Encyclopædia Iranica

CARPETS VI. PRE-ISLAMIC CARPETS
Article by **Karen S. Rubinson**

Published: December 15, 1990
Last Updated: September 20, 2017

CARPETS VI. PRE-ISLAMIC CARPETS

CARPETS

vi. Pre-Islamic Carpets

Since 1966, when Hans Wulff wrote “There is no field in the industrial arts in Persia that is as important as carpet weaving, and yet little is known about its early development” (*Crafts*, p. 212), little new information has become available. Indeed, the evidence for textiles of all kinds in pre-Islamic Iran is very sparse. It is necessary to supplement the few remains of actual textiles with examination of representations in art and other kinds of indirect evidence of production, for example preserved impressions and pseudomorphs from excavations (for a recent summary of all this evidence, see Kawami). In this discussion the focus will be on preserved textiles in general, in order to demonstrate the range of fibers and techniques in use in Iran over time and thus to provide a context for the development of carpet making.

Interworking of fibers to produce cloth was known in Iran as early as the 5th millennium b.c.; two ceramic vessels of the Dalma period (see ceramics, chalcolithic, zagros) containing infant burials, from mound B at Seh Gābī in Kurdistan, yielded impressions of textiles and a preserved fragment as well (Levine p. 180). The corroded surface of a proto-Elamite (Period IV) copper

mirror found in Tomb 2 at Sialk (Sīalk) in north central Iran, dating to about 3000 b.c., preserves what appear to be shreds of S-spun linen (Pfister, pp. 201-02 and pl. XXXII/13; Ghirshman 1938, p. 64 and pl. XXIX/3). Other textiles are preserved from later 3rd-millennium contexts. At Tepe Hissar (Ḥeṣār), in northeastern Iran, two copper daggers with fragments of charred cloth in the area of the grip were found in the Burned Building of level IIIB, and another, in a IIIC grave, preserved traces of a grip of cloth and wood (Schmidt, p. 201 and pls. I, L). A copper ax from Susa had been wrapped in two pieces of cloth, of which traces were preserved. Analysis indicates that both were of linen, one coarse, the other finely woven (Lecaisne, p. 162 and suppl. pl. XLIII).

By the late 2nd millennium b.c. cording was known; the technique was later used in the selvages of carpets (see above, iii, v). In the tombs at Marlik (Mārlīk) on the southwest Caspian coast, which date from this period or perhaps the beginning of the 1st millennium b.c. (Muscarella, pp. 416-17), were found fragments of unidentified fabric, including cords and woven bands (Negahban, 1964, fig. 88 and p. 50). In addition, adhering to the surface of a bronze beaker from tomb 39 were traces of a fabric in which it may have been wrapped before burial (Negahban, 1983, p. 77, no. 50). Tomb C-I at the approximately contemporary site of Ghalekuti (Qaḷʿa-ye Kotī) in Deylamān contained a mirror with remains of hemp or flax cloth adhering to it, as well as fragmentary strings of hemp or flax that appear to have provided suspension for jewelry (Egami et al., 1965, p. 31 and pl. LXXV/88-90).

Hasanlu (Ḥasanlū), near Lake Urmia in Azarbaijan, was destroyed in an attack at the end of the 9th century b.c. (level IVB), and a relatively large sample of textiles survived the resulting fire (Dyson and Muscarella; Maude de Schauensee, personal communication). The pieces include one- and two-ply yarns, exhibiting both S and Z spin, preserved as woven fabric, fringe, tassels, and balls of thread. One example appears to have a kind of pile, with small loops occurring at intervals; its function is, however, unknown. Although the fibers have not been completely analyzed, the textiles from both Bronze and Iron Age levels include a large preponderance of wool, as well as bast; a second, unspecified vegetal fiber; and goat hair (de Schauensee, personal communication). Impressions of textiles were also preserved on a silver-and-electrum beaker; presumably it had been wrapped in fabric for storage (Porada, p. 2971, pl. 1488). Excavations in the grave of a young girl (grave 3, area P_l) at Haftavan (Haftavān) Tepe, north of Hasanlu, also of the 9th century b.c., produced the remains of a headdress, which had been made of plain-

woven cloth, as well as bits of the thread that had secured decorative bronze disks to it (Burney, pp. 134-35, fig. 8, and pl. IVa).

