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## **Tracing cultural ties of carpet weaving in Kazakhstan and Central Asia**

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### **Abstract**

The diverse culture of Kazakhstan has long been the fruitful soil for the flourishing of the unique handicraft of carpet weaving. Kazakh traditional carpet weaving of the 19th – early 21st centuries, comprising the peculiar ethnic identity, vivid artistic expressiveness and deep spiritual meaning, necessitates its comprehensive study. The in-depth study of formation and evolution of artistic traditions of the Kazakh carpet weaving by analyzing the archive data and museum collections will enable a thorough study of this tradition, and the history and social and cultural ties of the Kazakh people, its philosophy and values that were reflected in carpet ornaments.

**Keywords:** Carpet making, Pazyryk culture, Utility art, Scythians, Saks.

## **Rastreando los lazos culturales del tejido de alfombras en Kazajstán y Asia Central**

### **Resumen**

La cultura diversa de Kazajstán ha sido durante mucho tiempo el suelo fructífero para el florecimiento de la artesanía única del tejido de alfombras. El tejido tradicional de alfombras kazajo de los siglos XIX y XXI, que comprende la identidad étnica peculiar, la expresividad artística vívida y el profundo significado espiritual, requiere un estudio exhaustivo. El estudio en profundidad de la formación y evolución de las tradiciones artísticas del tejido de alfombras de Kazajstán mediante el análisis de los datos del archivo y las colecciones del museo permitirá un estudio exhaustivo de esta tradición, y la historia y los lazos sociales y culturales

del pueblo kazajo, su filosofía y valores que se reflejaron en adornos de alfombras.

**Palabras clave:** Fabricación de alfombras, Cultura Pazyryk, Arte utilitario, Escitas, Saks.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, Kazakh carpet weaving has been formed by the confluence of cultures of ancient and medieval tribes, as well as the achievements of ethnic groups of late times. The stable economic and cultural environment, the ties with nomadic and sedentary life stimulated the long-term preservation of certain images, plots and compositions that arose in the era of the early nomads, or in I millennium B.C., in the art, and in some cases, provoked their creation up until the middle of the twentieth century. At the same time, the technological features (raw materials, spinning, dyeing, weaving) of carpet production, originated in the era of the early nomads, have continued to exist without significant changes to the present day.

Animalistic plot compositions and technological features of weaving, characteristic of the early nomads, are presented in the ancient Pazyryk carpet, found by S. I. Rudenko in 1949 in the Altai Mountains (RUDENKO, 1968). The carpet is an example of exceptionally fine weaving, and the depicted ornament possesses a sacred and symbolic meaning.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study were the ideas and theoretical developments of leading researchers, historians, cultural scholars, art experts and ethnographers such as Yu. M. Lotman, A. V. Shubnikov and B. A. Koptsik, M. S. Kagan, C. Levi-Strauss and others. Of particular importance are the works of P. G. Bogatyrev, T. S. Semyonova, L. M. Butkevich, N. I. Kaplan and T. B. Mitlyanskaya, which examine the folk arts and crafts, artistic and visual means, including ornaments, color and their symbolic roles in traditional culture? The concepts formulated in the works of Kazakh researchers T. K. Basenov, U. Dzhanibekov, A. Kh. Margulan, M. S. Mukanov were also applied.

The study of the stated problem was based on the relevant principles:

- historicism, which made it possible to trace the evolution of Kazakh carpet weaving in the 19th and early 21st centuries and the dynamics of its development with the historical and cultural background of the era;
- objectivity, focused on the existence of relationships in the historical process, spatial and temporal correlations, functional dependencies;
- integrity, according to which, the study was conducted under the unity of material and spiritual constituents;

- scientific reliability, which provides provability and logical validity of the information provided;
- comparability of historical and cultural phenomena, and
- Consistency.

The above-mentioned integral methods were implemented using classical and modern general scientific study methods:

- Problem-chronological, through which the subject of research was analyzed in the dynamics of its development;
- Historical-comparative, which allowed to identify the features of Kazakh carpet weaving by comparing the artistic traditions of carpet weaving of other peoples;
- Historical-systematic, which provides an opportunity to integrate the subject of analysis into the overall context of the development and formation of Kazakh carpet weaving in the 19th – early 21st centuries;
- Artistic and technical, which helped to identify the classification and functions of carpets of the Kazakhs on the basis of artifacts of the 19th – early 21st century;

- Semantic and semiotic, which allowed to identify the genesis and evolution of carpet ornaments, the symbolic essence of national ornaments and colors, the underlying reasons for their occurrence and consolidation in the carpet composition;
- Methods of field ethnography that represent recording of the oral messages, making video recordings, photographing, audio recordings with persons related to the problem under consideration;
- A cartographic method by which the proliferation of carpets is investigated.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of semantic and artistic features of the carpet makes it possible to establish parallels in Kazakh carpet weaving with that of peoples of Central Asia. As K. A. Akishev writes: “The search for the common and close only led to the opinion about monoculturalism, about the existence of the Scythian Oekumene on a huge territory stretching from the Euxine Pontus to the Ser Scythians (from the Black Sea to, presumably, the territory of the current southern regions of Mongolia) (AKISHEV, & KUSHAEV, 1963). The author’s statement is important for identifying the cultural relationships of the peoples of Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the field of carpet weaving by studying the worldview, spiritual culture and ideology of the peoples of the period under consideration.

