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Update of 'The Swedish Connection'

Welcome, Filiberto Boncompagni.
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Miscellaneous (rug-related) Topics Opinions on books, articles, recent auctions, exhibitions, etc.



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January 27th, 2021, 10:34 AM

#1

Pierre Galafassi Members

Update of 'The Swedish Connection'

Update of archived thread 'The Swedish Connection' by Martin Andersen
http://www.turkotek.com/misc\_00143/Swedish.html

Join Date: Oct 2009 Posts: 110

'Pregnant animal' rugs

Hi all,

In this 2017-2018 thread, Martin led us through a highly interesting discussion about possible sources of the motifs of Swedish folk textiles and rugs.

In the fourth part of the thread, we indulged in one of these digressions for which Turkotek threads are deservedly famous: Having identified the Bulgar ethnic groups populating the Volga-Kama area as a potential transmission chain for artefacts and motifs between central Asia and Sweden, we started discussing a group of very old rugs which appeared on the market during the last third of the 20th century, being apparently exfiltrated from Tibetan temples during the troubles of the sixties.

C14 analysis of these rugs (1) indicated that they were most probably woven around the begin of the 14th century, hence, when Borjigin mongol dynasties ruled just about everywhere in Asia: The Yuan Empire in China, the Jagatai Khanate in central Asia, the Il-Khanate in Persia and the Golden Horde a.k.a Kypchak Khanate in northern Eurasia .

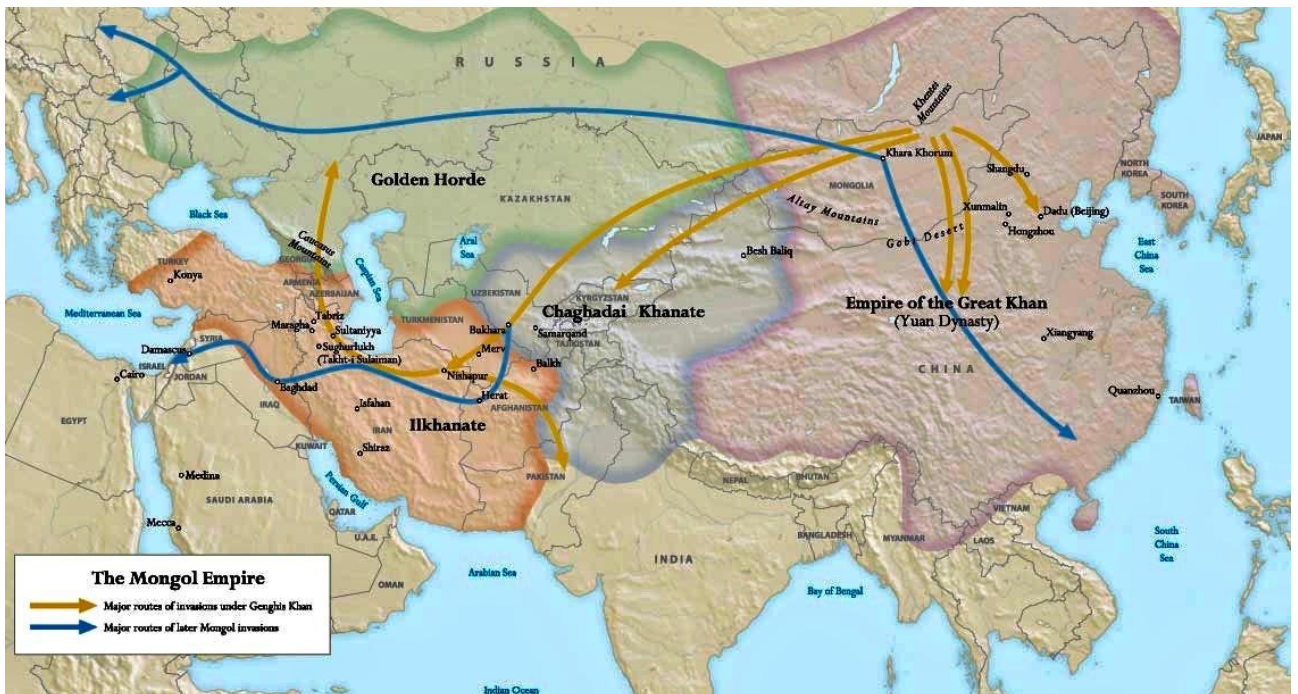


FIG 1 (Source Wikipedia) The 14th century Mongol Empire

The most original, common characteristic of most rugs is a field motif featuring an animal- within-an-animal, let's call it a 'pregnant animal' motif.

As the rug expert Franses (2) puts it 'I am unaware of depictions in other media of creatures within creatures, a fact that surely must be significant'.

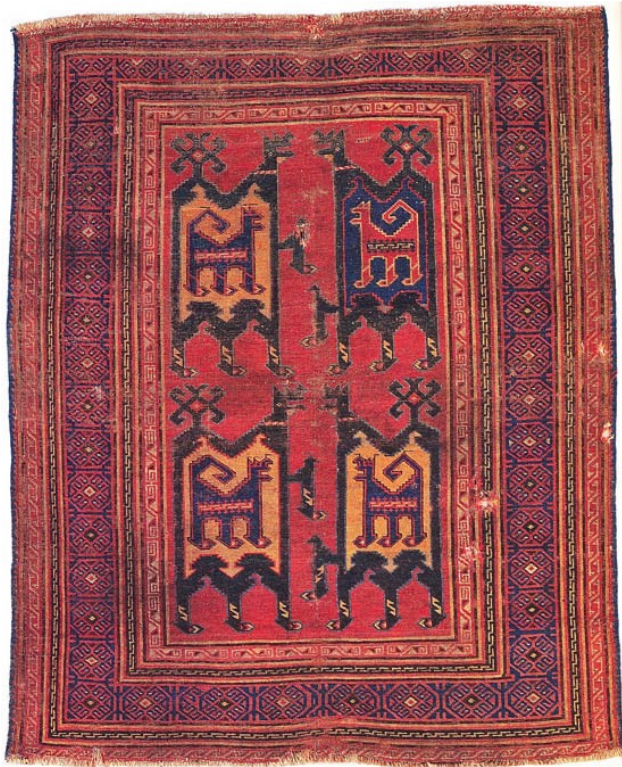


FIG.2 Pregnant lioness. J. Opie, Tribal Rugs, p. 273 (MET)



FIG.3 Pregnant mare. Kirchheim, Orient Stars, p. 15 (MIA Doha)





