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 **The pelt and the origin of the prayer rug**

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Welcome, [Filiberto Boncompagni](#).

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Virtual Show and Tell Just what the title says it is.



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 March 8th, 2014, 12:09 PM

#1

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
 Posts: 53

 **The pelt and the origin of the prayer rug**

Hi All

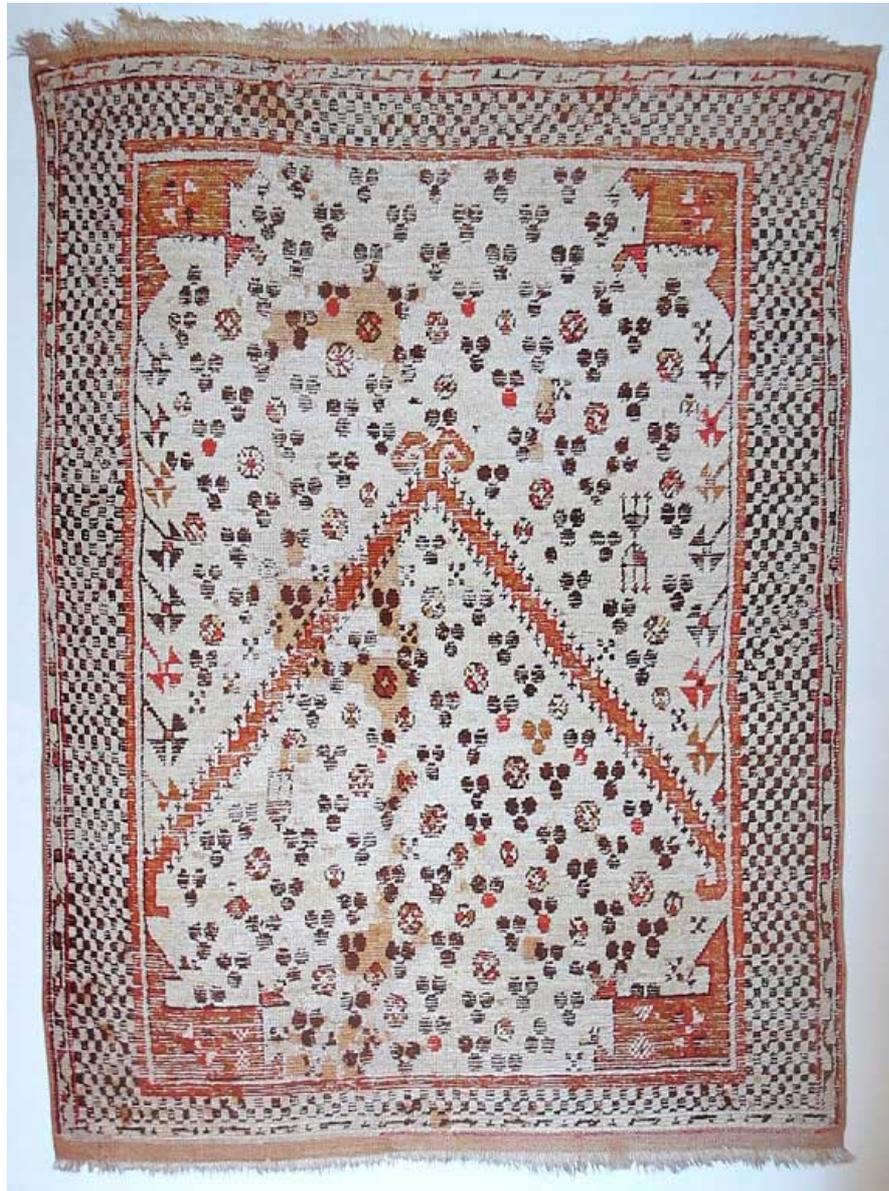
I am aware that motif origin in the rugs can't be anything but speculative, but it is still an integrated part of almost everyones interest in the rugs. Personally I have for a long time speculated on the origin of the "niche" or "prayer" rug. I know this is highly debatable, but thats a part of the fun 😊

To me it seems that this rug type as minimum is a fascinating merger of two sources: the architectural niche or mihrab - and the animal pelt. I suppose the niche/mihrab source is kind of self-evident (though highly interesting in itself, to me especially in its possible turkic branch, the kejebe motif), the fun stuff here is the animal pelt or sheepskin origin.

