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[The pelt and the origin of the prayer rug](#)

Welcome, [Filiberto Boncompagni](#).

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



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March 10th, 2014, 09:42 AM

#21

[Pierre Galafassi](#)

Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
 Posts: 71

Quote:

Originally Posted by **Patrick Weiler** ▾  
*Pierre,  
 I never considered that the re-entrant design may represent the rear legs of a sheep pelt.*

Neither did I, Patrick, so far, but as Martin rightly wrote *"I know this is highly debatable, but that's a part of the fun"*. Martin's thesis is too good an opportunity to be missed 😊.

By the way, it might be that the asymmetric niche rugs had **various** origins:  
 - Architecture might indeed, as you suggest, be one of them: A door of the Paradise featuring the typical Islamic "shoe horse style" makes symbolic sense too.

- Many people (including me) see in the bulbous niche of the famous "Berlin prayer rug" a rather faithful representation of the Calife's (and Sultan's) turban

Best regards  
 Pierre.



March 10th, 2014, 09:48 AM

#22

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
 Posts: 53

Hi Pierre

I sure can't help seeing pelt on pelt on pelt in your Kazak rug 😊



The old animal rugs spring to mind:



best Martin



March 10th, 2014, 11:40 AM

#23

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

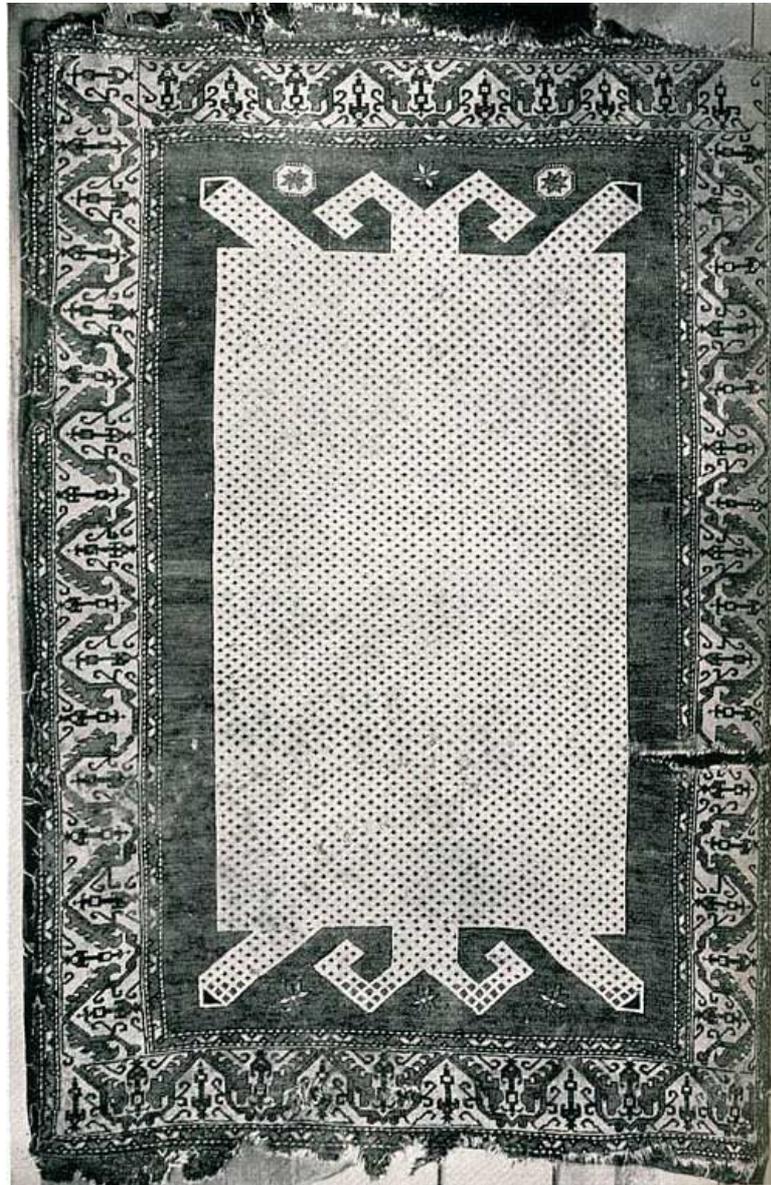
Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



If its agreed that these rugs represent the motif of a sheepskin, then I suppose the next question is why a sheepskin as a motif?