The Pazyryk carpet, which is stored in the Hermitage, is not only a historical landmark, a reference point for the subsequent history of carpet-making of many peoples, but also is the oldest carpet in the world (4th-3rd centuries BC). It is woven with Turkish knots, threads spun from sheep wool. The density of the carpet is 3600 knot weaves per square decimeter and is shaped in almost a square (2.00 x 1.83 m). The colors are harmoniously balanced with the main red background of the carpet, with the inclusion of yellow, blue and white colors. There are 24 cross-shaped figures in the central area, and five borders show spotted deer and winged griffins, cross-shaped figures similar to those placed in the central area. Wide outer border depicts the image of the riders on horseback leading their war horses on a string.

Researchers' opinions on the origin of the carpet differ. S. I. Rudenko, relying on the stylistic features of the depicted characters, defines the carpet as Persian or Median. M. P. Gryaznov refers this carpet to Central Asia, since contacts with Iran and the Middle East passed through Central Asia. S. P. Tolstov, basing on the excavations of Toprak-Kala, put forward a version about the Massagetae origin of this carpet (GRYAZNOV, 1958). Armenian expert in the field of carpets, ethnographer Ashkhunj Poghosyan believes that the carpet might be attributed to late-Urartic or early-Armenian production (POGOSYAN, 2013). Disputes about the origin of the carpet – Central or Western Asian – are still ongoing. According to researchers it is believed that it was created during the reign of the Achaemenids and is made in the court style.

There is a small probability that the carpet was woven by the Pazyryk people themselves, but most likely it was made to order by professional weavers in the cities of that time (in Central or Western Asia). This carpet, certainly, is a luxury item that an ordinary member of the tribe could not afford, therefore, it possible to conclude that in the fifth Pazyryk mound, the leader of the tribe and his wife (or concubine) are buried. However, there are different and quite contradictory points of view regarding the dating of this artifact (RUDENKO, 1951). Therefore, the question of the origin and time of manufacture of this carpet is still to be solved.

Imagery and motifs on the Pazyryk carpet are also found on objects of utility art of earlier times. For example, they were found in the Saks' "Royal" Shilikta mound dated 8th-7th centuries BC in Eastern Kazakhstan. Here, deer are depicted with their legs bent and pulled up to the chest, and with their head with antlers tilted back. Also there were found pins in the form of a Golden eagle and bracelets rounded in the figure of snow leopard that serve to clothing decoration. The same decorations in the image of the head of a deer and a horse are found on items found within the Issyk burial mound (AKYSHEV, ASYLBKOV, & BAYPAKOV, 1994).

A quadrangular decoration with the image of a horseman was found in the mound "Tenlik". The same images have been known since the beginning of the second millennium BC in the Middle East and Asia Minor, as writes M. I. Artamonov. The author notes that in terms of style, Tenlik decorations match the ornaments of the Pazyryk carpet and other



monuments related to the art of the Greco-Bactrian period (ARTAMONOV, 1973).

In the Tagar culture of the “animalistic style” 6th-3rd centuries BC, the most widespread images were those of deer, sheep and mountain goat – animals, which in ancient times were the personification of the forces of nature and space (MARTYNOV, 1979). According to mythical representations of the Scythians, the deer with golden antlers symbolized the sun shining, it was a symbol of fertility and vitality, dignity, masculinity, rapidity, and a mediator between the world of gods and the world of people (REMPEL, 1987). The deer cult was very widespread throughout Eurasian mythology, and there was a universal myth about the deer stealing the sun from the Lord of the underworld. The deer was racing across the sky, carrying the sun on its antlers, but the forces of darkness managed to gain on and take the sun from deer away. Then the deer would come down again into the underworld, and everything would be repeated again.

Therefore, the Scythian horse, decorated with the mask of a deer, had to play a cosmic myth: go down to the underworld with the leader, the Governor of the sun on earth, and to return it again to the world of the living. After death, the leader must rise again just as the sun rises every day, and the sun deer – the “vehicle” of the sun – will help him with this (EROFEEVA, I. V. 2001). Remnants of totemism have preserved in many peoples to the present time. According to A. I. Martynov, among the carriers of Tagar culture, the deer was the leading all-Tatar deity associated with the sun (MARTYNOV, 1979). The deer was one of the

main totems of the ancient Turkic tribes. The image of this totemic ancestor of the Buga tribe is closely related to the ideas of the Altai-Sayan peoples about wild antlered animals, including deer, which were considered as their totems.