I suppose there is general consensus that this early Anatolian rug represent a depicting of a sheepskin:



And this one, with the also highly interesting cintamani motif (the 3 dots), could be interpreted as a snow leopard pelt, please note the "claws", with a superimposed niche on top:



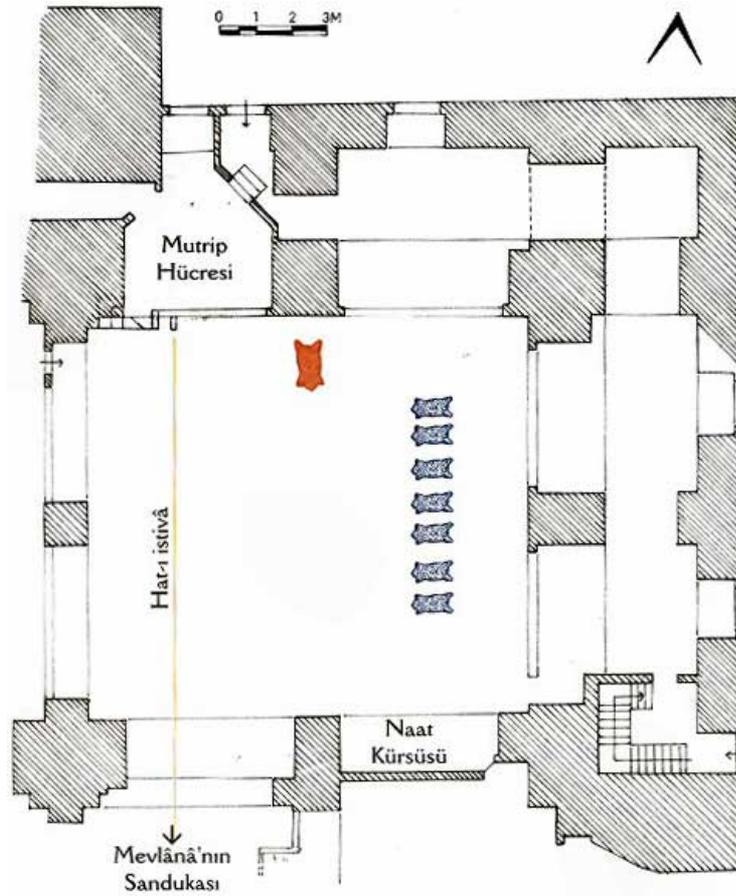
The sides could be seen as ornamental, but surely could also be seen as the jagged sides of a skinned pelt:



It strikes me that the majority of Anatolian niche/prayer rugs depicts a red niche, like this one:



And actually I can't remember ever having seen a red mihrab except on the rugs. But red sheepskins on the other hand are firmly rooted in Anatolian religious tradition. Going back to Rumi/Mevlevi, and still alive, red colored sheepskins have had a prominent symbolic place in the prayer practice:



Konya Mevlevihânesi Semâhânesi'nde
Semâ sırasında semâ heyetinin diziliş şekli



Here a photo from Balkan: lots of sufi-regalia, colored sheepskin - and the mihrab



best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 8th, 2014 at 04:04 PM. Reason: spelling



March 8th, 2014, 04:25 PM

#2

[Steve Price](#)

Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Posts: 62



Hi Martin

Interesting, provocative ideas (as yours always are). I wrote a little article on the subject of prayer rugs more than 15 years ago, and it seems relevant to your theses. [Here's](#) a link to it. It was written before I was aware that the word "Moslem" is a derogatory term; Muslim is more appropriate. I apologize for not having known it at the time, and assure everyone that it was done out of ignorance.

Regards

Steve Price



March 8th, 2014, 05:37 PM

#3

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)

Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Location: Cyprus
Posts: 60



Hi Martin,

There's no need to discuss the niche/mihrab source because, as you say, it's self-evident.

The "animal pelt" idea is interesting, but I have an objection concerning the possible use as prayer rug of the first rug you present.

After previous readings and discussions on the use of textiles for praying I formed the impression that, for the faithful Muslim, everything should do - even a newspaper, for example - provided it keeps the person cleanly "insulated". But if a textile is used habitually it should have a directional design, so the faithful can lie is foets, hands and forehead always on the same

spots.

The layout of the first rug is symmetrical, hence not fit for the use as prayer rug.

