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

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



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 March 16th, 2014, 06:09 PM

#41

Unregistered
 Guest

Posts: n/a



hi Chuck,
 what made me think of a christian origin are the crosses in the rug. There are two of them in each center of the hooked device and six others in the top of the rug on the blue background.
 The fotos are not so good so they are difficult to see.
 And for the rams horn they show in the opposite direction.

Regards Roger



 March 16th, 2014, 06:39 PM

#42

[Steve Price](#)
 Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
 Posts: 62



Hi Roger

You're welcome to post without registering, but when you do, please overwrite the word "unregistered" in the user name field with your full name.

Thanks.

Steve Price



 March 20th, 2014, 06:59 PM

#43

[Patrick Weiler](#)
 Members

Join Date: May 2008
 Posts: 21

 **Another red rug**

Here is a photo of another "Beshir" prayer rug, (from Hali.com) likely still on the market - so value should not be discussed. It not only shows the gravestone-type imagery, but also what appears to be a pelt in the spandrels, with legs splayed out to the sides.



There is also pomegranate imagery, which can be linked to death:

From Thirstyfish.com:

"The pomegranate is believed to have originated in Iran. In most cultures, including in Iran, it symbolizes, prosperity, ambition, abundance and fertility, but in Ancient Greek mythology it was known as the "fruit of the dead", associated with spending eternity in the underworld."

Pomegranate juice can be bought from carts in Istanbul as readily as we can find lemonade in the US.

This imagery leads one to the speculation that these rugs were "funeral rugs". It could explain the good condition which many of these very old pieces are in.

Patrick Weiler



March 21st, 2014, 09:06 AM

#44

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



Hi All

Rams horns even today sure seems to have some kind of symbolic function in central asia and turkic culture in general, here from Nokus in Uzbekistan. Often seen in connection with doors, I suppose a general interpretation as protective in transition would make sense in relation both to the graves and prayer niche.



And here from Kastamonu, Turkey:





And of course it sure would be almost impossible to image the turkmen rugs without this basic motif, which beautifully merges itself into floral ornamentation. Regarding the burial rugs, I don't really know what the source is, I have never seen them described neither as specific rug type or the precise function. Personally I still think the turkmen niche rugs fits as urban prayer rugs.

Just recently I saw a 19th engraving on the net of a yurt which at its side had high pole topped with a complete ram pelt including head and horn. Unfortunately i didn't save the image, I wonder if anyone here has it? Here a parallel I suppose with horse skulls.



best Martin



March 21st, 2014, 09:35 AM

#45

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



I am aware that suggesting a merger of two very different images like pelt and architectural niche may seem very strange to some. But actually I would say that we see an even more evident parallel example of pictorial merger between architectural and old nomadic representation on the prayer rugs - and that is the relation between the rams horn and ottoman crescent moon. In later payer rugs (and one could argue also in the oldest known samples) the niche sometimes clearly depicts the totality of the mosque crowned with

the ottoman crescent, but for sure no mosque or mihrab in the time of the anatolian prayer rugs with their rams-horned niches would ever be crowned with rams horn. To me this merged pictorial duality is 100% parallel to pelt and niche.

best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 21st, 2014 at 09:49 AM.



March 24th, 2014, 02:43 AM

#46

[Horst Nitz](#)

Members

Join Date: Feb 2013
Posts: 24



Hi All,

I am sorry for chipping in late and will try to make up for it.

Generally, the so-called Mosaic ban on images and idols was obeyed by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, at least for some time and with few notable exceptions only. God never was to be depicted. If this limited artistic expression of the divine, it was overcome in various ways. In some medieval works of art a hand or an arm belonging to God is reaching into the scene from above; Ratchi's altar in Cividale del Friuli, Italy (Lombard, 8th c) is an example for this. The same solution later occurs in Islamic miniature paintings. Abstraction is another means, and was utilised by the Nestorians. Evoking ancient Mesopotamian image language, sets of bucrania (the kotchak motif) were used to indicate the presence of the divine. This was accompanied by colour coding. Flaming white was the colour of Christ, and the rationale for this was taken directly from the bible (Mount Tabor; 'I am the light of the world'). Hence, a huge kotchak motif set in the middle of a white rhomboid medallion is a symbol of Christ. Islam appears to have continued this tradition, and red has become indicative of the sphere of the divine. Hence, in communication with Allah, Mohammed is praying on a red rug and is dressed in flames. This is paralleled by the red sheepskin mentioned. Christine Gruber of Michigan University has focussed on depictions of Mohammed and colour concepts in Islamic paintings.