FIG 4 Detail Pregnant mare. Kirchheim, *Orient Stars*, p. 15 (MIA Doha)

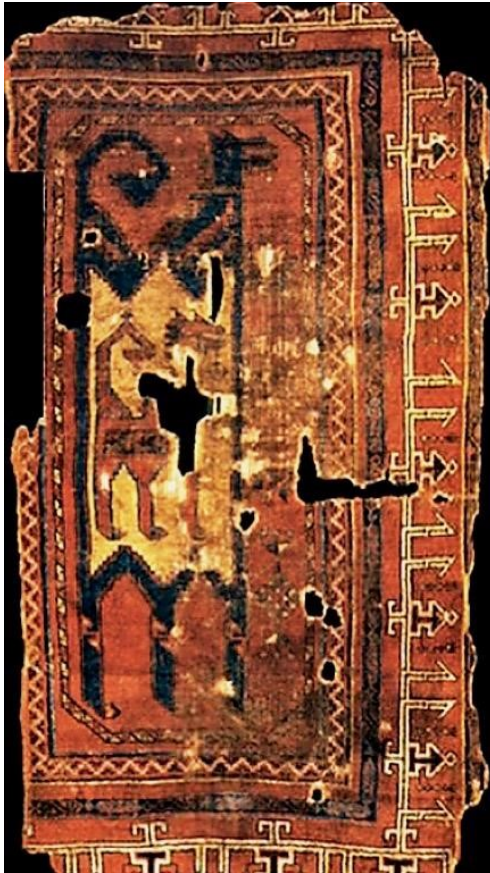


FIG.5 Fragment Pregnant mare (?) (Bruschettini Collection, Genova)



FIG.6 Pregnant she-wolf. Detail of Gregorio di Cecco's 'Marriage of the Virgin' ca. 1423. Sieneese school. National Gallery, London.

In this thread, Martin convincingly demonstrated that this very rare, perhaps even unique rug feature was also a stylistic feature of some silverware left by the semi-nomad population of the Volga-Kama Basin during the 8th-14th century (3). We agreed therefore that one or the other of the many ethnic groups living in the area could have been weaving these spectacular rugs as well. Obviously, we did not have a clue about these weaver's exact tribal identity. For what little it's worth, I have a preference for the earliest prevalently Turkic immigrants in the Volga Basin especially the Bulgars, but not excluding a priori the Cuman-Kipchaks, the Petchenegues, or other clans related to the Oghuz Turkmen (4), or the Khazars. Most being culturally sophisticated semi-nomadic populations, which presence in the area was roughly contemporaneous with the period of production of silverware featuring animal-inside-animals motifs. (8th to 14th century). In particular the Bulgars (already a rather multi-ethnic population at the time), were reputed for their skills in metallurgy (5)

**As usual I am warned that this post is too long-winded.  
Let's meet in next post**

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; January 27th, 2021 at 11:19 AM.



January 27th, 2021, 10:49 AM

#2 □

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009

**Continuation of the previous post.**



## 'Pregnant animal' rugs

In this post, I would like to come back to this topic with some further considerations.

Let me start with an act of faith: I suppose, without any trace of proof, that these rugs were tribal rugs, woven by one specific turko-mongol semi-nomadic ethnic group. Excluding therefore settled weavers of one of the great urban civilizations of the time. Take it or leave it 🙄🙄🙄

- To me, the main motif of all these rugs looks very much like a tribal totem.
- Most carpets feature at least one turko-mongol motif (a kind of 'tug').
- The border motif has an islamic flavor which rather speaks for a turko-mongol tribe roaming an area north-west of the Pamir- and Tien-Shan mountains (6).
- The art of all central and eastern Asian nomads has always been strongly animalistic, starting with the Scythians and the Xiongnu, continuing with the Khitans, the Turks and the Mongols.
- Exquisite metal working was a hallmark of many central Asian nomads.

While I am still jumping up and down on this thin ice sheet, 🤔 I might as well make another daring suggestion:

If the four pregnant animals are any kind of tribal totem, they may represent the (rather frequent) division of Turko-mongol tribes in four leading clans, while the choice of a golden yellow for the body of some 'mothers' could advertise a clan's descent from Genghis Khan ('golden clans', a.k.a. 'white bones'..). During centuries, following Genghis-Khan's rule, such a lineage was a pre-requisite for the ruler of most turko-mongol khanates & confederations. Advertising this ancestry surely was politically clever.

### What about the story of the purchase and conservation of these 'pregnant animal' rugs by Tibetan buddhist temples. Is it credible?

It might not be only a coincidence that these rugs appeared on occidental markets after the 1959 failed anti-chinese Tibetan uprising, when the Dalai Lama and many Tibetans, especially clerics, fled the country. The Chinese repression focused on the temples during the 1960-1970 period. The rationale was probably that after the end of the Tibetan Empire (around the ninth century), during the following millenary the political power was mainly held by the Buddhist hierarchy. The leading clerics were much respected, educated and the temples were comparatively wealthy. They were therefore the most likely leaders of any future revolt against China. Indeed many temples were closed by the Chinese army.

According to Kirchheim, Frances and other sources (7) monks emigrated taking with them whichever precious objects they could save from the disaster, including at least two extant 'animal-inside-an-animal' rugs.

According to Wenzel (8) some 13th-14th century Anatolian silk- and metal-thread brocades also followed the same route.

### Could the temples have bought these rugs from 14th century turko-mongol tribesmen?

Since the 5th or 6th century AC, thus long before Islam, Buddhism was the most successful **foreign** religion of Turko-mongol tribes. Initially it was probably a version similar to the Dharmaguptaka Buddhism practiced in India and North-western China, but, later on, the Tibetan version of Buddhism, more compatible with the dominant indigenous religions (a blend of Shamanism and Tengrism), became very influential in many of the tribes living East of the Pamir, later also North and West of it. Despite the later islamisation of most turko-mongol tribes, some have even kept this form of Buddhism until our times (for example some clans of Kalmyk Oyrat Turks, who moved back and forth between the western Tien-Shan range and the Volga Basin, the Tuvan Mongols of Southern Siberia or the Buryats Mongols near Lake Baikal).

Btw. Tibet is quite close to the Tien-Shan and Altai ranges, homes of many 14th century Turko-Mongol tribes, and close to both branches of the silk road in the Takla Makan, which were probably often the route chosen for their many East ---> West migrations.

This period of 'Pax Mongolica', was particularly favorable for commercial exchanges along the Silk Roads and along the Volga fluvial trade route to the North (9).

Thus there can hardly be any doubt that 13-14th century turko-mongol tribes had ample opportunities for friendly contacts with Tibetan clerics and temples.