Another piece of evidence that pile carpets may have been produced in the ancient Near East is to be found on stone slabs from the entrances of residences of the Neo-Assyrian kings, beginning with Tiglath-pileser III (745-27 b.c.), which are decorated with geometric designs that may represent such carpets (Albenda). Although Xenophon mentions that the Persian kings made use of "Median carpets" of a yielding softness, no example is preserved from Achaemenid Persia itself (*Cyropaedia* 5.5.7, 8.8.15-16; cf. Wulff, p. 212). The earliest well-preserved pile carpet that has been excavated was found in kurgan 5 at the site of Pazyryk in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia; it has often erroneously been identified as "Persian," even by the excavator (Rudenko, 1970, p. 304). As kurgan 5 dates from the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 3rd century b.c., however, the carpet probably does not belong to the Achaemenid period, though it may well reflect the influence of Achaemenid carpet design. The carpet, which is preserved to nearly full size, originally measured 1.83 by 2 m (Plate CV). The field is divided into 24 framed squares, each containing a stylized floral element that may ultimately have been derived from the quatrefoils of Assyrian prototypes (Albenda, p. 3). The border consists of five stripes separated by narrow guards of alternating black, tan, and red squares outlined in black, flanked by narrow tan bands edged in black (Rudenko, 1968, pp. 40ff.; idem, 1970, pp. 298ff.). The outer and inner stripes contain schematic lion-griffins with heads turned back; the heads in the outer stripe face to the left, those of the inner stripe to the right. In the second stripe from the outside is a row of horses with crenellated manes, some ridden and some accompanied by walking male figures wearing caps; the ground is rust-colored. The walking figures resemble the tribute bearers on reliefs at Persepolis (e.g., Ghirshman, 1964, p. 184, pl. 231, p. 176 pl. 222), and it is this motif that originally suggested a Persian origin for the carpet. Near one corner of this stripe there are two circles with rosettes in the centers, which have led one scholar to infer that the carpet may have been a game board (Jettmar, p. 121). The fact that the horsemen are both mounted and on foot, in contrast to the figures on the Persepolis friezes, suggests that this border pattern was a rather distant adaptation of the Achaemenid original. (This observation was made by Judith Lerner.) The central border stripe contains stylized floral elements similar to those in the squares of the field, in rust, white, and black on a tan ground. The remaining stripe contains a frieze of reddish, spotted animals with lowered heads on a buff ground; they were

identified by the excavator as fallow deer (*Cervus dama*; Rudenko, 1968, p. 42). The haunches are patterned with the Achaemenid "dot and comma" motif (cf. Ghirshman, 1964, p. 239, pl. 286), and decorative polychrome bands run along the backs and necks, but the relatively naturalistic body contours and pose with lowered head suggest that the carpet was made in Central Asia or Siberia, where this animal and the naturalistic representation of animals in general were indigenous (Rubinson; Farkas, pp. 24-25). The pile consists of symmetrical knots, 3,600 to the dm^2 (Rudenko, 1968, pp. 48-49; idem, 1970, p. 302). It should be noted that kurgan 2 at Bashadar in the Altai, dating about 100 years earlier than Pazyryk kurgan 5, yielded fragments of a much finer knotted carpet, with 7,000 asymmetrical knots to the dm^2 (Rudenko, 1968, p. 49; idem, 1970, p. 302). It is, however, too fragmentary to permit determination of its design or function.

No pile carpet remains are extant from Persia before the Sasanian period, though fragments of Parthian wool textiles are common. Some pieces from tombs in the Germī region of eastern Azarbaijan, near the Soviet border, are reported to be colored blue, orange, brown, and cream and to include among their design repertory swastika motifs and checkered patterns, as well as Greek-key borders (Matheson, p. 75). At Shahr-i Qumis (Šahr-e Qūmes) in Gorgān part of a black/brown felt garment, with the edge of the neckline and part of the left shoulder preserved, has been excavated. It is dated to the first half of the 1st century b.c. The silk cord that presumably secured the neck opening is the oldest excavated piece of silk known from Iran at present. Felt fragments, colored red and black, were also found in the Parthian levels at Shahr-i Qumis (Hansman and Stronach, 1970a, pp. 49-52; Nunome, pp. 341-43). Hemp cord and other textile remains from the Parthian period have been found in tombs at Naruzmahale (Nowrūz-maḥalla) on the Caspian coast (Egami et al., 1966, Japanese text pp. 14, fig. 2/1; 17, fig. 3; English tr., p. 18).