Throughout the ancient Orient, horns were at the 'interface' of man and the divine. Horns were attributed to the gods by man to distinguish them from the mortal; altars can be conceptualized as seats or tables of gods and carried horns; the most common sacrifices were horned animals; the known 'church asylum' stands in such ancient tradition, if someone in escape of his enemies managed to embrace an altar horn, he was save and spared. The (red) rams' horns in Turkoman graveyards refer to such ancient concepts. The gods live in the other world, and the dead are passing into their care. In this context, the horns can be understood as bidding for good whether in the passage.

Patrick, I sympathize with your suggestion that prayer rugs may have functioned at some time as funeral rugs, it certainly is worth further exploring. Besides prayer, death is the most certain interface with the divine – for the believer. "This is the gate of the Lord, through which the righteous enter" is written in Hebrew above a famous rug in the Textile Museum; through the arched gateway in it one catches a glimpse of lamps and flowers, signifying paradise and the presence of god. But who can be sure to belong to the righteous that may enter? A helping hand by a friend and an appropriate rug may tip the balance. In the Christian Orient and in medieval Christianity in Europe, the pheasant was regarded as a symbol of resurrection and of immortality. At least one incident is recorded, in which a textile with depicted peacocks served a symbolic purpose in an event similar to a funeral. Cnut the Great (King Canute) - King of England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden - visited the tomb of Edmund Ironside (Edmund II), his predecessor and former opponent, on the anniversary of his death in 1016 and laid a cloak

decorated with peacocks on it to assist in his salvation, peacocks symbolising resurrection (M K Lawson (2004) Edmund II. Oxford Online DNB - after Wikipedia.org).

This narrative casts a new light onto the 'Marby Rug', discovered in the old wooden church of Marby in the Jamtland province of Sweden – an unlikely place for such a find one might think. Its origin lays in Eastern Anatolia or in Northwest Iran, 15th century (Lamm, 1985). Its main motifs are peacocks flanking a tree.

The Pazyryk rug was a funeral rug in a double sense, it served in the funeral of a Scythian aristocrat, and following Ulrich Schuermanns brilliant interpretation, it allegorized a traditional Scythian funeral ceremony.

Regards,

Horst



March 24th, 2014, 11:43 AM

#47

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

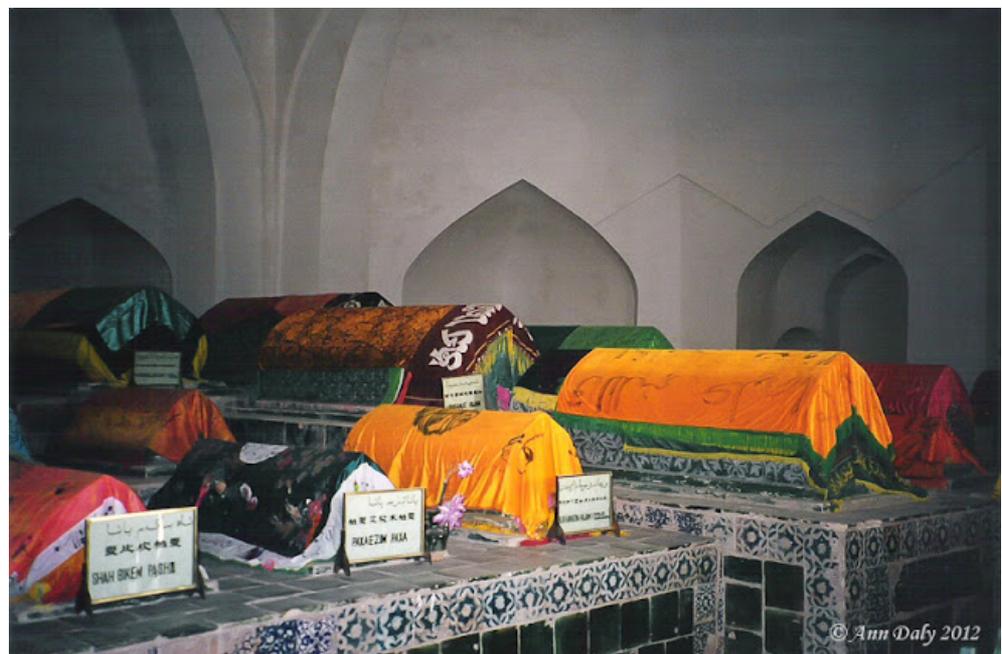
Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



