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CARPETS VII. ISLAMIC PERSIA TO THE MONGOLS

CARPETS

vii. Islamic Persia to the Mongols

Because of the scarcity of surviving materials it is difficult to separate the history of carpet making in Iran from that of the rest of the Islamic world before the Mongol invasion (656/1258). Furthermore, the kind of rigid distinction between carpet and other textile designs that characterizes later production probably did not exist in the early Islamic period. On surviving fragments and contemporary depictions of both carpets and textiles simple patterns of lozenges, circles, stripes, and the like are the main designs; animal designs on early carpets seem to have been modeled on those of deluxe figured textiles, again suggesting a more general approach to the design of floor coverings at this period.

Until recently the entire history of carpets in the first centuries of Islam was known only through written accounts (for compilations and extracts, see Wiet, pp. 93-129; Pope, pp. 2276-80; Serjeant; Lombard, pp. 181-86). Excavation of early carpets and fragments in Egypt, including some that may have been made in greater Iran, has permitted the first step toward establishing a corpus of scientifically excavated and analyzed early pieces that may soon lead to a better understanding of early floor coverings. The extant material includes not

only tapestry-woven and pile carpets but also fiber mats, textiles, and felt rugs.

Fiber mats (ḥaṣīr, ḥoṣr). Mats woven of rushes, straw, and undyed hemp were made throughout the warmer parts of the Islamic world. Among Persian centers of manufacture were Dārābjerd in Fārs, ʿAbbādān (Ābādān), and Sāmān in Ḵūzestān, and the province of Gīlān (Moqaddasī [Maqdesī], p. 442; *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 137, cf. Serjeant, 10, pp. 89, 102; 15-16, pp. 76-77; Dimand, 1942, p. 79; Lombard, p. 185). The mats of Sāmān and ʿAbbādān must have been especially fine, for they were described in the work of the 5th/11th-century writer Abu'l-Moṭahhar al-Azdī as lovelier than carpets and softer than silk, so that they could be folded in two as if they were made of cloth (p. 36; cf. Serjeant, 15-16, p. 76). Several examples and fragments survive from this period, though the provenience of most remains to be established. A large straw mat in the Benaki Museum, Athens, was made, according to its inscription, in Tiberias, in Palestine (Dimand, 1942, p. 78), a city mentioned by several medieval writers as a center for production of fine reed mats, including prayer mats (Dimand, 1973, p. 13; Ferber, no. 10). In The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, there is a similar, though smaller, example (Acc. no. 39.111) with two bands of stylized writing expressing blessings and good wishes to an unnamed owner. Both these mats have panels and borders of purple and black, and the weave is similar to a basic cloth weave (Dimand, 1942, p. 78). Other designs are also known: confronted lions rendered in a geometric style (on a fragment in the Benaki Museum; Delivorrias, p. 96), panels of script with decorative borders (al-Sabah collection, Kuwait; Jenkins, p. 43), and Kufic writing on a speckled ground (several fragments formerly in the H. P. Kraus collection, exhibited in Binghamton, New York, in 1975; Ferber, figs. 10a-b). All these examples have been attributed to the 4th-5th/10th-11th centuries. In 1980 a considerable number of fragments woven in various fibers and of various weights and structures were excavated in Fosṭāṭ (old Cairo) by the American Research Center in Egypt, under the direction of George Scanlon; they are presumed to date from the 5th/11th century, though they have not yet been systematically examined (Mackie, p. 26). Early textile inscriptions were an instrument of government economic control, usually indicating the city or workshop where the pieces were made (Bierman, p. 19); further study of the paleography on surviving mats may thus provide additional evidence of their origins (see calligraphy).