From the Sasanian period a rich legacy of textile imagery and literary references has survived (see, e.g., bahār-e kesrā), but it is only from the Sasanian levels at Shahr-i Qumis that actual Sasanian textiles are preserved (Ackerman, pp. 69lff.; Bier, pp. 119-25). They include several yellowed fragments with pile, identified as rugs, and fabrics of wool or wool and cotton, some with patterns; a fragment striped in red/orange, white, and blue; another with brown and white stripes; a white shroud ornamented with a single green thread; a piece decorated with white palmettes; and another with a blue ground and white "pearls." Fragments of linen were also found at the site

(Hansman and Stronach, 1970a, p. 40; idem, 1970b, pp. 154-55, pls. I-IV and p. 154 fig. 7; Bier, pp. 119, 123; Kawami, appendix). One of the Sasanian fragments from Shahr-i Qumis has been identified as a *zīlū* (Vogelsang-Eastwood), but the identification is controversial (see v, above).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

P. Ackerman, "Textiles through the Sasanian Period," in *Survey of Persian Art* I, pp. 681-715.

P. Albenda, "Assyrian Carpets in Stone," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 10, 1978, pp. 1-34.

C. M. Bier, "Textiles" in P. O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter. Art of the Sasanian Empire*, New York, 1978, pp. 119-40.

C. Burney, "Excavations at Haftavan Tepe 1969. Second Preliminary Report," *Iran* 10, 1972, pp. 127-42.

R. H. Dyson, Jr., and O. W. Muscarella, "Constructing the Chronology and Historical Implications of Hasanlu IV," *Iran* 27, 1989, pp. 1-27.

N. Egami, S. Fukai, and S. Masuda, *Dailaman* I: *The Excavations at Ghalekuti and Lasulkan*, The Tokyo University Iraq-Iran Archaeological Expedition Report 6, Tokyo, 1965; II: *The Excavations at Noruzmahale and Khoramrud 1960*, The Tokyo University Iraq-Iran Archaeological Expedition Report 7, Tokyo, 1966.

A. R. Farkas, "The Near East," in E. C. Bunker, C. B. Chatwin, and A. R. Farkas, *"Animal Style"Art from East to West*, New York, 1970, pp. 19-59.

R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles de Sialk, près de Kashan*, 2 vols., Paris, 1938-39.

Idem, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, New York, 1964.

J. Hansman and D. Stronach, "Excavations at Shahr-i Qumis, 1967," *JRAS*, 1970a/1, pp. 29-62.

Idem, “A Sasanian Repository at Qumis,” *JRAS* 1970b/2, pp. 142-55.

K. Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes*, New York, 1967.

T. Kawami, “Archaeological Evidence for Textiles in Pre-Islamic Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 23, 1989 (forthcoming).

M. L. Lecaisne, “Note sur les tissus recouvrant des haches en cuivre,” *MDFP* 13, 1912, pp. 163-64 and suppl. pl. XLIII.

L. D. Levine, “Seh Gabi,” *Iran* 10, 1972, pp. 179-80.

S. Matheson, *Persia. An Archaeological Guide*, Park Ridge, N. J., 1973.

O. W. Muscarella, “Fibulae and Chronology, Marlik and Assur,” *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 1984, pp. 413-19.

E. O. Negahban, *A Preliminary Report on Marlik Excavation. Gohar Rud Expedition, Rudbar, 1961-62*, Tehran, 1964.

Idem, *Metal Vessels From Marlik*, Prähistorische Bronzefunde, Abt. II, Bd. 3, Munich, 1983.

J. Nunome, *The Origins of Sericulture and Ancient Silks* (in Japanese), Tokyo, 1979; Eng. tr. courtesy Department of Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

C. Parham, “How Altaic/Nomadic Is the Pazyryk Carpet?” *Oriental Rug Review* 13/5, June-July, 1993, pp. 34-39.

R. Pfister, “Traces de tissu sur un miroir en cuivre provenant d’une tombe proto-élamite de Sialk (période VI),” in R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles de Sialk, près de Kashan* II, Paris, 1939, pp. 201-02 and pl. XXXII.

E. Porada, “Notes on the Gold Bowl and Silver Beaker from Hasanlu,” in *Survey of Persian Art* XIV, pp. 2971-78.

K. S. Rubinson, “A Reconsideration of Pazyryk,” in G. Seaman, ed., *Ecology and Empire. A Symposium on Nomads in the Cultural Evolution of the Old World*, forthcoming.

S. I. Rudenko, *Drevneĭshie v mire khudozhestvennye kovry i tkani*, Moscow,

1968.

Idem, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia*, tr. M. W. Thompson, Berkeley, 1970.

E. F. Schmidt, *Excavations at Tepe Hissar*, *Damghan*, Philadelphia, 1937.

G. M. Vogelsang-Eastwood, "*Zilu* Carpets from Iran," *Studia Iranica* 17, 1988, pp. 225-40.

[E. J. Laing, "Evidence for Two Possible Sasanian Rugs Depicted in Tun-Huang Murals of A.D. 642," *Ars Orientalis* 12, 1981, pp. 69-71.] Dr. Trudy Kawami kindly supplied some of the information reported here.