If made today they would have an almost tautological humorous absurdity - wool depicting (the source of) wool. But I doubt that these in their time luxurious rugs were made for fun.

But if they were made under influence of sufi tradition they to me make sense. Sufism as it is known from Melvani/Rumi is an ascetic religious movement which in its program rejected wealth and earthly glory, and it seems very appropriate that Rumi may have chosen the simplicity of sheepskin for his prayers (the etymology of the word "sufi" is debatable but two possible origins says "wool" and "clean", both certainly fit with a cleansed sheepskin). But as movement Sufism also very quickly came under patronage of the wealthy and powerful. What do you do if you as a wealthy and powerful person wants to showcase your affiliation with an ascetic religious movement - but you don't really want to give up your wealth and power? Well its simple, you lift the asceticism into the symbolic realm, and order a luxurious rug representing your asceticism 😊 The same can be seen in the sufi Kashkul (beggar's Bowl), which also exist in absurdly luxurious versions (more suited for a bragger than a beggar)



We today may find something like this utterly hypocritical, but it surely may not have been seen like that in medieval time, and we know the same from christianity - monasteries and churches praising the poverty of jesus and his disciples in gold and jewelry.

The Kashkul here and the three pelt rugs share a formality which I think supports my interpretation: The maintaining of the ascetic simplicity in execution of the main motifs (pelt and bowl) - and the lavishness of the borders

best  
Martin

*Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 10th, 2014 at 01:03 PM.*



March 10th, 2014, 12:41 PM

#24

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



(Filiberto and Chuck: after all I personally probably doo think the pelt rug has religious connotations, wether or not it should be called a prayer rug I am not certain, perhaps prayer rug in an extended sense. And one should perhaps also bear in mind that devotional prayer practice in sufism surely not is limited to directional prayers towards Mecca)

*Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 10th, 2014 at 01:18 PM.*



March 10th, 2014, 01:51 PM

#25

[Pierre Galafassi](#)

Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 71



Hi Martin,

Thanks a lot for starting this interesting thread!  
I can see much logic in your thesis.

Besides, as we all know, the Islamic world was very far from being monolithic, having integrated numerous civilization with fully different states of development, way of life, traditions, religious beliefs and superstitions and having, from its very beginning, a strong tendency for divisions, including in matters of religious practice.

As already discussed in other threads and mentioned by Steve in this one, even the concept of a "prayer rug" is debatable, or at least it was a few centuries ago.

From XIX century visitors' reports, we all know, for example, that the

Turkmen nomads hardly used any prayer rug, often not even a clean textile for their prayers, even though rugs and kilims were ubiquitous in their daily life, while their close neighbors in the Bukhara Khanate did weave such specific rugs and used them for prayer at home or at the mosque, (along with other textiles or part of their own clothing).

I certainly do not want to hijack this thread and re-start this "prayer rug" debate, my point is merely that **IF** we assume, reasonably enough, that the use of a prayer rug was specific to some parts of the islamic civilization, to some periods of history and even to some (moneyed) layers of the population, we can assume that the design and symbolic motifs of the rugs too were quite variable, and may have depended on location and time.

It is possible, I suppose, that some genuine prayer rugs carried reminiscences of a nomadic past in which a given ethnic group used whitened or dyed sheep skins, while some others, in another part of Islam, symbolized the Gates of Paradise or its flora (The Millefleur rugs?), other still the mirhab of the mosque, with or without its lamp, other still may have symbolized the attachment of the believer to his leader, the Calife (The turban niche?) etc... Even the asymmetry of the rug, linked to the orientation of the believer towards Mecca, may have been optional.

IMHO it is perfectly understandable that *walking* on a rug carrying religious symbols was tabu in some places, as mentioned by Marla, (even more, of course if the feet were not those of a believer), while it was no issue at all in some other places and times. Similar differences are evident in the tolerance or the ban of representations of human beings. Even the representation of the Prophet, an absolute No-No in most of the cases, had it's early exceptions as shown by the miniatures in your post.

