



# CARPETS VIII. THE IL-KHANID AND TIMURID PERIODS

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## CARPETS

### viii. The Il-khanid and Timurid Periods

Persian carpets that can be indisputably identified as having been produced in the 8-9th/14-15th centuries are virtually nonexistent. One fragment of a pile carpet in the Benaki Museum in Athens has recently been attributed to “Iran or Central Asia” in the 9th/15th century (Lentz and Lowry, p. 220, no. 119), though the reasons for this attribution are not clear. It is made entirely of wool and measures 14 x 22” (35 x 56 cm; Mackie). Many features of the design link it (and comparable fragments reported to be in the same collection; R. Pittinger, personal communication) to Anatolian Saljuq and “Holbein” rugs dated between the 7th/13th and the early 10th/16th centuries (Yetkin, pls. 1-22, esp. 26-27; cf. Spuhler, 1978, nos. 1, 3, 5-14; for a *zīlū* carpet said to be dated to 807/1405, see iv and v, above).

That carpets were used and produced in Persia in the 8-9th/14-15th centuries has nonetheless been inferred from written sources, both contemporary and slightly earlier (e.g., Barbaro and Contarini, p. 119; Erdmann, 1962, p. 18; idem, 1977, p. 14). The existence of carpets and weavings from contemporary Anatolia and the Turkman tribal confederations, and possibly also from Egypt and even Spain (Spuhler, 1978, pp. 27-32; Helfgott, pp. 107-14), permits the



inference that carpets were being produced in Persia as well. Finally, it has been argued that “the finest surviving knotted carpets . . . of the Safavid dynasty . . . could not have originated spontaneously” (Spuhler, 1986, p. 698).

In the absence of surviving examples from the period, hypotheses about the colors and designs of Persian carpets have been based on comparisons with 9th/15th-century illustrated Persian manuscripts, most fully by Amy Briggs. The validity of using pictorial art as a source of evidence for textiles that no longer survive is, however, questionable at best; a concomitant problem is that the surviving parallels for the depiction of rugs in 9th/15th-century Persian painting usually turn out to be Anatolian. Nonetheless, in the continuing absence of material evidence from Persia, the approach still has adherents. If representations of rugs in contemporary painting are to be used as evidence for Persian carpets in the 8-9th/14-15th centuries, the paintings must be chosen according to the strictest standards of quality, dating and localization, and purpose, for only at that level can specific illustrations of the material environment be found.

*Timurid carpets.* Briggs’ arguments are flawed by the underlying assumption that a rug shown in a Timurid painting exactly represents a Timurid carpet. In her first article (1940) she discussed geometrically patterned rugs; in her second (1946), on arabesque and “flower” rugs, she continued to work from the same flawed hypothesis. It is now clear that not only geometric rugs but also other types can be found in illustrated Timurid manuscripts from court workshops, dated throughout the century, which casts doubt on the argument that the classical Timurid carpet was geometrically patterned (Spuhler, 1986, pp. 698-700; Lentz and Lowry, p. 221). For example, in “Rūdakī and the Samanid Amir” from a copy of Neẓāmī ‘Arūzī’s *Čahār maqāla* made for Bāysonğor in 835/1431, the two figures sit on a rug with floral arabesques in the field and a contrasting border in pseudo-Kufic script with knotted ascenders (Istanbul, Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi, 1954, fol. 22r; Gray, 1979, pl. L); in “Laylī and Majnūn at School” from a copy of Neẓāmī Ganjavī’s *Ķamsa* dated 866/1461 a rug with multiple niches is depicted (Plate CVII; Topkapı Sarayı, Istanbul, Hazine 761, fol. 106r; cf. Grube, pl. 33A).

Briggs’, and others’, arguments regarding Timurid carpets become less significant as other possible sources of evidence emerge. For example, scholars are now considering the possibility that rugs once considered Safavid are actually Timurid in date (e.g., a fragmentary arabesque- and floral-patterned multiple prayer rug in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin;



Spuhler, 1986, p. 700 and pl. 5). The identification of Timurid woven textiles, notably those with curvilinear patterns (Lentz and Lowry, p. 218), also allows the comparison of designs on illustrated Timurid clothing and furnishing textiles with those presumed to be typical of Timurid rugs, which in turn indicates the importance of the *moḍahheb* “draftsman” and other personnel of the *ketāb-kāna* “library” as the source of Timurid designs on all materials, regardless of scale (Lentz and Lowry, chap. 3).

*Il-khanid carpets.* The carpets of the preceding, Il-khanid, period, however, remain as little known as ever. Briggs had restricted herself to Timurid painting, as carpets are only occasionally represented in Il-khanid miniatures (1946, p. 20 n. 3), and her approach, based on contemporary book illustrations, provides few clues. For example, two floor coverings with the appearance of carpets are depicted in the great *Šāh-nāma*, now attributed to the period of Abū Saʿīd, the last of the Il-khanid rulers of Iran (717-36/1317-35; e.g., Grabar and Blair, pp. 46-55): Unfortunately, the surviving material for comparison is from Anatolia, rather than from Persia. Part of a large octagon with a dragon-like animal in the foreground can be discerned on the floor covering depicted in “Zaḥḥāk Enthroned” (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 23.5; Grabar and Blair, p. 59); this design was characteristic of 8th/14th-century Anatolia (Yetkin, pp. 27-41, esp. fig. 12). In the foreground of “Mourning over the Bier of Eskandar” (Freer, 38.3; Gray, 1961, p. 32) there is a large rug with a field pattern similar to those on brick surfaces depicted in other Persian miniatures and an outer border in white pseudo-Kufic script on a red ground, a pictorial formula known from 7th/13th-century Anatolian carpet fragments (cf. Yetkin, pls. 3, 4, 7, 13).

As in the 9th/15th century, the similarity in form and color between illustrated 8th/14th-century Persian carpets and contemporary Anatolian weavings is striking. It is thus difficult to escape the conviction that before the 10th/16th century the development of the knotted carpet in Anatolia, Iran, and the tribal areas adjacent to both was characterized both aesthetically and technically more by similarities than by differences.



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