Unless, of course, my impression is completely wrong, that is.



Regards,

Filiberto



March 8th, 2014, 05:51 PM

#4

[Chuck Wagner](#)

Members

Join Date: May 2008
Posts: 9



Hi

I may be mistaken but I think the first rug was only intended to provide a connection between something that is generally agreed to represent an animal pelt, with the geometry of designs often found on Anatolian prayer rugs. The red sheepskins are a new piece of information for me, and fit well with Martin's hypothesis.

Regards
Chuck Wagner



March 8th, 2014, 05:58 PM

#5

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)

Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Location: Cyprus
Posts: 60



Well, right, Martin doesn't say explicitly that the first rug IS a prayer rug.

Regards,

Filiberto



March 8th, 2014, 06:24 PM

#6

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



sorry for being unclear, Chuck got me right, the first rug was to illustrate the iconography of a pelt on a rug, if it has been used for prayer I suppose there is no way of knowing (but its general resemblance to turkmen ramshorned niche rugs to me seems striking)
best Martin



March 8th, 2014, 07:49 PM

#7

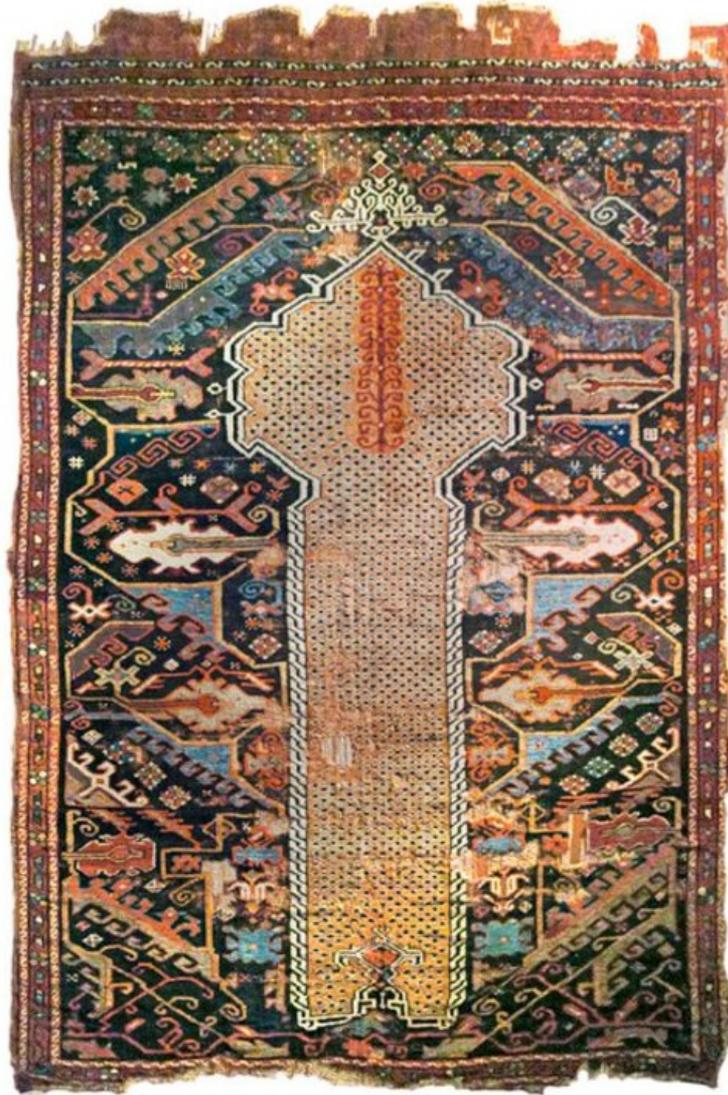
[Marvin Amstey](#)

Members

Join Date: May 2008
Location: Fairport, NY
Posts: 11



I've also been intrigued with the "animal pelt"/ prayer rug duality. Here is an image of an example: the rug hangs in the Turk v Islam museum in Istanbul, labelled Konya, 18th c.



I was intrigued enough to purchase this reproduction to decorate a floor in my home.



The color differences are only apparant since the lighting in the museum is terrible. Actually both rugs have the same color tones. The copy is made with handspun, naturally dyed wool and is much better in person.