Hi Patrick and Horst

You are of course right there is a possible connection to burial practices in this, covering islamic tombs with elaborate and precious textiles sure is widespread. And the traditional directional burial towards Mecca does perhaps also provide a link to the directional niche rugs. And of course as none of this is directly proscribed in the Quran customs in this surely may also have varied in time and region. And historical evidence of use either in prayer or burial practice of the niche/prayer rugs seems very scarce. Here some photos supporting the practice of use of the niche rugs as related to burials.

In Chinese turkestan the use seems more varied and colorful than in the west:



Rumi/Mevlanas tomb in Konya is covered with this, not really a rug, I think its gold embroidery



And the Ottoman turban is of course also here:



Might be a small digression but the Seldjuk Turbe mausoleums are generally thought of as originating as an architectural transference from nomadic tent burials. Here the Turbe over Rumi/Mevlanas tomb:



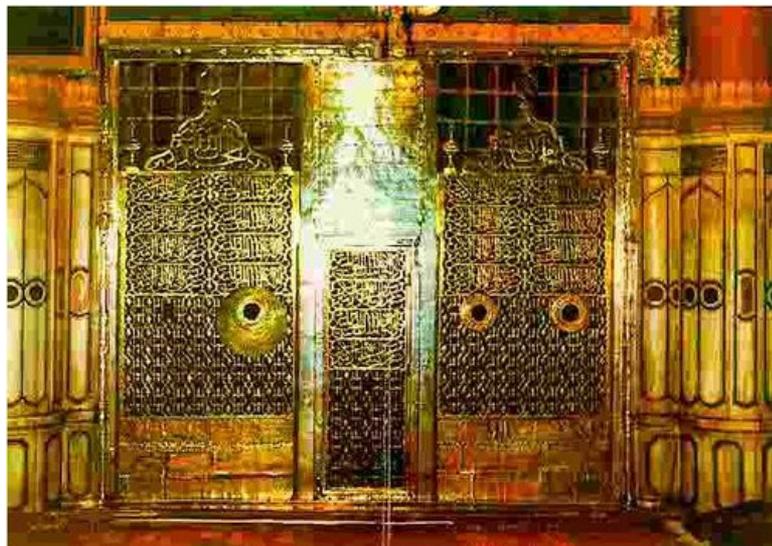
Here a two small niche rugs on a tomb in Syria, they perhaps looks a little misplaced, but they are there 😊



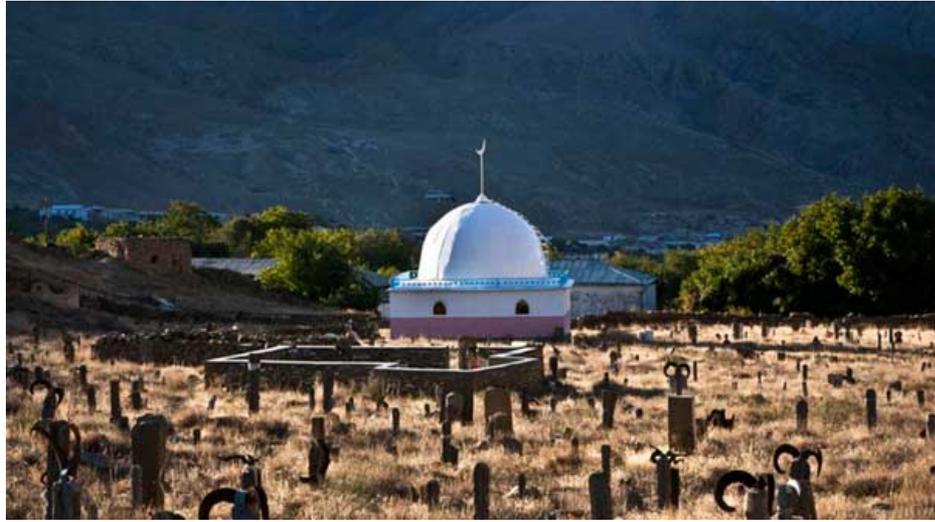
And here an 18th curtain embroidery for Muhammad's tomb in Medina