### Could the temples have been a suitable environment for a good conservation of these six century-old rugs?

Well, the low temperature and dim light inside Tibetan temples surely had a positive effect. One may suppose that it did not overly stimulate the sex life of local moths either.

Kirchheim (10) posits that the greasy smoke of candles made with yak fat left a protective layer on the rugs.

One could perhaps also note the fact that extant rug fragments had been cut, as if used as chair covers. In central and eastern Asia, chairs were found mainly in very upper-class Chinese houses or used by very senior clerics in temples, hardly ever in any turko-mongol yurt.

Finally a very strong argument in favor of the 'Tibetan temple' hypothesis is that Jack Cassin was raging against it. 🙄🙄🙄

### Notes

(1) Juerg Rageth 'Anatolian Kilims' in AMS Radiocarbon Dating by Norman Indictor p.165.

C14 calibrated ages at 95% confidence limit.

Pregnant Lioness rug: between 1040 and 1290

Pregnant Mare 1 rug : between 1190 and 1300

Pregnant Mare 2 rug : between 1205 and 1375

(2) Michael Franses. An Early Anatolian Animal Carpet and Related Examples

<https://www.academia.edu/7657068>

(3) The climat in the middle Volga Basin leaves very little hope that 700 years-old organic artefacts, like rugs, could still be discovered.

(4) [http://s155239215.onlinehome.us/turkic/70\\_Dateline/72\\_Bulgars/bulgar\\_dateline\\_5\\_En.htm](http://s155239215.onlinehome.us/turkic/70_Dateline/72_Bulgars/bulgar_dateline_5_En.htm)

(5) N. Fedorova. Volga Bulgaria Silver of the 10th-14th centuries (on materials of the Trans-Urals collections) Artistic Metal Studies: <http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/fedorova.html>

(6) During the first five centuries after Hegira, Islam was not particularly successful east of the Pamir. Even Kasghar, the westernmost and most important city of the Takla-Makan, remained mainly Buddhist at least until the 15th century.

North-west of the Pamir, the first turko-mongol tribes to convert to Islam were probably the Karluk Turkmen of Transoxiana (10), as early as 790 CE, followed by Almish Yiltawar, Emir of the Volga Bulgars in 921 CE and Seldjuk Bey, leader of the Oghuz Kinik Turkmen clan in 990 CE. The Mongol Il-Khans, rulers of a predominantly Islamic Persia, hesitated until 1290, when Il-Khan

Ghazan finally took the plunge.  
(7) H. Kirchheim, Orient Stars, page 12  
M. Franses, An Early Anatolian Carpet and related examples, 246  
(8) M. Wenzel. Turkish Textiles 2002  
(9) The Volga fluvial trade route was a rather logical route, for example, for the famous animal rug (C14-dated 1300 -1420 AD) found in Marby, Sweden in a church.  
(10) H. Kirchheim. Orient Star , page 374, note #318  
(11) Btw. The Karluks are mentioned in Arab literature as particularly gifted rug weavers. I have been unable to find the primary source.

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; January 27th, 2021 at 11:13 AM.



January 27th, 2021, 01:18 PM

#3

**Filiberto**  
**Boncompagni**  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



Thanks, Pierre, for reviving the subject. I almost forgot about it.

One objection:

Quote:

Well, the low temperature and dim light inside Tibetan temples surely had a positive effect. One may suppose that it did not overly stimulate the sex life of local moths either.

OK for the low temperature but, as far as I know, clothing moths (adults and larvae) love low light conditions. That's one of the reason for periodically exposing rugs to the sunlight.  
Perhaps they don't live at high altitudes, though (I couldn't find anything about that on Google).

A couple of observations:

Quote:

- Most carpets feature at least one turko-mongol motif (a kind of 'tug').

I guessed that in this case 'tug' was a sort of insignia.  
I checked on Wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tug\\_\(banner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tug_(banner))

Yes, it is.

Quote:

Finally a very strong argument in favor of the 'Tibetan temple' hypothesis is that Jack Cassin was raging against it

Indeed. You convinced me there. 🙄🙄🙄



Filiberto



January 30th, 2021, 11:59 AM

#4

**Pierre Galafassi**  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



### The Gion Matsuri rugs

It seems to me that adding a turko-mongol group, living in the the Volga-Kama area, to the list of possible weavers of the 14th century 'pregnant animals' rugs is reasonable enough.

Now, I would like to discuss another mysterious group of rugs, which may well be related to the 'pregnant animals' rugs. The 'Gion Matsuri rugs'.

A set of rugs which since immemorial times decorates floats during the annual Kyoto festival.





FIG 1



FIG 2

The Gion Festival dates back to the late 800s of the Heian era. Its creation was an attempt at appeasing the gods during a plague. The gods appreciated, the pestilence lessened and, just to remain on the safe side, Gion Matsuri was officially decreed an annual event in 970 C.E.

Over time, the increasingly powerful and influential merchant class made the festival more elaborate and started to use the parade of the sixty-six stylized and decorated 'hoko' or floats (one for each province of Japan at the time) to display their wealth.(1)

I understand that the festival managers have an old tradition of decorating the floats also with foreign textiles and rugs.

After the festival, the floats and regalia are kept in special storehouses.

The textiles and rugs are taken care of by the guild of 'Nishijin' weavers, who also offer new ones, including replicas for the ones that are destroyed or are considered too valuable to use in the festival events.



Below a recent picture of a float carrying some of our mysterious rugs.



FIG 3

The same float also featured a nice Persian rug. Another one was decorated with what looked like 16th centuries European tapestries.



FIG 4

Coming back to our three mysterious rugs in FIG 1 and FIG 2:

While the field motifs of two of them and the color palettes of all three rugs are about as Chinese as can be, the motifs of all borders are absolutely identical with those of most of the 'pregnant animal' rugs.





FIG 5



FIG 6

**So who wove these rugs?**

I am not aware of any C14 analysis of the Gion rugs. Thus, they may have been woven at any time, before, after or during the same period as the 'pregnant animal rugs'. It is also possible that the rugs currently decorating the float are not the original

ones, but replicas made by the 'Nishijin' weavers.