March 8th, 2014, 08:19 PM

#8

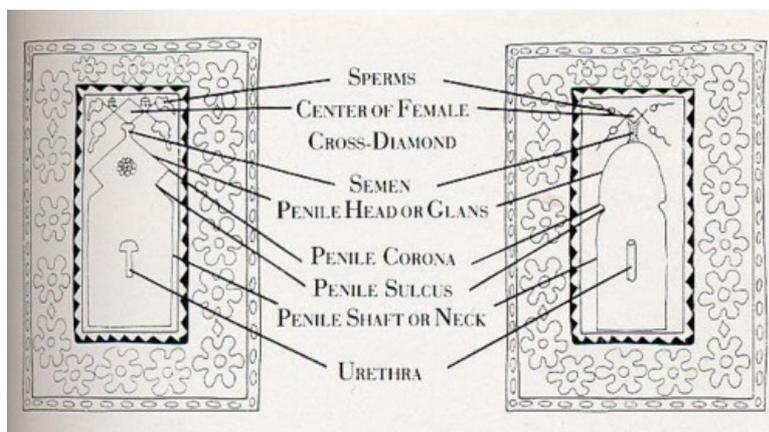
[Steve Price](#)
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Posts: 62



Please don't let this hijack the thread, but I don't see how we can fail to include this reading of prayer rugs from Douglass and Peters 1990 book.

Steve Price



March 8th, 2014, 08:20 PM

#9

[Martin Andersen](#)
Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



here a documentary film from Macedonia, no colors but lots of prayers on sheepskin

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c11X2uqkIuQ>



(and Steve - that sure is hijacking the focus 😊)



March 8th, 2014, 08:35 PM

#10

[Martin Andersen](#)
Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



This rug, though probably not a prayer rug rather a votive rug, is also relevant here. Loaded with iconographic sufi regalia:



best Martin



March 8th, 2014, 09:35 PM

#11

[Patrick Weiler](#)

Members

Join Date: May 2008
Posts: 21

 **Several Sources?**

Martin,

The Dervish rug you posted brings up a couple of other possible sources for the niche/prayer format.

The flayed pelt is certainly evident in the rug, and as a source for the design, but note that it appears in a niche-type format similar to the Mughal Mille-Fleurs rugs and related Qashqai rugs.

In this case, I recall reading that this represents a view from behind a window out into a garden. In the case of your rug, the viewer sees the trees in the garden to the left and right of the field, on either side of the pelt.

Alternatively, the niche-design has been represented by a single tree, wide from the base up to the diminished, angled top, popularized by Baluch weavers as well as others.

I will submit some pictures to show examples of these types.

Patrick Weiler



March 8th, 2014, 09:57 PM

#12

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



Patrick I sure agree on the floral tree of life motif in some of these rugs (even though it gives the tree a very red sky as background) or alternatively lamps in the niches, for me these motifs aren't mutual exclusive, on the contrary its the possible merging of these very different motifs into a conventionalized whole which I find fascinating.

best Martin



March 9th, 2014, 08:53 AM

#13

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



To put "the origin of the prayer rug" as title for a tread here is probably a bit pretentious, and should be thought of as including a question mark. And as Steve points out in his article even the term "prayer rug" is highly debatable. But praying on sheepskins colored red or undyed is according to the traditions around Mevlana/Rumi in Konya a practice which goes at least back to the Seljuks, and thus back to the oldest group of rugs we have. This Seljuk niche rug I suppose in general might be the oldest that fits the criteria of a prayer rug:



The "terraced" niche design is a format which continues. Here some tulu/fillikli versions which of course are much younger (I suppose old filliklis haven't really survived, but it to me would seem strange if this technical very basic weave type should'nt have been around as long as the other pile rugs) Especially the last one has an almost absurd half abstract/half concrete resemblance to a sheep pelt:



My point in this is that one could speculate that there in some early points of history in Anatolia have been the possibility of a fluent transition between the pelt and the rugs.

And here a Persian (Timorid?) miniature painting of a person with a rosary on a snow leopard pelt (in the hope that Filliberto and Pierre will find some relevant material in their miniature archives 😊)



best
Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 9th, 2014 at 02:56 PM.