The niches as gates I suppose of course is a part of their architectural symbolic connotation, here the gate to Muhammad's tomb:



Of course speculative but a clearly ramshorned niche rug to me surely does not seem unlikely inside a setting like this mausoleum in earlier times:



And an original use as covering for tombs in mausoleums sure may explain the lack of wear on the majority of the turkmen niche rugs (the same of course goes for the use of them as wall hanging prayer rugs)

best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 24th, 2014 at 12:12 PM.



March 24th, 2014, 03:18 PM

#48

[Richard Tomlinson](#)

Members

Join Date: Jun 2012
Posts: 1



Hi

Slightly off topic but following on what Hertz wrote;

It's interesting to note that early Indian art was also aniconic. It was not until the first century AD that Buddha was represented in human form.

Coomaraswamy (1927) believes that it was unlikely that any Vedic gods or deities were represented anthropomorphically. He points out that the symbolic, or aniconic method was "universal and orthodox" at the time.

Narrative reliefs at Bharhut and Sanchi are pertinent examples of aniconic art that feature signs or symbols of Buddha's presence. In the Abhiniskramana scene, Buddha's presence (as he is not present) is indicated by his horse Kanthaka and royal umbrella next to him.

Other examples of these symbols include the empty throne, the Bodhi tree, wheel of law and animal motifs like the elephant and horse. Evidence of Buddha's various travels are often represented by footprints.

Just thought I'd throw that in ...

Continue please.

Richard Tomlinson



March 24th, 2014, 05:23 PM

#49

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members



Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53

Hi Richard

Aniconism certainly is a fascinating factor in this. The group of Anatolian red field niche rugs is rather big and diverse. A large number of these rugs to me seem to be strikingly empty in the red field compared to the general aesthetics of Anatolian rugs.



And again, I don't recall ever having seen a red mihrab in a mosque, sure it probably might exist somewhere, but also sure - its not common.

Apart from the topping ramshorn, it to me also looks like they share a distinctive jagged border articulation along the niches which we don't see elsewhere on other borders of the rugs.



best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 24th, 2014 at 06:52 PM.



March 25th, 2014, 03:51 PM

#50

[Paul McGhee](#)
Members

Thanks Guys

Join Date: Sep 2011
Location: Cambridge England
Posts: 2

I just wanted to say a big thank you to all you perceptive, knowledgeable and diligent folks on this thread - the most interesting discussion I've seen on TurkoTek since I joined.

Paul



March 25th, 2014, 05:19 PM

#51

[Marvin Amstey](#)
Members



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

Here's another red-ground niche rug, complete with ram's horns:



March 29th, 2014, 01:37 AM

#52

Guido_Engel
Guest

Posts: n/a



Hi all,

There was an interesting museum exhibition on the history of the red colour. It was used in the oldest burial spaces of mankind in Israel.

Ovid mentions the custom to cover dead people with a red blanket before cremation (comparable to the Kafiri custom of dressing dead people with a red robe). The Roman Emperor in his function as the highest priest had red shoes (by the way, like the Bishop of Rome). Plinius mentioned that the faces of divine statues were coloured red.

There is also a Maori myth that a woman ate some ochre in the underworld and was able to come back to life.

In Tahiti a red feather means that a person possesses the divine life force

(i.e., the leader of a tribe). One could compare this idea to the red sheepskin.

In Kongo red means transformation and the combination of white (the colour of the ancestors) and red intensifies the life force coming from the ancestors. As some turkic tribes also talk of "the golden land of the ancestors" I am not totally convinced that i.e. the chyrpy design was inspired by Islam.

I think the red colour has been used for a very long time, with the same intention all over the world and one can only speculate on the artist's (weaver's) religious ideas (Islamic, Christian, Archaic religion of nature.....). Some people even think that it was the first colour used in a ritual context.