Textiles as floor coverings. On early Islamic metalwork and ceramics from Iran

male figures are commonly depicted seated directly on the ground, with no cushions or textiles beneath them; kings and other important figures, on the other hand, sometimes sit on thrones covered with cloth. A fine throne rug of this type is represented on a silver bowl in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, generally dated to the 2nd-3rd/8th-9th century (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 208). In the field is an elaborate asymmetrical floral design, perhaps related to Chinese designs of the Tang period (Dimand, 1973, p. 13). At Pyandzhikent, near Samarqand, in murals dated to the 2nd/8th century figures are shown sitting on textiles with wide borders; borders and fields are sometimes patterned in pearled roundels, rosettes, and other repeat motifs that are also found on silk-brocade clothing of the period (Azarpay, figs. 52, 53, pls. 18). Identical or similar textiles appear as saddle cloths in these paintings (Azarpay, figs. 7, 50, pl. 20, 21). A reconstruction of another Pyandzhikent painting shows a god seated on a throne supported by horses. A cloth panel with a curving edge hangs down in front of the throne (Azarpay, fig. 35); it may be either one end of a small oval rug or possibly a swag attached to the edge of the seat. Thrones with similar pendants are represented on Persian metalwork. For example, on a shallow silver dish in the Islamic section of the Staatliche Museum, Berlin (West), a lute player rendered in relief is seated on a sturdy bench; an oval cloth with asymmetrical folds is draped beneath him (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1354[3]B; 5th-6th/11th-12th century). Several inlaid medallions in the upper register on the bronze “Bobrinsky bucket” (made in Herat in 559/1163; now in the Hermitage, Leningrad) frame figures seated on simple bench thrones with small round textile swags visible (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1308). Approximately seventy-five years later several personifications of zodiac constellations were represented in very much the same fashion on the lid of the famed “Vaso Vescovali” in the British Museum (1950, 7-25.1), seated on benches with legs in the shape of horse protomes, partially hidden by semicircular drapes (Baer, p. 255, fig. 207). The bunched folds of some of these drapes suggest that most of them were lightweight textiles, rather than heavier carpets. Ṭabarī (II, p. 952) mentions a military commander’s sitting on a *ṭenfesa*, a heavy carpet or cloak, during battle, and Ebn Jawzī (510-97/1126-1200) has recorded that the ascetic ʿOmar b. ʿAbd-al-ʿAzīz, while he was governor of Medina (87-93/706-12), used to sit on a cotton shirt spread over a Qaṭawānī cloak (*ʿabāʾa*) made of wool flock (Ebn Jawzī, *Manāqeb*, p. 31). Qaṭawān near Kūfa in southern Iraq was the probable origin of such rough woolen cloaks, but it is also possible that they were the products of Qaṭawān (Qaṭvān) near Samarqand (cf. Balāḏorī, *Fotūḥ*, p. 246; Yāqūt, *Boldān* IV, pp. 139-40; Serjeant, 9, p.63). These stories suggest that some “rugs” were no more

than outer garments, which were perhaps used for bedding as well.

Felts (named; namaṭ, *plur.* anmāṭ). In colder parts of the Islamic world it is likely that carpets and felts were more widely used than lighter floor coverings; the surviving remains of such materials are, however, very fragmentary (see vi, above). In the 4th/10th century the term *al-anmāṭ al-moḥkama* ("sturdy *anmāṭ*") is applied by Moqaddasī (Maqdesī) to products of Jahram (Jahrom) in Fārs (p. 442; cf. Pope, p. 2279; Serjeant, 10, F 86). Other towns that produced *anmāṭ* were Fasā (ibid.) in Fārs, Tostar (Šūštar) and Qorqūb in Ḵūzestān, and Dabīl (Dwin) and Barḏaʿa in Armenia (Moqaddasī, pp. 377, 380, 416; cf. Serjeant, 10, pp. 74, 78, 94, 96). It is not clear that at this early period the word necessarily meant felt, however, for Yāqūt (*Boldān* I p. 656) mentions that the men and women of Baṣenna (Boṣanna) wove *anmāṭ* and other items. At Pyandzhikent there are paintings of paladins and deities seated on rectangular and oval floor coverings that probably represent felts (Azarpay, pls. 13, 27); the fields are unornamented, though the narrow border, which are in contrasting colors, sometimes may be decorated with zigzags or other simple designs. In the excavations a Fosṭāṭ several small fragments of felt were uncovered in a 5th/11th-century context; the colors include yellow, blue, green, tan, and red, but there is no patterning (Mackie, p. 33).