The original rugs probably came from China, with which Japan had old, and regular commercial, religious and diplomatic contacts. They may have been, for example gifts to the Emperor, to the Shogun or to influential families, except during the crisis between the two countries created by Kubilay, the first Yuan emperor, who twice tried and failed to conquer Japan (1274, 1281). His armies were not able to win any decisive battles on land and when, each time, typhoons sunk or dispersed the fleet, both expeditions turned into bloody disasters for the Mongols (2). The rugs may have been part of the properties of a Yuan general for example and taken by one of the victorious generals of the Kamakura Shogunate (3), who surely would not have forgotten to offer part of the spoils to the puppet above, the Emperor and to the Kyoto imperial court. Even puppet Emperors must be kept happy.

While Kubilay, could have been a tad upset and sulky after the lack of success of his troops and the disaster of his fleets, this was nothing that could not be cured by cutting a few hundred officials' heads. After a while, exchange of goods and ideas surely resumed, and the original Gion rugs may have travelled to Japan then.

The Pax Mongolica being a fact during the 14th century at least, one can assume that such rugs circulated freely.

#### But what about the completely different color palette and field motifs?

One possible explanation could be that genuine 'pregnant animal' rugs reached Japan and were copied by Japanese weavers. I doubt it, for several reasons:

- a) wool was not a popular fibre in Japan.
- b) strong color contrasts were not shun by Japanese artists.
- c) why should they have exactly copied the border motif, but radically modified both the main motifs and the colors?

A weaving of the Gion rugs somewhere in the Mongol empire seems more credible to me. While it is certainly true that rug motifs have long legs and that copies can travel far, the identical design of the borders, down even to tiny details, like the 'Tugs', rather suggests that their weavers were closely related to the weavers of the 'Pregnant animal rugs'. I am not aware of any proof of a market for rugs in Kubilay's China (4), but given the integration of so many rug-using and rug-weaving populations in the four new Mongol states, it does not seem such a remote possibility. Some Han Chinese officials may have imitated their Turkic-, Mongol-, Arab- and Persian colleagues or rich foreign merchants and some rug-weaving populations (like perhaps the unknown population who wove the 'pregnant animal' rugs), may have decided to adapt part of their production to the taste of Han Chinese gentlemen, hence the subdued brownish color, the 'shishi' motif or the tree-in-the-wind motif.

The svastika motif (in Fig 1) was familiar to most Central and East Asian civilizations.

Just a thought  
Pierre

#### Notes

(1) Capturing the world. History of the Kyoto Gion matsuri

<https://capturingtheworld.net/2019/06/30/kyotos-gion-festival-part-1-history/>

(2) Actually these 'Mongol' armies were mainly recruited among warriors and sailors from all over the Empire, including (perhaps moderately motivated-) newly conquered Koreans and Southern Chinese of the former Southern Song Dynasty.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol\\_invasions\\_of\\_Japan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol_invasions_of_Japan)

(3) At the time of the Yuan invasions, Japan 'enjoyed' a political layer-cake: The real power belonged to a 'Shikken' which family had reduced both the Shogun residing in Kamakura and the Emperor residing at Kyoto to the status of mere puppets. It makes the victory of Japan over the invincible mongols even more amazing.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamakura\\_shogunate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamakura_shogunate)

(4) Extant rugs and paintings showing rugs appear later, especially during the 16th century in Ming China.

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; January 30th, 2021 at 12:07 PM.



January 30th, 2021, 03:30 PM

#5

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

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



Hi Pierre,

The first and third Gion rug (plus another one) were also discussed by Murray Eiland, Jr. in his article '*Speculation on the Earliest Surviving Chinese Rugs*' on Thomas Cole's website:

<http://www.tcoletribalrugs.com/article20eilandchinese.html>

It seems that a very similar rug to your FIG. 1 'allegedly found in Tibet - has been carbon dated roughly to the fourteenth or fifteenth century.'

Filiberto



February 1st, 2021, 02:31 PM

#6

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Yes Filiberto,

Tugs are a kind of standards initially used by central- and eastern Asian nomads especially Turko-mongol ones. Often used as military banners they probably also had a symbolic, religious importance in tengrism / animism.



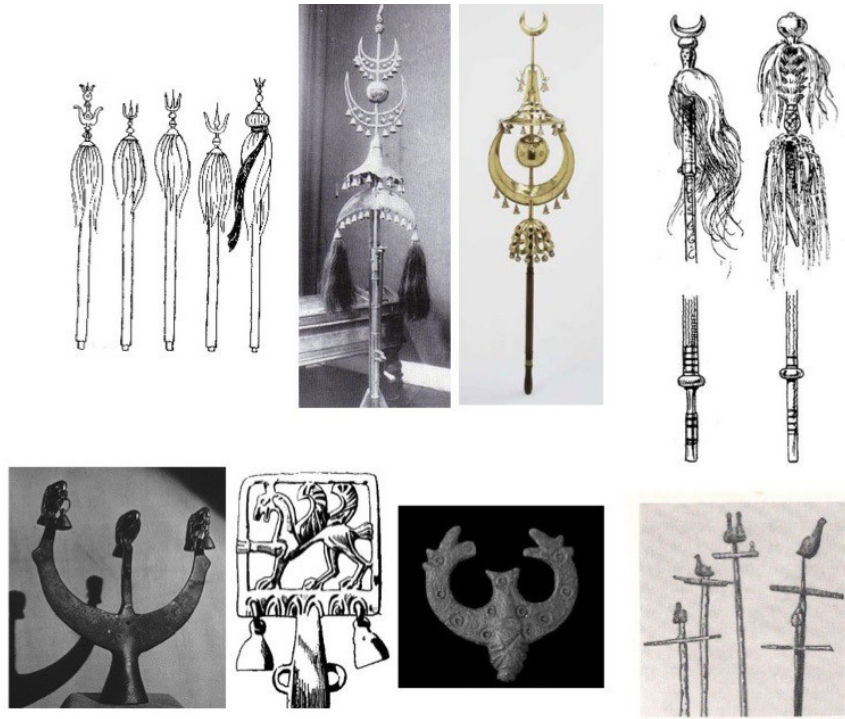


FIG1 Various tugs

It usually consists of a pole with on its top a hollow socket carrying a bronze or iron figure, (bird, mythical animal..). In the Turko-mongol world it frequently carries a kind of trident.  
 FIG 2 shows several of these tridents, called sulds near a cairn (Ovoo) in Mongolia.  
 Later Ottoman tugs (bunchuks) were often topped with a crescent instead.  
 Perforations or rings allow to attach horse tails.



FIG 2

Thanks, for the interesting link to the Cole / Eiland paper and to another Franses' paper (1) in which the C14 test of one of the Gion matsuri rugs is mentioned. A test which confirms that this rug is indeed roughly contemporaneous with the 'Pregnant animal' rugs (2). In both papers, several other Gion matsuri rugs, with a (possible-) similar provenance and age, are mentioned.