To avoid misunderstandings; I really don't think that all red objects should be seen in a ritual context.



March 31st, 2014, 10:38 AM

#53

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



Hi All

Surely the color red is a basic color in all cultures, its interpretation I suppose is open and straight forward. But in the Quran there as far as I know aint any color symbolism which could explain the prioritized use of red in the prayer rugs. The very common motifs of lamps and trees in the niches on the other hand are as it has been discussed here on turkotek before beautifully corresponds to sura 24:35:

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. Light upon light. Allah guideth unto His light whom He will. And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is Knower of all things."

And of course red is a very basic color in the rugs, but conventionalized empty red large fields like we see in the prayer rugs is not something one sees elsewhere in the anatolian rugs. A speculative alternative to an origin in the pelt of this red field could be in perspective representation of space. If the floors of the early seldjuk and ottoman mosques where covered with rugs, and rugs where predominantly perceived as red, then it would make sense

that the floor seen trough the niche could be depicted as a flat red plane behind the niche. But still this wouldn't for me contradict a possible multi-sourced merger of floor, red rug and red pelt.

Here a relatively late clearly figuraritive architectural representation of the niche, still with the rams horn instated of the ottoman crescent:



best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; March 31st, 2014 at 11:37 AM.



April 5th, 2014, 10:01 AM

#54

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

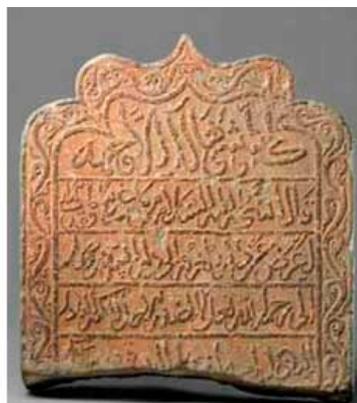
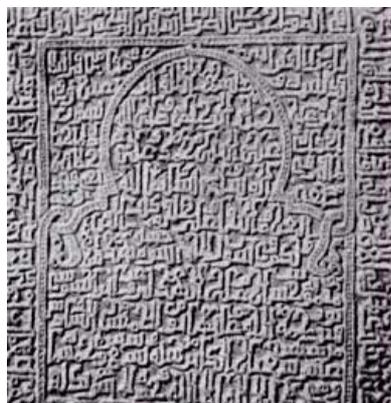
Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



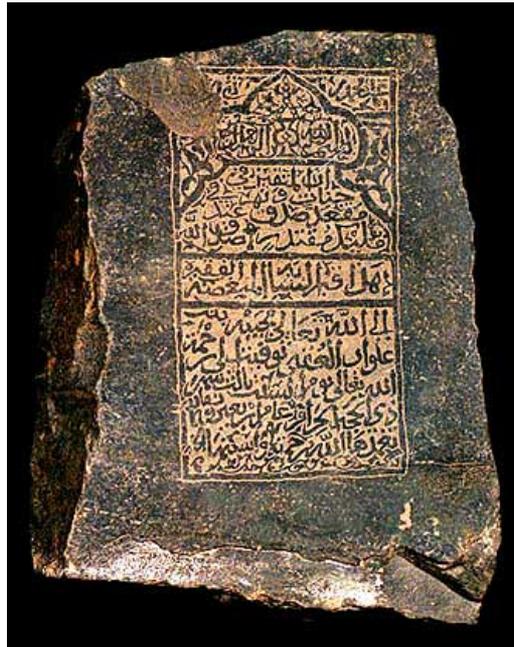
Hi All

Looking for islamic tombstones/epitaphs in the shape of the niche or mihrab it seems clear that they go back a long time, and samples geographically are stretching across the entire islamic area from Mongolia to Morocco

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/456952> :



Malta & Mongolia 13th. (?)



Iran 16th.



Saadian tombs Morocco 16th.