March 9th, 2014, 10:01 AM

#14

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



and of course the multitude of both Anatolian and Turkmen niche rugs which are bluntly crowned with ramshorns are also relevant in this



March 9th, 2014, 05:12 PM

#15

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)

Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Location: Cyprus
Posts: 60



Hi Martin,

Quote:

And here a Persian (Timorid?) miniature painting of a person with a rosary on a snow leopard pelt (in the hope that Filiberto and Pierre will find some relevant material in their miniature archives 😊)

I looked there. Sorry, I didn't find anything similar to the images you posted in #13. No "terraced" niches nor pelts. Or if it was, I missed it.

But in the rugs section I found some rugs that *could* be relevant (I suppose). I post them in chronological order, with Pierre's *verbatim* labels:

Turkish. Seldjuk 13a. Konya prayer rug. XIII XIV. 170X127.AL.jpg



Turkish. Konya 5. XVI. 263X145.AL.jpg



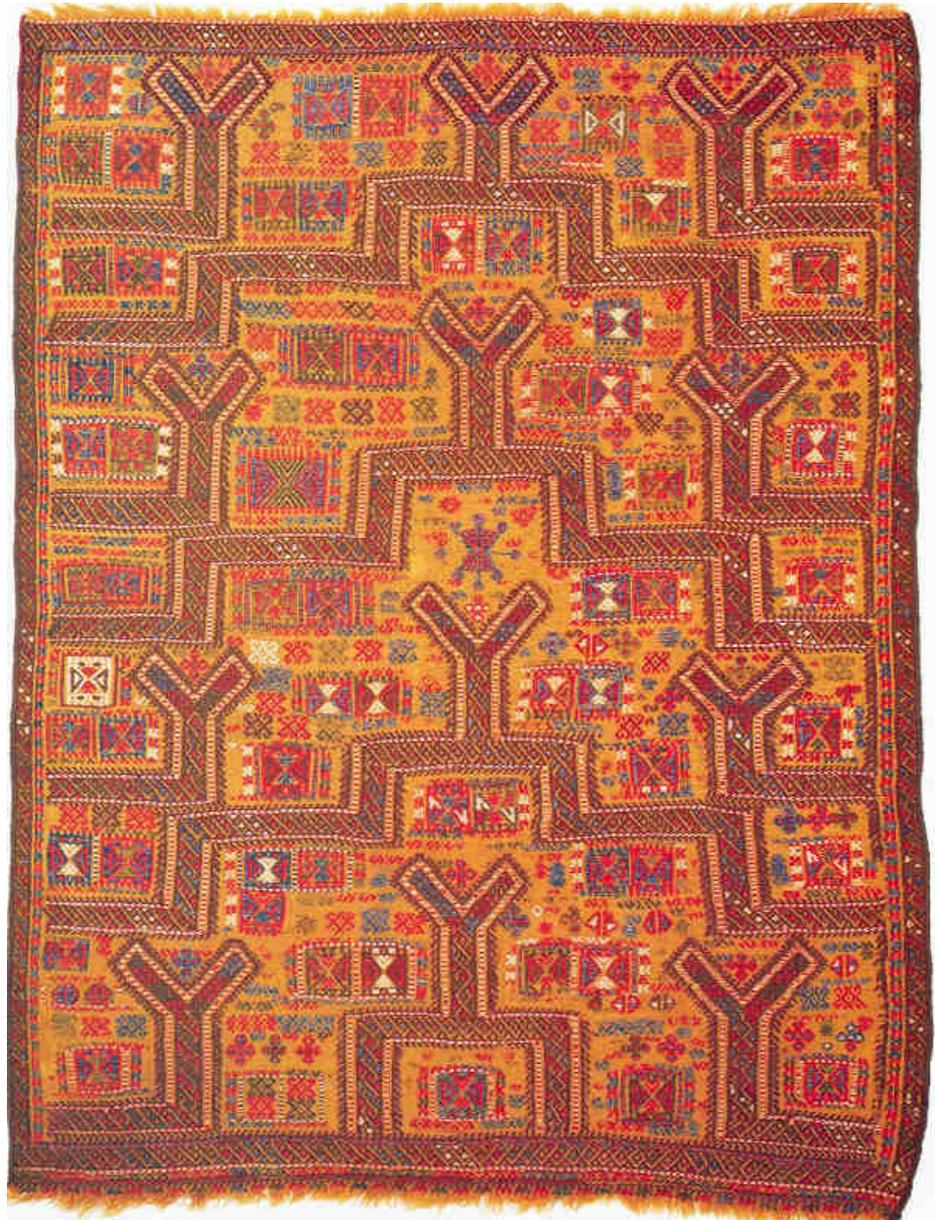
Turkish. Konya 78 prayer rug. XVIII. 190X140.THC4.jpg