Indeed, in the picture below there is a glimpse of another rug which may belong to the same group.



FIG 3

Another float features two very poor copies, likely to be recent local weavings.



FIG 4

Coming back now to the genuine rugs: In one of them (here FIG 5) the field corners feature a (rather 'corroded-') motif reminiscent of an eagle, a motif which appears already

- in a 12-13th century Chinese representation of a Khitan (3) nomad encampment (FIG 6),
- in a Mongol rug, given as 18th century (FIG 7)
- in several 17th and 18th century Khotan and Yarkand rugs (FIG 8 & 9).

A 19th century occidental painting (FIG 10) shows Uyghurs seated on a carpet featuring the same 'eagle' motif.

This 'eagle' corner motif is very rare in other very old (18th century and older) oriental rugs.

Its presence in a Gion rug could perhaps be seen as an additional clue for its very old, likely central Asian Turko-mongol origin.



FIG 5.





FIG 6. Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute. 12th -13th CE. MET 213008.



FIG 7. Mongol rug given as XVIII century.





FIG 8. Yarkand XVIII H. Bidder Carpets from Eastern Turkestan plate 5









FIG 9 Khotan XVII-XVIII H. Bidder Carpets from Eastern Turkestan plate 6



FIG 10. 19th century? Unknown painter.

Notes

(1) *An Early Anatolian Animal Carpet and Related Examples*. M. Franses  
<https://www.academia.edu/7657068/>

(2) Radio carbon-dated to 1293-1447 (calibrated ages at 95% confidence limit.)

(3) FIG 5 is one of the paintings illustrating a Chinese poem, the 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute'. These illustrations are said to describe quite accurately nomad encampments, their attire and quite a number of rugs too. In this late version of the poem (ca. 12th-13th century), the costumes and rugs are supposed to be those of Khitan nomads. See [http://www.turkoteck.com/old\\_masters/salon\\_7.html](http://www.turkoteck.com/old_masters/salon_7.html)

*Khitan*s: an ethnic group related to the Mongols which founded the Liao dynasty and dominated Northern China until 1125. Their weaker successors, the so-called Eastern Liao and Later Liao, remained independents, north of China, until the first quarter of the thirteenth century when they submitted to the Mongols.

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; February 1st, 2021 at 03:08 PM.



February 1st, 2021, 03:03 PM

#Z □

Filiberto  
Boncompagni  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



I Pierre,

The article by Michael Franses:

*An Early Anatolian Animal Carpet and Related Examples*

is downloadable from here:

[https://www.academia.edu/7657068/An\\_Early\\_Anatolian\\_Animal\\_Carpet\\_and\\_Related\\_Examples](https://www.academia.edu/7657068/An_Early_Anatolian_Animal_Carpet_and_Related_Examples)

it says, among other things (not time for re-reading it in full at the moment)

**'The MIA Anatolian Animal Carpet**

*Before it was acquired by a previous owner in Kathmandu, Nepal, the MIA animal*



carpet had reportedly been in a Tibetan monastery. In 1991, it was sent to Longevity Conservation Studio in London for washing and conservation, an event that allowed me the opportunity to examine it thoroughly over eight months. The process was lengthy because much of the carpet was heavily impregnated with wax. This situation is typical of carpets and textiles from the monasteries, which were once illuminated by thousands of yak-butter candles. These gave off a vapor of grease that over centuries covered the contents of the buildings. Because the carpets were out of reach of sunlight, however, the colors were perfectly preserved.'



Well, wax isn't the same thing as yak-butter, though 🤔



February 1st, 2021, 03:39 PM

#8

**Filiberto Boncompagni**  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



Pierre,

My ageing neurons were slowly put in motion by your images of 'tugs': I already saw something similar discussed here in the past.

It was, of course, posted by Martin Andersen in the archived discussion 'Sogdian design and iconography'

[http://www.turkotek.com/misc\\_00139/Sogdian.html](http://www.turkotek.com/misc_00139/Sogdian.html)

with an 'incursion' on the kufic border visible in most of these rugs as well.

Look at posts down from #15 to #26!



February 2nd, 2021, 06:12 PM

#9

**Filiberto Boncompagni**  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008



Hi Pierre,

Having found the time and will to re-read Murray Eiland Jr and Michael Franses' articles, here is my two-cents opinion on the 'Gion' rugs.

Quote:

A weaving of the Gion rugs somewhere in the Mongol empire seems more credible to me.

I agree.

Quote:

While it is certainly true that rug motifs have long legs and that copies can travel far, the identical design of the borders , down even to tiny details, like the 'Tugs', rather suggests that their weavers were closely related to the weavers of the 'Pregnant animal rugs'.

Well, perhaps related but not so closely. Those borders (so identical among the Gion group) have a much more - I might say - rough rendition. They don't have at all the same elegance we see in the 'pregnant animal' rugs.

Quote:

I am not aware of any proof of a market for rugs in Kubilay's China (4), but given the integration of so many rug-using and rug-weaving populations in the four new Mongol states, it does not seem such a remote possibility. Some Han Chinese officials may have imitated their Turkic-, Mongol-, Arab- and Persian colleagues or rich foreign merchants and some rug-weaving populations (like perhaps the unknown population who wove the 'pregnant animal' rugs), may have decided to adapt part of their production to the taste of Han Chinese gentlemen, hence the subdued brownish color, the 'shishī' motif or the tree-in-the-wind motif. The svastika motif (in Fig 1) was familiar to most Central and East Asian civilizations.

Or perhaps it was a different group that simply copied the borders, filling the rest with design and colors more suitable to 'the taste of Han Chinese gentlemen' and so on. Because, as you say, colors, design and the 'eagle' corner motifs are very much central-Asian-Turkestan-Mongol.

Eiland makes an interesting note on the structure of these rugs, by the way:

Quote:

Even assuming the rugs are Chinese - and they are woven with asymmetrical knots on cotton foundations like Chinese rugs - this does not tell us whether they are from the same mainland crafts center we believe produced the surviving early Chinese carpets

I presume the structure of the 'pregnant animal' rugs is symmetrically knotted wool on wool, right?

Filiberto



February 2nd, 2021, 06:36 PM

**Filiberto**  
**Boncompagni**  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



This one is wool on wool for sure:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453317>



#10



February 3rd, 2021, 10:53 AM

**Pierre Galafassi**  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Buongiorno Filiberto,

Quote: Well, perhaps related but not so closely. Those borders (so identical among the Gion group) have a much more - I might say - rough rendition. They don't have at all the same elegance we see in the 'pregnant animal' rugs.