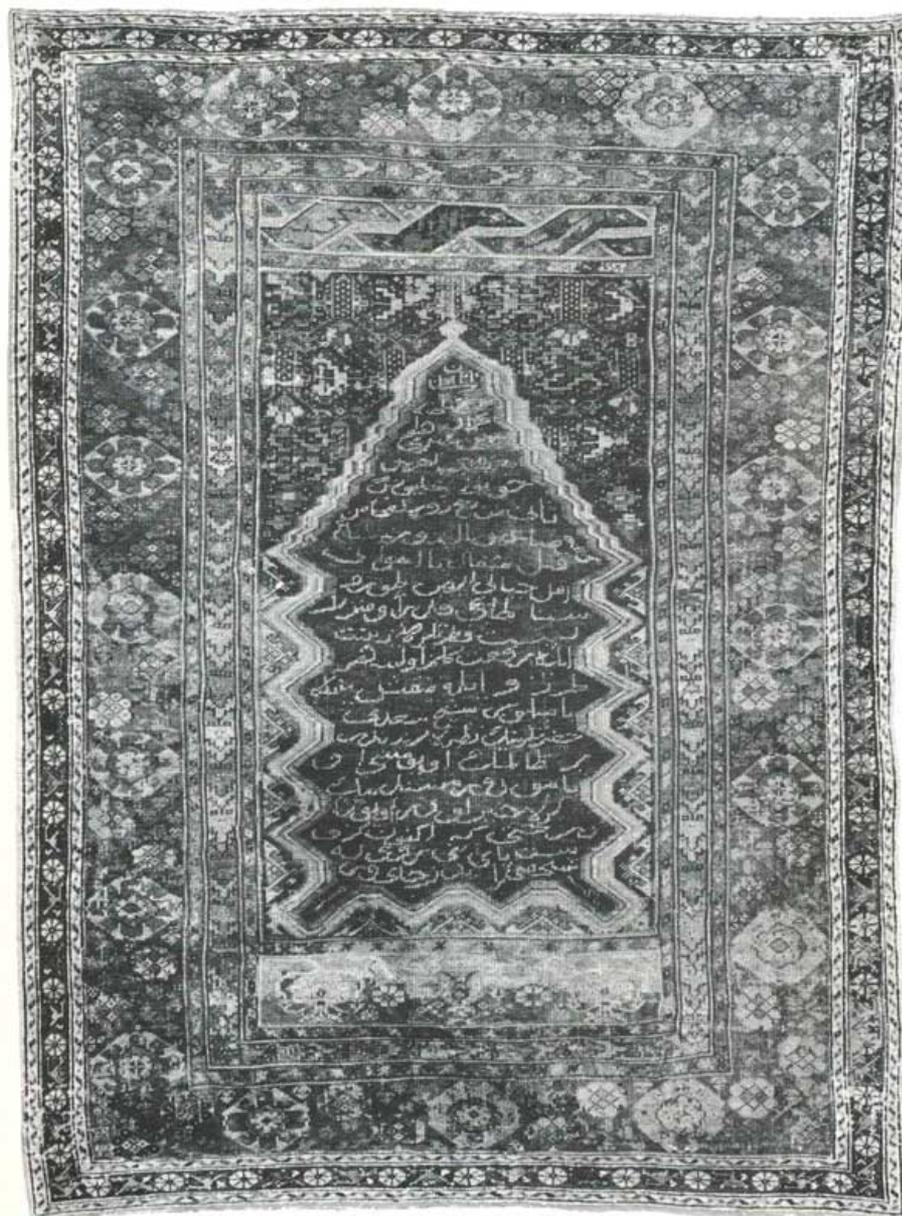


Caucasus Dagestan 18th.

And here a 1450 indian miniature with the mourning Majnun and something which might be a picture of burial rug on a tomb (even inside a red niche/mausoleum):



It sure would be interesting to get a transcription of the text of this prayer rug from the Metropolitan museum to see if the text is f.ex a sura (which its calligraphy doesn't look like to me), a votive like text or a personal epitaph. If the text is a personal epitaph I suppose it would kind of constitute a direct link of the prayer/niche rugs to burial practice:



Anatolian. dated A.H. 1210/A.D. 1795-96 <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/447554?pp=60&pg=11&ao=on&ft=rug&pos=627>

I will try to get the text transcribed but it might take some time, so if anyone here know of a translation it would be much appreciated.

Best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; April 5th, 2014 at 10:51 AM.