Turkish. Anatolia 133 faded aniline dyes in border and field. XIX. 193X121.N286.jpg



TURK_374.JPG



Regards,

Filiberto



March 9th, 2014, 10:36 PM

#16

[Marla Mallett](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 8



Hello folks,

A few disjointed comments:

First, anyone who has ever been in a Turkish cemetery must be struck by the similarity of prestigious early tombstone structures--stone columns topped by representations of turbans--to the imagery in Marvin's photos of Post #7. (AND to the Douglas drawing posted by Steve in #8.) This is just an observation; I don't know what symbolic intent might have been involved on the part of those rug designers.

Among Turks--who made the vast majority of extant "prayer rugs"--the predominant view is that ANY rug (or other textile) is suitable for use on the ground or floor for prayer. There is no need for a directional design. In fact, the term "seccade" means a "prayer-size" rug, not specifically a rug with a particular design or imagery. The more precise term "namazlik" refers to a rug or textile featuring a niche, mihrab or arch. In the marketplace, especially among younger dealers, these semantic distinctions are not always observed.

Since the "prayer rugs" with which I've had the most experience in Turkey have been "prayer kilims," they are what I am most qualified to discuss. I have never seen or heard of one of these used on the floor (unless it was a Vakiflar mosque donation, added to the layers of donated pieces). Instead, one of these namazlik kilims hangs in the typical nomad's winter house, or house of recently-settled, but still kilim-weaving, villagers. It is placed on the appropriate wall indicating the direction of Mecca--serving the same function as the mihrab in every mosque. Village women and girls typically say their prayers at home, while men and boys go to the local mosque. In both cases, just about any kind of floor covering can be used for the prostrations--including sheepskins sometimes.

One word of caution: My Turkish friends and acquaintances are horrified by the idea that Westerners who buy namazliks--rugs with obvious religious imagery--might actually put them on the floor and WALK on them. Thus no one with respect for Islamic cultures should consider using them for this kind of interior decor.

Marla

Last edited by Marla Mallett; March 9th, 2014 at 11:00 PM.