Best regards  
Pierre



March 10th, 2014, 02:12 PM

#26

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



Hi Pierre

I totally agree with your post.

Here just a small highly interpretational expansion of the possible sufi connection to the pelt rugs: Literary sufi stories often evolve around a logical/illogical twist or a paradox, supposedly to set the mind free from the earthly rationalism of the listener/reader. A pictorial representation of sheepskin in pile weave (wool depicting wool) could be seen as such a paradox. Likewise with the mirrored appearance of the pelt (mirroring is in itself a favored sufi-theme) not being able to tell head from tail could be a good sufi punch-line 😊

best Martin



March 10th, 2014, 03:47 PM

#27

[Filiberto Boncompagni2](#)

Administrator

Join Date: Aug 2012



Hi Martin,

Posts: 4

I wanted to add some comments but Pierre pretty much summarized the whole idea, sparing me the trouble.  
To your credit, you added the pelt as one of the probable sources of the prayer rug design, which, as far I am aware of, wasn't considered before.



Regards,

Filiberto Boncompagni



March 11th, 2014, 10:12 AM

#28

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



Hi All

Referring to sufism as something monolithic is of course also wrong, surely also here lots of variation in region and time. The red sheepskin seems to have a rather drastic symbolic function among the Kosova sufis (got the photo from John Taylor, at first I thought this was a still from a horror movie, but its not - its a red sheepskin 😊)



Here also from Kosova a video with sufis performing zikr on a circle of sheepskin

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ql\\_GVTSZghQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ql_GVTSZghQ)



And here the person leading the prayer standing on a sheepskin

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WRF64wOkto>



And the more poetic version as we know it from the Melvani/Rumi tradition today - with the red sheepskin:



And 🍷🍷🍷 Filiberto, sure others than Marvin and me must have seen the possible connection (perhaps except the connection to the red sheepskin 😊)

best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 11th, 2014 at 12:18 PM. Reason: spelling, sorry i am a lousy speller even in my own language



March 11th, 2014, 10:18 AM

#29

[Martin Andersen](#)  
Members



Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53

and of course when one starts looking there are lots of candidates for being pelt rugs, here a red one:



March 11th, 2014, 11:37 AM

#30

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

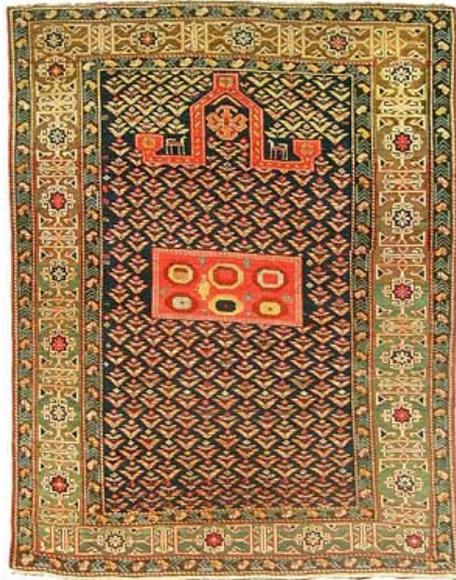
Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



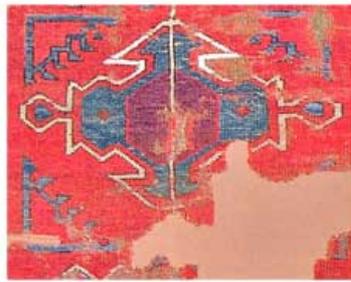
Hi All

I know the following might be even more debatable, and surely very interpretational, than seeing the pelts on the rugs. But for me the prayer rug format is highly interesting because its a format where we with certainty are looking not only at ornaments, but at pictorial representation. A pictorial presentation which is almost a battleground between the flatness of the rug, its ornaments - and the depth of pictorial space of the objects its depicting (architecture, lamps, ewers, tree). The pelt is also because of it flatness an interesting "in-between" in this. And in some prayer rugs I am rather certain that some of the ornaments within the niche are actually representations of rugs, that is to say we in some cases are looking at images of rugs on rugs.