L. P. Potapov, who studied the origins of totemic views of the Altaians from the perspective of archeology and linguistics, noted that the deer was a totem among the Uriankhais and Soyats, as well as among the Altaian peoples (POTAPOV, 1954). To this day, there is a myth that the Kirghiz people descended from the “muyizdi ene” (i.e. from the antlered mother), descended of the deer, the daughter of the divine patron of deer, mountain sheep, goats, roe deer, and so forth. It is possible that this motif passed from the Kirghiz to the ancestors of the Kazakhs. Among the Kazakhs, red deer and deer are considered “kieli” (sacred). For example, the character of the ancient epic “Kozy Korpesh – Bayan Sulu” Sarybay dies after hunting a pregnant red deer. The hanging of argali horns in the Yurt was a sacred tradition (this was probably reflected in the Kazakh folk ornament of the ram’s horns “koshkarmuyiz”) (OSEROV, & ESTAEV, 1992).

Hence, it is possible to conclude that in the ancient religion, with animal worship, the images of animals were associated with the power of a patron spirit or ancestor. It is no accident that the Pazyryk carpet depicted a deer, whose name became an ethnonym for a number of tribes related to the Scythians. According to N. V. Polosmak, the image of a horse, similarly to that of a deer, in the Saks’ mythology was associated with the sun and fire, was a link connecting the worlds, and an assistant in

reaching the “heavenly” pastures by the dead (POLOSMAK, 1997). In the image of a horse-drawn chariot, or only parts of it – a wheel or a horse – all Indo-European peoples represent the sun. In the Rigveda, in the Avesta, in Greek poetry, the sun is called “fast-horse-drawn”, and its rays are compared with the horses’ waving manes (KUZMINA, 1977). The horse also played an important role in the cult of the God of dying and resurrecting nature. In Central Asia, he was revered under the name of Siyavush, which means “black stallion” (DYAKONOV, 1951). The images of a ram and a mountain goat, which are not depicted on the Pazyryk carpet, but are widely displayed in cave paintings and in archaeological finds of the Saks period (RUDENKO, 1968), demonstrate an undeniable connection with such mythological representations. The works of B. A. LITVINSKY (1972) are devoted to the goat cult of the Iranian-speaking peoples; they show the connection of the goat image with the mountains cult, cycle of “tree” and fertility, as well as with the Down world concept.

The peoples of Central Asia still have an idea of the sheep’s special role. Thus, among the Tajiks, “the sacred sheep illuminated by a bright glow” has descended to earth from the sky and acts as a link between people and deity, who helps to achieve not only favorable weather, harvest, health, posterity, but also everything that is the subject of human concerns. Among Tajiks and Turkmens, there is also a belief that a person’s soul goes afterward to heaven or hell. If a person ever slaughtered a ram for a God-pleasing purpose, in the next world this ram approaches the bridge leading to Paradise and transports the person on itself (ANDREEV, 1958)

Another interesting example is given by Litvinskiy (1968) that the ram in Central Asia was considered the “fortune” (“құт”) of the house and was carefully cared for. The cult of the ram and sheep is of particular importance among the Kazakhs too. According to the beliefs of Kazakhs, whose source of life also was cattle, the increase of flock of sheep or horses was attributed to one of the ewes, or mares, respectively, and it was believed that she is the “blessed”, chosen by the patron Saint (“құты қонған, киесі бар”), consequently, the herders tried to ensure the special care and concern to the ewe or mare. If she dies, then the well-being of the family hearth collapses, people worried that she took her “fortune” (“құт”) with her; in such cases, they marked it with phrase “the fortune’s gone with her” (“өзімен бірге құты кетті”) (ISABEKOVA, 2016).

The ram cult played a peculiarly important role among various Turkic peoples, in whose household ram occupied the first place. Generally, ram, and less often sheep, were the most popular sacrificial animals when performing the rites of an Islamic religious or calendar holiday. A remnant opinion and the belief in the sacred functions of the goat, which served, in particular, as a certain living amulet of a sheep flock, was preserved among the people. According to the beliefs of many Turkic-speaking peoples, not only sacrificial animals, but also their horns and skulls, had a sacred power. Similar beliefs existed among the peoples of Central Asia. It was believed that the skulls of animals have the power to protect from the “evil eye” and bewitchment, activate the positive magical origin, etc. It follows that the Iranian-speaking and Turkic-speaking peoples have preserved the experiences of beliefs associated

with Khvarenah, and this is despite more than a thousand-year dominance of Islam.

