Sümer, ibid., pp. 336-344, discusses the Seljuk boys before and after Malazgird, drawing heavily on the Ottoman tax records for Anatolia for the more recent patterns of settlement.


28 On the other hand, Dr. Jon Thompson's theories on the earlier origins of great form, propounded in a paper at the Washington conference, and published in E. Hermann, Von Konya bis Kokend, Munich 1981, is thought provoking and certainly the best explanation of the form which has been made to date.

29 The exclusivity argument is an important one when we are dealing with such a small number of extant examples. A great deal is known about the non-Islamic artistic traditions of Anatolia, their style, their dating, and their diffusion in Asia Minor. In the history of art, the burden of proof cannot be carried alone by documents, epigraphy, or appeals to what the protagonist may believe to be the pattern of history; history is carried by the work of art itself — style, technique, iconography.

30 See, for example, Abdul-Aziz Khwairati, Balbars the First, London 1978; or, in a different vein, the studies by the eminent historian David Ayalon: Studies on the Mamluks of Egypt, London 1977.

31 Est we should form the notion that the Mamluks were confined to the eastern Mediterranean littoral, or that the Kap Koyunlu were confined to Azerbaijan, a look at the maps in Woods, op. cit., (Map 7, p. 108 and Map 8, p. 124), which give an altogether different message, should be kept in mind when we talk about rug production in 13th century Anatolia.


33 Chapter III in History of the Early Turkish Carpet, London 1977.