Here a to me obvious example on this:



I would also see it here:



And looking at the following four rugs together for me illustrates the dizzyingly possible merger of architectural representation, rug and pelt. Not as the work of a singular weaver but as collectively pictorial development in the prayer/niche/pelt rugs:



An interpretational logic could be like this: In a larger religious sense both mosque and pelt could have been seen as nothing more than cleansed places

for prayer, so merging them pictorial was a proper motif for a prayer rug.

best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 11th, 2014 at 12:30 PM.



March 12th, 2014, 10:23 PM

#31

**Guido\_Engel**  
Guest

Posts: n/a



Hi Martin,

Just a short remark on the red sheepskin.

Klieber mentions in his book on Afghanistan a tradition of the people of Kafiristan/Nuristan. During funeral ceremonies the dead people were dressed with red robes and had feathers in their turbans. And there are many cultures using this colour as a symbol of transformation.

I would see the sheepskin as "pars pro toto" (sheep,ram) and animals played an important role in shamanism all over the world. So looking on the red sheepskin one could reflect on shamanistic roots and ideas.

Guido



March 13th, 2014, 03:37 PM

#32

**Pierre Galafassi**  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 71



Quote Guido Engel: "*...animals played an important role in shamanism all over the world. So looking on the red sheepskin one could reflect on shamanistic roots and ideas.*"

I agree Guido, this seems quite likely. Nineteenth century visitors of the Turkmen, East of the Caspian, mention that these fellow's basic graves were identified by a mere pair of ram horns, probably another survivance of shamanism. These Turkmen were mildly Sunni (Hanafi with a tint of sufism, I believe).

As mentioned by Martin, traces of shamanism might explain the Anatolian chintamani rug motif (leopard pelt?) and perhaps also the Tibetan "tiger rugs". (integration of old animist symbols in Islam & Buddhism ?).

Quote Martin Andersen "*...Likevise with the mirrored appearance of the pelt (mirroring is in itself a favored sufi-theme)..*"

Interesting! The main inconvenient caused by this new information of yours, Martin, is a further aggravation of my hallucinations. Indeed, I can now see even more skins and pelts in old rug motifs. Including the rather frequent Anatolian and Caucasian motif below (two symmetrical sheep skins positioned head to tail ?).

Let's hope that this rather serious condition can be cured though.



Turkish. Anatolia 23. XV XVI. 215X120.BALP

Regards  
Pierre



March 14th, 2014, 06:23  
PM

#33

[Martin Andersen](#)  
Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



Sure Pierre, I know what you mean, suddenly the eyes get tuned into looking perhaps to specific after a motif. But still to me the turkmen ramshorned niche rugs sure looks as a minimum as much as headed sheepskins as they look like architecture/niches:



best Martin



March 14th, 2014, 08:54 PM

#34

[Patrick Weiler](#)

Members

Join Date: May 2008  
Posts: 21

**Who put the Ram in the Rama lama ding dong? The Edsels, 1957**

A quick internet image search of "Turkmen Cemetery" turns up these interesting headstones. (englishrussia.com/bigtrip10.blogspot.c om)



Their similarity to the rams-horn crowned niche rugs is striking. No sheep skins, but plenty of rams horns. And lots of red.

Patrick Weiler



March 14th, 2014, 10:50 PM



#35

[Marvin Amstey](#)  
Members

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



Great image find, Patrick  
Thanks



March 15th, 2014, 02:48 PM



#36

[Martin Andersen](#)  
Members



Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53

Patrick, yes the gravestones surely are very interesting in this, also in the details of the carvings