April 5th, 2014, 11:43 AM

#55

[Filiberto](#)
[Boncompagni](#)

Administrator

Join Date: May 2008
Location: Cyprus
Posts: 60



Sorry Martin but my wife can't help. She is comfortable only with printed text... that one is too difficult for her. 😞
Regards,
Filiberto



April 5th, 2014, 12:36 PM

#56

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



sure Filiberto - probably not an easy reading, but here is a detailed photo of the text:



April 5th, 2014, 12:42 PM

#57

[Filiberto](#)
[Boncompagni2](#)
Administrator



She can make only one word: "Sunna" (Sunni). 😞

Join Date: Aug 2012
Posts: 4

Filiberto Boncompagni



April 5th, 2014,
11:34 PM

#58

[Horst Nitz](#)

Members

Join Date: Feb 2013
Posts: 24



Hi all,

I love that Beshir rug you posted, Patrick. Thanks for the interesting aside, Richard, which, at second thought, is not really off-topic. In a lecture a few years ago, Christiane Gruber was touching on the same principle: "Real Absence: Picturing God in Islamic Art." I agree, red is a very special colour - thank you for the additional information, Guido.

It seems to me that we got as far as we could regarding the significance of the colour red with the conclusion, that it is an expression of enhanced spiritual potency. But several important questions remains unanswered: given the special affiliation of Alevis and Shiites with the colour red ('kizilbash') one wonders, why the bulk of prayer rugs with a red field comes from Turkey, and not from Iran. This distribution is even more pronounced with regard to kelims; and if the prayer rugs depict mihrabs in Turkey, why should this stop at the border of countries? Why (see Marla's post too) are prayer rugs so rarely observed that show the characteristic shaving marks that go with frequent use in prayer? There is so much uncertainty and ambiguity attached to the issue, that I wonder whether the supposed function in prayer isn't rather lyrical. If I negated everything I have read that tells us about prayer rugs, I wouldn't be able to tell what exactly it is that I am looking at in those kelims, a mihrab, a single naved church, an apse, the front of an old style synagogue, a coffin etc.

At this point I recall Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'A Crown of Feathers'. One of his characters pulls out of the 'survival kit for life in the Diaspora' the following advice: 'If you can't get over something (an obstacle for instance) and if there is no way around it, you may still try underneath.' This is the route I want to take us. We'll emerge almost exactly 700 years earlier in front of one of the great rugs on earth:



The background of this rug is discussed in more detail here:
http://www.turkotek.com/salon_00114/salon.html

The tree depicted in this rug carries blossoms according to Friedrich Sarre (or fruit in my interpretation) in the shape of Torah shrines – and I trust you will have no difficulty in identifying the rams' horns in the gable. But what could be the significance of the tree? I suggest the theme of the rug is a verse from the Jewish bible, Hosea 14:8 in which Jahwe identifies himself with a fruit-carrying tree: "O Israel, stay away from idols! I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me." (New Living Version) or "O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit." (English Standard Version). Thus, the rams' horns are a symbol of divinity, in tune with ancient image language, here as well as in the prayer rugs.

Do you remember the TM rug with the Hebrew inscription: "This is the Gate of the Lord ..." Here is another reference, inside of Dura-Europos Synagogue (ca. AD 244):

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/64/Dura_Synagogue_ciborium.jpg

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:DuraSyn-WB4-Ark_and_Temple_of_Dagon.jpg

No, I am not suggesting that those prayer rugs are Jewish. It took Islam centuries to develop its own architectural form and artistic style, calligraphy as an exception; in

the meantime it built on (Nestorian) Christian concepts. Christianity in turn has its roots in Judaism, which itself is amalgamated with the bulk of ancient Oriental Religion and its artistic expressions. The Jewish tradition of un-iconic image language therefore offers a window to the understanding of those ancient concepts to which the discussed prayer rugs are linked; it conciliates the image language of the fairly recent prayer rugs we are looking at with an idolatric origin (to be continued).