Flat-woven carpets (gelīms). These carpets are woven of spun wool (see v, above), and most of the fragments known from the period have been found in Egypt. In Egypt wool was generally spun toward the right (S-spun), following the practice with linen, the fibers of which curl naturally toward the right when they are drying. As some of the pieces discovered in Egypt are made of wool spun to the left (Z-spun), they are believed to be imports, or possibly made locally of imported yarns, for example, a flat-woven piece with slit joins of an unusual type and a design of polychrome squares arranged in a stepped-lozenge design (Mackie, p. 332, figs. 8-9). Several groups have been distinguished within these finds. One large group of tapestry-woven bands, distinguished by the use of three-ply wool warps and distinctive lattice patterns containing birds and geometric motifs in the compartments (Thompson, no. 35, pl. XV, pp. 80-81; Kühnel, pp. 79-89, pl. I, fig. 2), has been dated by the paleography of some in-woven inscriptions to the 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries. It is possible that these bands were sewn together in shrouds or coffin covers, and they were probably imported from Armenia, Turkey, or northern Syria (L. Bellinger, in Thompson, p. 80); similar designs occur on some 13th/19th-ceutury Anatolian *gelīm*s (Michael Francis, personal

communication). There are many other early Islamic woolen tapestries found in Egypt that have not yet been analyzed or classified according to type; they are believed to come from various sites in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia, as well as Egypt (Dimand, 1973, pp. 10-11). *Gelīm*s are mentioned as products of Wāseṭ (in southern Iraq) and Fārs in *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam* (written 372/982; tr. Minorsky, pp. 126, 138, cf. Serjeant, 9, p. 89; 10, p. 80). The term does not occur frequently in early texts, which suggests that *gelīm*s were made largely for private use, most probably by nomads, as they still are today.

The term *zīlū* also appears in early sources; these flat weaves were sometimes called Jahramī after the city in Fārs that was renowned for their production (*Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, pp. 126, 129; Eṣṭaḵrī, p. 152; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 212; cf. Serjeant, 10, pp. 80-81). They were also noted among the products of Sīstān (*Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, p. 110); in the 5th/11th century Tūn in Kūhestān was an especially active production center (Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow, p. 141). Fine *zalālī* were produced at Dabīl, as well as at Badlīs (modern Bitlis; see bedlīs), Ḵelāṭ (Ahlat), Arjīš (Erciş), Barkarī (or Bargīrī, modern Muradiye), Ḵᵛoy, Qālīqalā (Erzurum), and Naḵjavān (Nakhichevan) in Armenia (Moqaddasī, p. 374; Ṭaʿālebī, *Laṭāʾef al-maʿāref*, pp. 184, 237; *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, p. 143; cf. Serjeant, 10, p. 94; Vogelsang-Eastwood, p. 233) and at Warthān (or Vartān) on the southern bank of the Aras river in Azarbaijan (*Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, p. 142). Thick, heavy fragments of cloth made of both S- and Z-spun dyed wool and Z-spun undyed cotton were found in the Fosṭāṭ excavations; the weave is related to modern pieces, also called *zīlū*, made in Iran and Iraq (Mackie, p. 33, figs. 14-15; see v, above). One piece has a stepped crenellated pattern, a second flattened “pearls” arranged in tangential rows; both designs may well be derived from traditional Persian stone and textile designs, for example, those represented on clothing on the reliefs at Ṭāq-e Bostān (see clothing iii). Another, technically similar fragment has been excavated at the Red Sea port of Quseir al-Qadim (al-Qoṣayr al-Qadīm) in a context probably of the 7-8th/13-14th centuries. It has been suggested that this entire group was influenced by a type of *zīlū* produced in Iran in the Sasanian period (Vogelsang-Eastwood, p. 233; see vi, above), but there is no conclusive evidence on the point.