best Martin



March 15th, 2014, 03:11 PM

#37 □

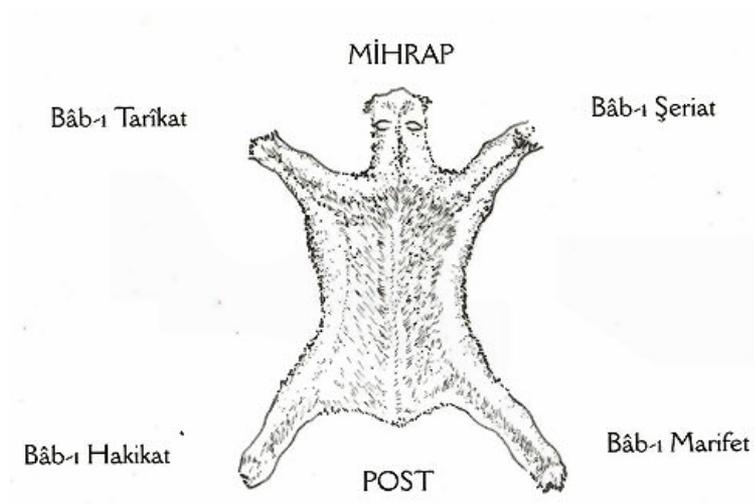
[Martin Andersen](#)  
Members

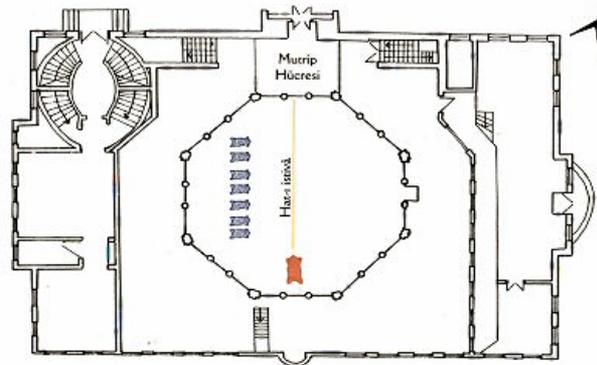
Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 53



the Melvani/Rumi traditions are complex and very detailed, as far as I understand even the different corners of the skin were connoted with different daily prayers

<http://muze.semazen.net/content.php?id=00032>





Istanbul Galata  
Mevlevihânesi  
Semâhânesinin  
Planı ve Semâ Heyetinin  
diziliş şekli

best Martin



March 15th, 2014, 11:14  
PM

#38

Guido\_Engel

Guest

Posts: n/a



Hi Pierre, hi all

I think that there are some motifs on rugs with a shamanistic background or at least influenced by shamanistic ideas.

Karl Jettmar mentions in his book "Die Religionen des Hindukusch" the preislamic god Imra/Mara from Kafiristan responsible for life and death. His main temple in Kushteki was destroyed after Islamization. Among its decor were many ram's heads. Eight statues of Imra flanked the doors. The Kafiris thought that next to the temple and a river in the neighbourhood was the entrance to the underworld. There was also a rectangular stone construction near the temple with poles in the corners crowned by ram's heads (maybe the poles in the center of the Ersari below are influenced by this idea).

In the Hindukush area the rams were holy and pure animals and the sheep were seen as the domesticated form of the ram. So praying on a sheepskin is not really surprising.



Rossetti mentions in her book, "Die Turkmenen und ihre Teppiche", that the ram's horns have a protective function and that poles crowned by animal heads are still used to ban the evil.

Looking at the religious ideas of various cultures around the world the animal had two functions: protection and connection to the source of a community's life force (i.e.the ancestors or a goddess like Innana/Ishtar,who was called the life force of Uruk,.....).

To avoid discussions: I don't know if these ideas are expressed in nomadic or seminomadic rug designs, but in other archaic cultures the items used in everyday life are very much influenced by them.

Guido



March 16th, 2014, 04:11 PM

#39

Roger\_Kaiser

Guest

Posts: n/a



Hey everyone,

Looks like I finally found the right forum for this rug.

IMO it's a Caucasian rug from around 1900. I suspect that the rug does not have Islamic origins, but is perhaps from a Christian community. Has anyone ever seen a rug like this, especially the central device? Let me know if the pictures aren't clear enough.

Here are the photos:





March 16th, 2014, 05:05 PM

#40

[Chuck Wagner](#)

Members

Join Date: May 2008  
Posts: 9



hi Roger,

While anything is possible, I don;t see any reason to suspect this is not of Islamic origin. The rams horn motifs and pelt theory fit well with this rug and as you can see from the discussion, are apparently related to Islamic traditions.

Or maybe the Vikings.

Regards  
Chuck



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