I agree, the weaving quality is inferior. One could imagine two clans of weavers, part of the same tribe or having at least shared some adventurous time together, (long enough to share some artistic preferences or symbolic motifs as well), before taking different routes. A rather common situation at the time, when Turko-mongol tribal confederations were formed or dispersed, following the hazards and necessities of the Mongol conquest of Asia.

While I haven't met yet any mention of anything like a rug bazaar (nor anything similar to Turkotek<sup>???</sup>) in the Yuan empire, this product was apparently important enough for the Emperors to keep an 'Office of Cut-yarn Carpets'. (1) These bureaucrats' archives confirm orders for supply of rugs to the Imperial Court, as for example '...production of knotted carpets for Emperor Yingzong's (Gegeen Khan 1320-1323) mausoleum hall and for the hall of Empress Sadabala (or Sugabala) in the year of 1328...'

The fact that Mongol- or Turkic Yuan elites would still use rugs, a couple of generations only after having moved from yurts into Palaces should not be overly surprising. Also Marco Polo bears witness of the usage by Kubilay Khan and the Court of precious carpets, which the Emperor loved enough for asking courtier to leave their shoes at the door (2).

Perhaps more interesting is the fact that already some Chinese gentlemen of the first century CE (Han dynasty) could be interested in such western barbarian's collectibles (3)

'....This last term was used by the famous historian Ban Gu 班固 (32 CE-92 CE) in a letter to his brother Ban Chao 班超 (32



#11



CE-102 CE), the general of the Western Region (4), asking him to buy tadeng from the Yuezhi (5) tribes' (Tadeng - pile rug).

One could suppose therefore that there could have been some ruggies in the Chinese intellectual upper-class during the Yuan dynasty as well, looking for genuinely 'barbaric' western or northern Asian rugs or sinicized ones.

**Notes.**

(1) Zhang He. (William Patterson University). *Knotted Carpets from the Taklamakan: A Medium of Ideological and Aesthetic Exchange on the Silk Road* page 39-40.

<https://edspace.american.edu/silkroadjournal/wp-content/uploads/sites/984/2020/02/5-Zhang-Knotted-Carpets-from-the-Taklamakan.pdf>

(2) Marco Polo. *Le Devisement du Monde et Le Livre des Merveilles*.

Chapter LXXXVI: Polo mentions that when Emperor Kubilay gives a party, he is seated higher, on a throne, his sons, his wives and the highest ranking guests are seated on a lower platform on chairs, but guests of all lesser ranks are seated on rugs.

Chapter CV: Polo mentions that the room in which the Emperor gives audience is carpeted with 'beautiful rugs of silk, gold and other colors' (sic), and that the courtiers must put on clean white slippers before entering the room.

(3) Zhang He. *Ibid*. Page 39

(4) Ban Chao. Chinese general who restored the power of the Han dynasty in the Tarim Basin, including in its westernmost city, Kashgar.

(5) Yuezhi: Semi-nomad, pastoralist and trading population, perhaps of Indo-European origin, strong in the Takla Makan during the 3rd- and part of the 2nd BCE, defeated by the Xiong-Nu around 175 BCE. Most Yuezhi, then, migrated West.

The first century CE rug-weaving Yuezhi mentioned by Ban Gu were probably those who created the Kushan Empire, which played an important role in the region during the next two centuries. Thus Ban Chao's purchased rugs may have been similar to the ones discovered in Northern Afghanistan and Bactria, discussed by F. Spuhler (*Pre-Islamic Carpets and Textiles From Eastern Lands*) or M. Frances. (MIA Collection) <http://podcast.islamicrodoha.org/2011/michael-frances/> ) or to the famous saddle rug found at Shampula below:



FIG 1 Shampula. (Near Khotan, westernTakla Makan) approx. 200 BCE-200 CE.

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; February 3rd, 2021 at 03:23 PM.

February 3rd, 2021, 11:59 AM

#12

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



Hi Pierre,

Perhaps I didn't put enough emphasis on the *'they are woven with asymmetrical knots on cotton foundations like Chinese rugs'* part but this detail is quite remarkable. This is an important structural difference. The fact that the weavers had access to cotton yarns probably points out to a different geographical location too.

Which makes me think, as I expressed above, that *perhaps it was a different group that simply copied the borders filling the rest with design and colors more suitable to 'the taste of Han Chinese gentlemen' and so on.*

Filiberto



February 3rd, 2021, 03:16 PM

#13

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Hi Filiberto,

You are right to emphasize this point which escaped my feeble attention (tired neurones are not any of your exclusivities, my friend)

Cotton is a fully unexpected fiber to me.

I was under the (probably wrong ) impression that it was a marker for relatively recent rugs: 19th century central Asian ones for example.

I hope one of our resident experts can tell us how to make sense of this fact, in rugs which were supposedly woven around the 14th century. 😞

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; February 3rd, 2021 at 03:25 PM.



February 3rd, 2021, 04:34 PM

#14

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 145



Do not despair, Pierre.

Quote from the already mentioned Michael Franses:  
'An Early Anatolian Animal Carpet and Related Examples':

*one Kyoto rosettes rug (pl. 248b) has been carbon-dated to 1293-1447.*

That's the first one in your fig 1.

And in the other document you referenced above, i.e.:

Zhang He. (William Patterson University)

'Knotted Carpets from the Taklamakan: A Medium of Ideological and Aesthetic Exchange on the Silk Road'  
on page 50-51 it is said:

*In the Ming dynasty, it seems there was a purposeful slowdown of the carpet making industry. For instance, it is recorded that in the tenth year of the Hongzhi emperor (1500 CE), Emperor Xiaozong wanted to repair and replace about one hundred 'dragon' and plain carpets. The head of the Ministry of Public Works (Gong Bu ), however, begged the emperor not to do so, for it would be too expensive to get wool from Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, **cotton** from Henan, and workers from Suzhou and Shanghai (Jia et al. 2009:55). But the emperor ignored this warning and continued his project.*

So... cotton WAS used in ancient times in the making of Chinese carpets, apparently 😞



February 3rd, 2021, 06:08 PM

#15

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Hi Filiberto,

Meglio tardi che mai, in an attempt at reducing my abysmal ignorance, I have given a look at my copy of 'Glanz der Himmelssoehne. Kaiserliche Teppiche aus China. 1400-1750', in which 68 classical Chinese carpets, from the Ming dynasty onwards have been thoroughly analysed by Elena Tsareva.