March 10th, 2014, 12:50 AM

#17

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



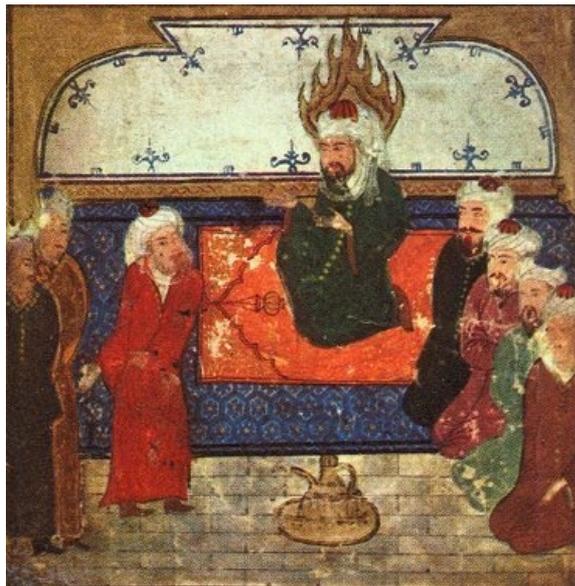
Hi Marla and All

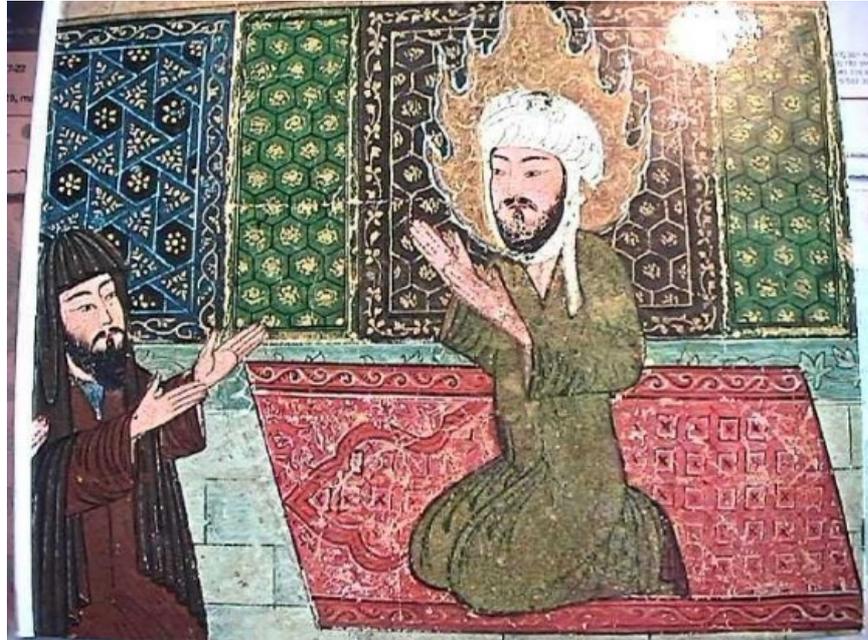
Yes Marvins two rugs sure have a strong resemblance to Ottoman tombstones.

Regarding the use of niche/prayer rugs I am sure customs must have varied during time and region. In a lot of the mosques I have visited in Turkey, Uzbekistan and Egypt these days it would simply not be possible *not* to walk on the niche rugs (of course leaving your shoes at the entrance) - as they cover the floor from wall to wall. Here an comparison illustrating that mass production of niches ain't a new phenomenon 😊



Since this last was discussed here on turkotek I have found these two (persian?) miniatures with Mohammad kneeling on niche rugs:





But I certainly don't doubt that the niche prayer rugs were and are used for wall hangings, here a ramshorned small Uzbek ikat and embroidery niche which must have been intended for wall hanging.



best Martin



March 10th, 2014, 12:58 AM

#18

[Pierre Galafassi](#)

Members

Join Date: Oct 2009
Posts: 71



Hi Martin and Gang,

I did not know that pelts were routinely used for the prayer too, that is an

interesting scoop Martin! It sure makes a lot of sense though in a Turko-Mongol context, since these fellows were mainly sheep breeders and hunters before switching to being competent builders of pyramids of severed heads and of Central Asian- or Anatolian empires.

There is a type which is extremely frequent among Caucasian rugs, especially among the so-called Fachralo Kazaks, but also in some Karatchoph Kazaks, in which there is a mirhab on top and two "legs" at the opposite extremity. With a minimum of imagination one could indeed see these as a reminiscence of the pelt of the forefathers in a classical mirhab "prayer rug".

FIG 1 Caucasian. Fachralo 31 Kazak prayer rug. XIX. 178X120.EDER



FIG 2 Caucasian. Fachralo 35 Kazak prayer rug. XIX. 147X127.KIR



FIG 3 Caucasian. Karatchoph 19 Kazak prayer rug. XIX



The same remark could be made about the (much older) so-called "re-entrant" or "Bellini" Anatolian rug type of which there is a good extant example in Berlin (FIG 4). I do particularly like the rug in FIG 5.

FIG 4. Turkish. Anatolia 13. Bellini pattern prayer rug. XV. ASLA.