Pile carpets. There is some evidence in Chinese sources suggesting that pile carpets from the Iranian world were reaching China in the 2nd/8th century (Schafer, pp. 198-99, 325 n. 25). Three fragments of knotted pile carpets were excavated in Egypt in 1980 and are believed to be of the 5th/11th century (Mackie, figs. 3-6, p. 28). Two of them have pile of symmetrical knots (see iii,

above); the wool (Z2S) is not Egyptian, but the place of origin remains unknown. Each fragment has only two colors, crimson or tan and bluish-green, and both show an unusual treatment of the wefts, with multiple shoots (up to eight) interlaced with pairs of warp threads. Symmetrically knotted rugs with multiple weft shots of a.d. the 3rd century have been found at Dura Europos in Syria (1933.541; Pfister and Bellinger, no. 224, pl. IV) and in the al-Tār caves in Iraq (3rd century b.c.-a.d. 3rd century; Sakamoto, p. 10, fig. 3; Eiland, pp. 111, 230-33). This type of wefting is not known after the 7th/13th century (Mackie, p. 28). In 1986 the San Francisco Museum of Art purchased an entire small carpet (168 x 89 cm) executed in symmetrical knots. The design in the field is a large, geometrically stylized lion; the border is filled with running vines with palmettes, and there is a single outer guard stripe with a jewel pattern (see Plate CVI). The dating suggested on the basis of radiocarbon-14 analysis is 2nd-3rd/8th-9th centuries. Although no consensus has yet been reached on the origin of this piece, a number of features point to northeastern Iran. The stylization of the lion, with triple-clawed feet and broad bands partly filled with interlocking Ys outlining its body, has close parallels on the well-known “St. Josse silk” in the Louvre (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 981), which is inscribed with the name Abu’l-Manṣūr Baḵtegīn, an officer of the Samanid ruler ʿAbd-al-Malek b. Nūḥ (d. 350/961; *Survey of Persian Art*, p. 2002). The patterned treatment of the foreleg and tail has parallels in the rendering of lions on silk textiles made at Zandana, near Bukhara, in the 2nd-3rd/8th-9th centuries (Shepherd and Henning, pp. 21-29, figs. 5, 7, 8, 10, 12; Ierusalimskaya, pp. 5-56, 178-79; see also abrīšam, pl. XII/2, where the legend has been reversed with that of pl. XII/1).

A special group of pile carpets consists of types in which the forms of the individual supplementary weft loops differ from those of the familiar symmetrical and asymmetrical knots; these types, though extremely varied, are often lumped together under the misleading term “cut-loop pile.” Yaʿqūbī (*Boldān*, p. 332), writing in 278/891, referred to “cut rugs” (*al-farš al-qoṭūʿ*) made in Aḵmīm, in upper Egypt, a term that has been interpreted as referring to carpets with a pile of cut loops (Dimand, 1973, p. 12), though it is not possible from such texts alone to specify the precise forms of the knots. Fragments of such carpets were known in northern Iran in the Sasanian period (see vi, above), and the region apparently remained a center of their manufacture for some centuries afterward. Six hundred pieces of *qeṭʿforš* (also called Ṭabarī carpets) were sent as part of the tax payment of Ṭabarestān, Rūyān, and Nehāvand to the ʿAbbasid court in the late 2nd/8th century (Ebn

Ḵaldūn, I, 323; cf. Serjeant, 9, p. 63; for the date see von Kremer, pp. 265-67). Two small fragments of carpets identified as of a cut-loop type, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (T.33-1942), the other formerly in a private collection in Washington, D.C., have designs of stylized birds in polygonal frames decorated with circles and radiating trefoils, designs considered to be Persian in character; they are believed to date from the 3rd-4th/9th-10th century and to be among the antecedents of the better-known knotted animal carpets of the 7th/14th century (Ettinghausen, pp. 92-98).

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