And you know what? The result is **Filiberto 10-Pierre 0**. 🙄🙄

Quoting Tsareva page 188: '...A number of characteristics are almost universal: Both warps and wefts are mainly cotton...' She also writes:

'...Chinese carpets show amazing uniformity in their basic structure, ..., all but one of the examples studied here are made with asymmetrical knots, open to the left...'

'...the pile of classical carpets is mainly wool, very coarse in the early imperial examples and relatively fine in the later pieces...'

Amen.

PS This bloody software suffers from acute anti German prejudice. It refuses to put the proper Umlaut on o or u.

Last edited by Pierre Galafassi; February 3rd, 2021 at 06:17 PM.





February 3rd, 2021, 07:09 PM

#16

[Steve Price](#)  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Posts: 114



Hi Pierre

There are two workarounds to the umlaut problem. The official transliterations use "oe" and "ue" for the umlaut forms of "o" and "e". The second workaround is to just ignore the umlauts. Most Americans don't know what the umlaut does anyway, and who cares about anyone else?

Cheers, amigo.

Steve



February 3rd, 2021, 08:08 PM

#17

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Well Steve, we Latins know better than writing German without the proper Umlaut. Last time we forgot, Mr. Arminius destroyed 3 of our best legions.  
Take care  
Pierre



February 16th, 2021, 09:34 PM

#18

[Martin Andersen](#)  
Members

Join Date: Jul 2008  
Posts: 90



Hi All

I see I am not the only one having trouble with text engine and umlaut 😊  
And I see I have some serious reading up to do.

All the best  
Martin



February 24th, 2021, 10:50 AM

#19

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 110



Hi all,

First let me welcome you back Martin! You have been missed!  
As a (rather long winded-) fellow, called Lamartine, once wrote: 'Un seul ?tre vous manque et tout est d?peupl?' (Sorry the software is also anti-french now!!)

Just finished reading a very interesting book full of superb pictures (1) . The author, Gloria Gonick, is a collector of East Asian textiles, scholar and museum curator, with a passion for the foreign textiles exhibited during the Kyoto Gion matsuri festivals. She dedicated this book to the study of a set of thirty-six ink-painted wool tapestries and of twenty-one wool-pile carpets.

Although the author tries to establish a common origin for both groups, I would like to concentrate only on the Gion carpets, which are the topic of this thread.

Mrs Gonick visited and examined, several times, the Gion collections, consulted old documents and did spent extensive research in China trying to establish the origin of the rugs .

In addition to the rugs already illustrated in my previous posts, her book features excellent pictures of seven more pieces, clearly belonging to the same group, although not necessarily all of the same age.

Mrs Gonick was informed that three of these rugs were C14 tested. Unfortunately she does not identify the tested rugs. The results are consistent with their weaving during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) or during the begin of the Ming dynasty.

- A) 1387-1511 CE with 95% probability
- B) 1293-1447 CE with 95% probability
- C) 1293-1437 CE with 95% probability

Mrs Gonick's belief that the rugs were not woven in Japan is not only based on the fact that wool was unloved in 14th century Japan, but also on old Gion matsuri documents which attribute their origin to a not better precised 'regional China'. IMHO, one could speculate that 'regional' could mean 'Not from mainland China' but rather from a place near the 'barbarian' western- or northern frontiers.

The author mentions that all rugs were woven with asymmetric knot, open left, that the weaving was very coarse, as low in some cases as 78 knots by square decimeter and writes that several older examples feature wool warps and wefts.. ' .In later pieces, cotton was used as well for warps and wefts.. ' .

N.B. At the time of the Yuans, cotton was still not cultivated further north than the Yang Tze Kiang valley (2), if one excepts the western Takla Makan oases.

Where I have a bit of difficulty following her, is when she claims that the wool is of the 'same hairy type (sic) typical of sheep raised in the (north-western) Chinese province of Gansu'. This precision is puzzling. Does Mrs Gonick imply that this wool is different from the one provided by the ubiquitous Central Asian 'dumba' fat-tail sheep? No source is mentioned for such an interesting information, which, if proven, could indeed support her pet hypothesis of a weaving of the Gion rugs in Gansu.

The seven additional beautifully illustrated rugs are the following



FIG 1



FIG 2





FIG 3



FIG 4





FIG 5



7.7  
FIG 6





FIG 7



FIG 8 Qocho- and Gansu Uyghur Kingdoms. Relics of the former Uyghur Qaghanate

Based mainly on the rug motifs, the author attributes the weaving to Turk weavers: To be more precise to Uyghurs ( a reasonable, credible assumption imho). However Mrs Gononick may walk on too thin ice when she tries to be even more precise and designates a specific population of Buddhists, settled in Gansu, East of the Takla Makan, near the upper Yellow River, called 'Monguors' and supposed to be Uyghur Turks assimilated by Mongols, or vice-versa (3). The author brings a rather bizarre explanation of their origin, and, more generally, of the history of the Uyghurs, which heavily collides with accepted historical data. Not to mention some rather large anachronisms.

For any reader with terminal compulsive history-mania, see (4),(8)

**As usual , I am too long-winded  
See you next post**

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February 24th, 2021,  
11:09 AM

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
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Join Date: Oct 2009  
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#20



### More to come, alas

While her identification of the field motifs with Buddhism makes sense, their identification as specific Yellow Hat (thus Tibetan-) Buddhist motifs seems a tad questionable and her focus on the Monguors as the obvious choice for the weaving tribe, based mainly on the hypothesis that this, partly Mongol and partly Uyghur, population were Tibetan buddhists during the Yuan times, seems rather weak to me:

- These Monguors of Gansu were certainly not the only Uyghurs and even less the only Turk population which had adopted the Tibetan creed of Buddhism at the time when the rugs were woven. (5)
  - After the destruction by the Kyrgyz of the Uyghur Qaghanate in 847. The Uyghurs created two new kingdoms, one around Qocho in the piedmont of the Tien Shan range and in the Takla Makan, another one, indeed, in Gansu. (See map). However, the only Uyghur entity still worth talking about, at the time of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties, was the Kingdom of Qocho (the Idiqtus), since the Uyghur Kingdom of Gansu was destroyed by the Tanguts (people of Tibetan stock and idiom) in 1030 CE, nearly 250 years before the creation of the Yuan dynasty in 1271. A pretty long time!
  - The identification of the 'Monguors' with 'Uyghurs' is also dubious because it ignores the fact that the Uyghurs were not any ethnic entity, but merely a confederation of nine Turk clans under the leadership of an Orkhon Uyghur clan. Whenever the political power of such a confederate state was destroyed, each clan had the choice between trying to move to a safer place together with other members, or to look individually for a new alliance with different Turko-mongol clans, or to return to its old status of single Turko-mongol tribal unit, or to dissolve itself in another tribe.
- I doubt that 200 or 300 years after the end of the short-lived Uyghur Gansu Kingdom and half a millenary after the demise of the Uyghur Qaghanate, one would still cherish any specific Uyghur culture in Gansu.  
Never mind, it's only my opinion..