Regards,

Horst



April 6th, 2014, 10:21 AM

#59

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



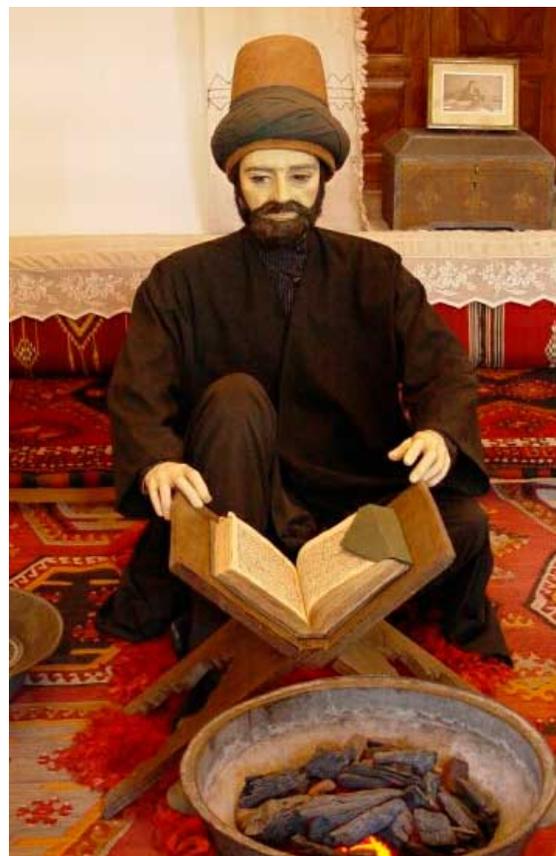
Hi All

After some google translating from turkish (which isn't very efficient, come on google) the color red in the Mevlana/Rumi tradition where reserved for the sufi sheiks leading the Sema/prayer and associated with the red dusk of the morning and evening prayer. This to me could explain the bulk of red niche fields in the Anatolian rugs. Not that every niche rug were necessarily used by a sufi sheik, but simply that the red color, and partly the motif of the pelt, were incorporated in the Anatolian weave tradition as being religiously honorable. If, and even more why, Mevlana/Rumi did draw on old central asian/nomadic traditions regarding the pelt I suppose is purely 100% speculative, but to me it sure seems likely.

Old photos relevant to this topic are very rare. This obviously arranged touristic photo of course should be looked at with reservations, but still it to me seems to have been taken on location and is interesting. The quality of the print is not very good but to me it looks like we on the large rug have the honorable sufi sheik sitting on a small directional niche rug with a dark center field (which could be red), and I might be on a limb here but to the right something which could be a bunch of small sheep pelts:



These days Mevlana's/Rumi's mosque and madrassa functions as a museum, and in the madrassa there are 3-4 pedagogical arrangements like this where the red pelts are used in reading and praying:



There is of course no doubt that generally the cultural interlinks and the artistic history goes back beyond islamic period, and sure this tread could lead us to almost anywhere in digressions. The specific form of the islamic tombstones and perhaps even the two pillars we know from the prayer/niche rugs depictions of the mihrab may directly originate in classical roman/greek tombstones with architectural representations, which must have been present in abundance in Anatolia (and in the most of the islamic area) and therefore a constant cultural/artistic challenge:



Chop away the idolatry in iconoclastic anger and you have a small mihrab 😊
The islamic iconoclasm destroyed the idolatry images not necessarily the architectural sites - as we know it even from the Kaba in Mecca. Iconoclasm wasn't an islamic invention but its nevertheless an essential factor in islamic art and architecture. The empty mihrab only filled with geometric ornamentation and calligraphy pointing towards the archictetual void of the Kaba being a programatic expression of this.

best Martin

Last edited by Martin Andersen; April 6th, 2014 at 11:55 AM.



April 6th, 2014, 12:57 PM

#60

[Martin Andersen](#)

Members

Join Date: Jul 2008
Posts: 53



Staying on the topic of the pelt, here are some assorted photos of dervishes dressed in or sitting on pelts. Again of course western photography which might be representing orientalist romanticism, but still to me can't be rejected as purely fantasy:



A degression but here according to the source two jewish dervishes: Agha-Jaan Darvish and his brother, patriarchs of the Darvish family. Tehran, Iran, c.1922. (Image source: Esther's Children^{۱۹۱۱}, edited by Houman Sarshar.) Interesting that even jewish tradition ain't as monolithic as one might think in this:



Here from the Mevlana museum in Konya:



And here some contemporary photos of the Mevlana/sufi tradition:



best
Martin



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