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CARPETS XVI. CENTRAL ASIAN CARPETS
Article by **Walter Denny**

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CARPETS

xvi. Central Asian Carpets

Central Asian carpets, broadly defined, include those woven by various peoples in what were formerly the Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, Karakalpak Autonomous, Kirgiz, and Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republics (Tzareva, pp. 5-6); in extreme northern and northeastern Persia; in Afghanistan; and in the Turkic (Uighur) areas of Sinkiang (Xinjiang) in western China.

History. Setting out the early history of carpet weaving in Central Asia is complicated by the absence of firmly datable examples. The oldest well-preserved knotted-pile carpets and equally ancient examples of flat-woven and felt rugs were excavated at Pazyryk in southern Siberia by the Soviet archeologist Sergeĭ Rudenko, who originally dated the finds to the 5th or 4th century b.c., a date that has recently been revised to the late 4th or early 3rd century b.c. (pp. 298-304; see vi, above). Excavations in Eastern Turkestan have unearthed tiny fragments of felt and both knotted-pile and flat-woven textiles (Stein, passim) that are quite possibly more than a thousand years old, but the patterns are impossible to ascertain; on the other hand, in medieval wall paintings from Bezeklik and other sites in the Tarim basin early textiles resembling carpets are depicted (Le Coq, passim), but no comparable

examples have survived. Despite this lack of early evidence, a number of scholars have held that the history of the knotted-pile carpet is closely linked to that of the Central Asian Turkic tribal groups, which are believed to have carried their designs and techniques with them as they migrated westward with the Great Saljuqs in the 5th/11th century (Erdmann, p. 3; Denny, pp. 329-30). According to this hypothesis, the earliest well-preserved carpets in the Islamic tradition (cf. carpets vii, viii), those woven in Anatolia in the 8th-9th/14th-15th centuries, are the artistic descendants of Central Asian Turkic weavings, many incorporating in their designs both the *tamġa*s or *damġa*s (tribal brand marks, used for a variety of purposes) and the *göl*s or *gül*s (from Pers. *gol* "flower"; tribal symbols, used in carpets only), the latter often in the form of small medallions, that are associated with various Turkic groups. The origin of the *gol* itself is still a matter of controversy, but the most convincing explanation has been put forward by the British scholar Jon Thompson, who has linked it to a pre-Islamic Buddhist tradition.

Extant examples of Central Asian carpets fall into two basic groups, reflecting two definable artistic traditions. First are the carpets of the Turkic nomadic peoples of western and northern Turkestan, like the Turkmen and the Kazakhs, who developed a broad range of carpet objects, from tent bands and door surrounds to camel trappings and utility bags, to fulfill both decorative and practical functions in the nomadic encampment (see also xiv, above). The second group consists of commercial carpets woven in towns, mainly in Eastern Turkestan, which are more likely to bear the imprint of artistic influences from China to the southeast and Persia to the southwest. There are few surviving examples of either group that can be safely dated to before ca. 1163/1750, though there are sound historical reasons to suppose that 13th/19th-century examples of the first group reflect a rich, and highly conservative, weaving tradition that stretches back hundreds of years.

Turkman rugs. The Russian conquest of what is today Turkmenistan marked the beginning of the collecting and study of Turkman and other nomadic Central Asian rugs; a collection of examples from the major tribal groups formed by General Andrei Andreevich Bogolyubov was first published in St. Petersburg in 1907 (Bogolyubov, 1973). Recently the Soviet anthropologist V. G. Moshkova has further defined the designs and symbolism of Turkman rugs (cf. Azadi). Turkman carpets, often erroneously called "Bukhara" in the carpet trade, have generally been attributed to six major tribes, as well as to a number of minor ones, on the basis of characteristic *göl*s; these carpets should

not be confused with modern “Bukhara” carpets from India, Pakistan, China, and other areas, which are woven in imitation of traditional Turkman patterns. Modern scholars have discovered, however, that these design motifs were exchanged among the Turkman tribes and considerably modified over time; today the structure, materials, and coloring of Turkman carpets, rather than their designs alone, are the major determinants of attribution to specific tribes (Mackie and Thompson). Up to the Russian conquest (1860) the six major Turkman tribes were the Tekke (the dominant tribe), Salor (or Salur, traditionally the most important carpet-weaving group), Saryk, Yomut, Chaudor, and Ersari (or Er-Sari). There are references to the Salor (Salḡor) and Chaudor (Čovaldar) in sources as early as Maḥmūd of Kāšḡar (ca. 467/1075; Sümer, p. 585); the Yomut and Ersari were mentioned by the 11th/17th-century historian Abu’l-Ḡāzī of Khiva, who also noted the Salor’s primacy as weavers (Sümer, pp. 657ff.; König, 1969). Even before the growth of Russian power in Central Asia in the 13th/19th century some of these rug-weaving groups had migrated southward; today many Yomut and Tekke tribal groups, as well as members of smaller groups like the Göklan, live and weave in northern Persia, in the region around Gonbad-e Qābūs, and many Ersari make their homes in northwestern Afghanistan (Azadi, pp. 10-13).