- I may err, as usual, but it seems to me that the Fo-dog (clearly the favorite motif in Gion rugs) was already popular in all of China before the Yuans, it surely remained so during the next centuries, not only for people of the Tibetan Buddhist creed. Is there any reason to think that other creeds did not like it? Was it not appreciated by Han Chinese literati adept of Confucianism or Taoism?

Below, two examples of Ming dynasty seat covers, one featuring a Fo dog, the other a tiger.





FIG 9. 17th century, Ming dynasty, western China. Source: Glanz Der Himmelssoehne

Btw, both rugs feature the kind of geometric 'eagle' in the corners, which is so rare in Rugdom, but rather frequent in the oldest extant rugs of the western Takla Makan. Two different variants of the motif are featured in nearly every Gion rugs too.

Below, one of the most ancient extant rugs generally identified as genuinely Chinese (as the imperial dragon may confirm). It is more than one century younger (Ming dynasty) than the oldest Gion rugs, pile is silk, it is less coarse, but still not very densely woven. Imho it has still some similarities with the Gion rugs, especially the palette which seems very Chinese to me, and not overly Tibetan.



FIG 10. The 'Davison' dragon silk rug. Ming dynasty. Cotton warp & weft. Al-Thani Coll.

Some clearly wrong points of History (4), and some bold, highly debatable statements about the original colors of the rugs and about their alleged symbolic link to the Tibetan Buddhist creed (6) leave to the reader an after-taste of superficiality. The author was probably misled by some of her sources or misunderstood them.

Which is a shame since these erroneous statements (which btw are fully irrelevant for the identification of the weavers of the Gion rug), kind of reduce the general credibility of other, interesting, points made by the author.

One of these particularly interesting points was her suggestion that the rare border motifs shared with the 'pregnant animal' rugs, are 'old Turkik runic letters'. Well, Mrs Gonic may throw the 'cochonnet' a bit too far (as we would say in Provence) when she writes '...there is no evidence of islamic features in any of the carpets in Kyoto'. The theory that this border could be inspired by islamic geometric Kufic script does not seem harebrained at all to me.

However the hypothesis of an inspiration by an old Turkik alphabet is surely worth considering seriously too. As it happens, both the First and the Second Turkik Qaghanates indeed used an alphabet, called Orkon script, which includes two letters identical with motifs of the mysterious border.



FIG 11

As also seen below in an excerpt of a propaganda petroglyph commissioned by Bilge Qaghan, a 7th century CE bully. (Read from right to left, of course, otherwise it will seem gibberish to you)

:𐰆𐰇𐰈𐰉 :𐰊𐰋𐰌𐰍 :𐰎𐰏𐰐𐰑 :𐰒𐰓𐰔 :𐰕𐰖𐰗  
 :𐰘𐰙𐰚 :𐰛𐰜𐰝 :𐰞𐰟 :𐰠𐰡 :𐰢𐰣𐰤  
 :𐰥𐰦𐰧 :𐰨𐰩 :𐰪𐰫𐰬 :𐰭𐰮𐰯 :𐰰𐰱  
 :𐰲𐰳 :𐰴𐰵𐰶 :𐰷𐰸 :---- :𐰹𐰺𐰻𐰼𐰽𐰾𐰿

FIG 12

I suppose that this script was known by most Turko-Mongol intellectuals, through all of central- and eastern Asia, at least until the end of the Second Turkik Qaghanate in 744 CE.

Including by the literati Uyghurs. They were members of these Turkish Qaghanates too. Eventually they led a victorious rebellion against the Qaghan, destroyed the State and created their own Empire, the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840 CE). They developed their own alphabet, which replaced the Orkhon script in the administration of the new Qaghanate, as well as in both its sequels: the Idiqt /Kingdom of Qocho and the short-lived Kingdom of Gansu.

The Uyghur script was adopted also by Genghis Khan's bureaucracy and by the Yuan administration.

The Orkhon script faded away, but I suppose that its survival was not impossible in some Turko-mongol clans until the Yuan period. Thanks to the Shamans for example: It could have survived in sacred manuscripts of Tengrism, like the 9 th century 'Book of Omens' written in Orkhon script, discovered by Aurel Stein in the Mogao Caves (7).

One way or another, it may indeed have found its way in border motifs of Gion rugs and of 'pregnant animal' ones.

That the best place to look for a relic of the Orkhon script would precisely be in rugs woven by a clan claiming Uyghur origin does not strike me as being obvious, though..

Building on Mrs Gonick's intuition, I searched the Net for other Turko-mongol alphabets, hoping to find other interesting similarities, alas with no result worth mentioning, except that the middle-age Volga Bulgar script also contained the same two letters.

In Sum, for what little it's worth, I do agree with Mrs Gonick that the Orkhon old Turkik alphabet could have been the inspiration of part of the mysterious border motif of Gion rugs (and of the 'pregnant animal' rugs).

But, still, geometric Kufic script could just the same be the source of inspiration, and this option keeps my preference.

This leaves unexplained the homunculus motif situated between the 'Orkhon turkik and the Islamic kufic' letters. With quite a bit of fantasy, one could describe it as a Qaghan brandishing two Tugs.



FIG 13

One can find rulers in a similar posture on Sassanian , Kushan or Bulgar coins.





FIG 14

The 'homunculus' could also be closely inspired by the tamga of one of the many temporary nomad states, of one of its Qaghans, or of any other tribal leader. In which case the weaver's tribal ID may be right under our (sorry, I meant under my- ) ignorant nose.

I am now in urgent need for a beer and a reset.

In the mean time, waiting for new and better pointers, I'll stubbornly stick with my superficial opinion about the Gion rugs: Cheap commercial rugs adapted to the taste of middle class Buddhists- or, more generally, middle class Han Chinese gentlemen, woven by Turk weavers somehow related to the ones who wove the technically much more refined, stately 'pregnant animal' rugs. In the latter case they were woven for the use of their tribal top class, who gifted some rugs to high and influent Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist creed, for the benefit of their (the Lama's) bums.

But NO, it is not yet finished.  
See you next post, perhaps

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