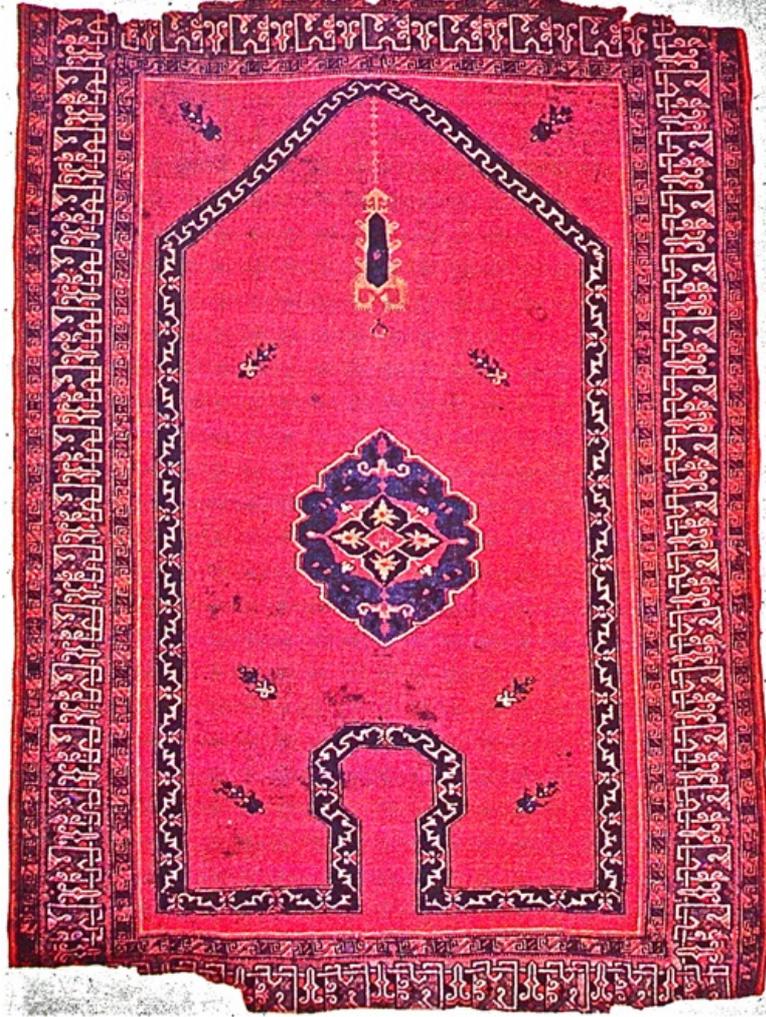


FIG 5. Turkish. Anatolia 25. prayer rug. XV XVI.



The most frequent motif in Lori Pambak Kazak rugs, as illustrated in FIG 6, is interpreted in various rug books as representing a pelt.

FIG 6. Caucasian. Lori Pambak 2 Kazak. XIX. 225X170.N286



If this identification is correct, the following 18th century prayer Kazak could perhaps be interpreted as featuring a pelt inside a mirhab field, no?

FIG 7. Caucasian. Kazak 79 prayer rug. XVIII. 141X110.EDER



Picture credits:

EDER: D. Eder, *Orient Teppiche. Band 1, Kaukasische Teppiche*

N286: F. Nagel, *Kunstauktionshaus, Katalog Nr. 286*

ASLA: O. Aslanapa, *One thousand years of turkish carpets.*

KIR: W. Kirchheim. *Orient stars.*



March 10th, 2014, 05:30 AM

#19

[Lloyd Kannenberg](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2009
Posts: 2

Hello All,

Here's a kilim of a familiar "terraced" design:



One like it, illustrated in Balpinar & Hirsch's "Flatweaves of the Vakiflar Museum" (Plate 58), was found at the Ulu Mosque in Sivrihisar. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose its intended use was as a prayer rug. I wonder, though, to what extent this design was regarded by the weaver as equivalent to a "prayer niche".

Permit me to assure Marla's Turkish friends that the piece shown above has NEVER been walked upon, at least as long as I have been responsible for it!

Lloyd



March 10th, 2014, 06:14 AM

#20

[Patrick Weiler](#)
Members

Join Date: May 2008
Posts: 21

Tree, Door

Pierre,

I never considered that the re-entrant design may represent the rear legs of a sheep pelt.

As promised, here are a few examples of the tree and door/window versions of prayer rugs.

First is a small Baluch piece with a single tree in the field. Notice the small "mound" at the base of the tree.



Next, the tree has been circumscribed to allow for hand panels at either side of the top of the rug, establishing a niche. From Boucher, *Baluchi Woven Treasures*, plate 38.



And a popular Moroccan tourist poster showing a rendition of the arched, architectural version of a doorway looking out.

<http://imagecache5d.allposters.com/watermarker/57-5736-MQUNG00Z.jpg?ch=1009&cw=595>

This art  poster is for sale (from numerous sellers) so no

discussion of the value is permitted...no "comments bearing on the value of any item currently on the market" allowed.

And, plate #1, the Mille Fleurs Qashqai version, from James Opie's book *Tribal Rugs of Southern Persia*, one of the early-modern tribal rug books.



This may show the portal or door to Paradise, with red cypress trees (often planted in cemeteries) to either side, a mound at the base with a vase and a profusion of flowers, and possibly hand panels at the top.

As Martin has indicated, there may have been several designs which were instrumental in the evolution of the prayer rug as we know it.

Patrick Weiler



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