The dominant color of Turkman rugs is red, derived from the ubiquitous madder root (see ii, above); owing to the use of different dyeing techniques and such mordants as dried yogurt, alum, and urine, the red wool in Turkman rugs varies from darkest walnut-brown through mahogany to purple-crimson and brilliant scarlet. Sheep’s wool was the preferred fiber for both pile and foundation in Turkman weaving, though silk and even cotton are sometimes found in small accents in the pile and goat or other animal hair was sometimes used for warp and weft. Yarns spun counterclockwise (Z-spun; cf carpets v, vii) are used in all Turkman weaving; they may also be twisted together in a clockwise direction (S-plied) to make stronger and thicker warp, weft, and pile yarns. Turkman pile rugs display a variety of knot structures. The highly prized old Salor pieces are characterized by asymmetrical knots open to the left, and their closely packed warps lie on two levels; in contrast, the asymmetrical knots in Tekke rugs are generally open to the right. The pile of Saryk rugs almost invariably consists of symmetrical knots, and Yomut weavers used all three types of knots, sometimes in the same carpets. The Ersari Turkman, especially those who settled in villages along the banks of the Oxus in the 13th/19th century, appear to have abandoned many of their traditional tribal designs in favor of patterns derived from Persian commercial

carpets, for example, the “Herātī” design (see iv, above, with Figure 73); Ersari carpets are also often more coarsely woven than those of other Turkman groups (König, 1980).

The variety of carpet objects developed by Turkman weavers is considerable; in addition to the “main carpet,” used on the floor of the frame tent (Plate IV), there was a wide variety of bags, ranging from the large *čuval* through the medium-sized *mafraš* to the tiny *torba* (Plate V; see also xiv, above, with Figures 102-03). Pentagonal animal trappings known as *asmalyk* and rectangular ones called *kejebe* appear to have been woven for special occasions, as were the trappings (*ḳalyk*) for the bridal litter. The Turkman tent was often decorated with door surrounds (*kapunuk*), horizontal bands, and door hangings (*ensi*). Many comparable objects were in use among other Turkic groups, like the Kirgiz and the Kazakhs, who tended, however, to favor flat-woven brocading techniques or various types of felt (Basilov, pp. 97-107); such textiles are only now beginning to be subjected to the sort of historical, technical, and artistic scrutiny that have been accorded to Turkman weavings for almost a hundred years.

Many of the early Turkman pile carpets are magnificent artistic and technical achievements. Among the rarest are the *kejebe* pieces of the Salor (Plate VI), which incorporate in their designs the eight-sided interlace medallion known as the “small-pattern Holbein motif,” which also characterizes one of the best-known groups of Anatolian Turkish rugs from the early 9th/15th century onward. Less characteristic of Turkman rugs in general, but highly prized by collectors, are the *sajjāda* (prayer rugs) of the northern Ersari (Plate VII), with their splendid colors and exceptionally soft wool.

Commercial rugs. The city rugs of Eastern Turkestan, like their “Bukhara” Turkman counterparts, were often grouped under an erroneous rubric: “Samarkand.” In fact there does not appear to have been much carpet weaving in the Samarkand area, and rugs once given this name are now reassigned to cities in the Tarim basin in the western Chinese province of Sinkiang Uighur. Fragments excavated at various sites by Sir Mark Aurel Stein and Albert von Le Coq suggest that there was an ancient tradition of pile weaving in Kashgar (Kāšḡar, now K’a-shih), Yarkand (Soch’e), and Khotan (Ho-t’ien), but few well-preserved examples have been convincingly dated earlier than, the 12th/18th century (Bidder, p. 43).

These centers have for some time been known for production of various kinds

of commercial rugs, generally rather coarsely woven, with cotton foundations; silk is often used exclusively for the pile, rather than only for accents. Many of these carpets show strong technical and stylistic affinities with Chinese and Mongolian examples. Although Persia has been a second major source of influence, scholars have generally regarded the rugs of Eastern Turkestan as quite peripheral to the “mainstream” tradition of urban carpets in Persia, Turkey, and the Caucasus. Some examples from Kashgar and Yarkand include Turkman motifs, but there is nevertheless little significant artistic or technical relation between the Turkman nomadic weavings of western Central Asia and the city rugs of the Tarim basin.

Khotan, the easternmost of these centers, appears also to have been the most important (Bidder, pp. 48ff.). Some of the most splendid Khotan carpets are woven with designs of eight-pointed stars that are strikingly similar to those of Anatolian rugs of the 9th/l5th century and of their later Turkish and Caucasian descendants (see xv, above); at the same time they incorporate elements of probable Chinese or Mongolian origin in the borders (Plate VIII); in addition, carpets with Mughal designs have been attributed to Khotan.

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ILLUSTRATIONS TO CARPETS xv AND xvi.

Figure 1. Map of the Caucasus

Plate I. Kazach/Borchaly carpet

Plate II. Kuba/Shirvan carpet

Plate III. Ganja/Karabakh carpet

Plate IV. Tekke Turkman main carpet, early 13th/19th century; wool pile, wool foundation; 128" x 77". George Walter Vincent Smith Museum, Museum of Fine Arts, Mass., no. 31.23.131

Plate V. Tekke Turkman *torba*, early 13th/19th century; wool pile, wool foundation, 15" x 50". George Walter Vincent Smith Museum, Museum of Fine

Arts, Springfield, Mass., no. 31.23.119

Plate VI. Salor Turkman *kejebe*, late 12th/18th century. The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., no. 1979.35.6

Plate VII. Ersari Turkman prayer rug, 13th/19th century. The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., no. 1968.18.2

Plate VIII. Khotan commercial carpet, 13th/19th century. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, no. 1474-1883