Horn-like motifs of “ram’s horn” and its derivatives in Kazakh and Central Asian carpets are the ancient cult symbols, that are the embodiment of good, a symbol of prosperity, wealth, and ram’s horn is a symbol of perseverance in achieving the goal. The image of the mythical Griffin on the carpet was known among many peoples (Assyrians, Egyptians, Hittites, Persians, Bactrians, and Parthians) and had its own specifics in each region. According to many researchers, Saks’ griffins protected gold from one-eyed arimaspi (BONGARD-LEVIN, & GRANTOVSKIY, 1983).

N. V. POLOSMAK (1997) notes that the image of a Griffin in Pazyryk art was interpreted as an image of a mythologized eagle. As the researcher believes: “Most likely, the bird-prototype of a fantastic creature – the Altai eagle-headed Griffin – was not vultures, although they were found in the high-mountainous regions of Altai, but the largest of the eagles – the Golden eagle; its traits are possible to notice in the images of the Altai griffins.” It is noteworthy that the most royal bird – the eagle – usually acts as a bird of the world tree (Arbor mundi) for many peoples. In various mythopoeic traditions of peoples, birds that live in two spheres (in the heavens and on earth) often act as mediators between gods and people.

In mass religions, the symbolic evaluation of the bird is always positive: in Hinduism, it represents the power of the mind that controls the quick-winged thoughts; in Shintoism, it expresses the creative principle of

creation; in Buddhism, the messenger of the gods serves as a sign of good omen. In the Christian religion, the soul of the righteous man who is blissful in the heavenly pastures is endowed with wings, but in Islam the situation is somewhat more complicated: songbirds with rainbow coat, chirping merrily in the branches of the Tree of Life, are associated with the souls of faithful Muslims, and the souls of infidels and unrelieved sinners are with scavenger birds sitting below (Encyclopedia of mythology, n.d.).

Interesting information is given by E. Kuzmina: in Indo-Iranian mythology, a waterfowl bird was the personification and companion of the mother goddess associated with water, which was often depicted as a “World Tree” with birds sitting on it, and a pair of ducks was a symbol of marital love in the folklore of all Indo-European peoples. It also indicates that in the Indo-Iranian tradition, horses or birds or only birds were usually placed next to a woman or her equivalent – a tree, but at the same time, “in all Indo-European traditions, the likeness of a horse and a bird is common” (KUZMINA, 1977b).

The carpet with the image of a Swan in the bride’s dowry among the peoples of Central Asia, including the Kazakhs, occupies a special place and means eternal love and safety of the hearth. Probably, similar representations were also among the ancient nomads, who installed white felt swans on the tent (KUZMINA, 1977a). Thus, birds in many peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan were considered not only amulets, but also personified the fertilizing, cleansing power, symbolized various good wishes, and were carriers of light principles. Common ornamental motifs

associated with images of birds include a bird's wing, a crane, a crow's paw, goose's paws, and a mouse's footmark. Patterns with the image of an elegant royal bird Swan ("Akku") are often found in modern carpet products of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

The cross-shaped figures depicted on the Pazyryk carpet resemble the "cross" pattern, which is widely used in Kazakh carpet weaving, including in Central Asian carpets. According to archaeological and written sources, it is known that the "cross" ornament stands for a very ancient sacred symbol that carries the idea of the center, the development of space and the point of top-bottom and right-left intersection. The cross vertical corresponds to the World Axis, World Tree – the main mythological concepts of primitive consciousness. E. A. Smagulov, who studied the historical development of cross-shaped ornament, concluded that: "In the middle ages, cross-shaped figures made of palmettes with horn-like curls were especially widespread in the ornament of the ancient Turks.

This motif was originally understood as a symbolic representation of the earth in a state of serenity and harmony; the earth that gives life to plant life and every living thing. In the middle ages, with the changing economic structure of the tribes of the steppe belt towards specialized nomadic pastoralism, the original meaning of cross figures was lost, there was a process of stylization, which resulted in the spiral plant branches being gradually transformed into a ram's horns" (SMAGULOV, 1994). Thus, the cross-shaped ornament on the ancient carpet is considered the most archaic, it comprises the earliest understanding of the foundations of

the universe and is widely presented in Kazakh and Central Asian, in particular in Turkmen, Kirghiz and Uzbek carpets.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the analysis of historical and ethnographic material, it should be noted that carpets created in the area of Kazakhstan could not but be influenced by the achievements of neighboring peoples, in particular the peoples of Central Asia. Semantics-stylistic, artistic and technical characteristics of carpets of Central Asia and Kazakhstan are of particular interest when examining the cultural relations of the peoples of Kazakhstan and Central Asia. They demonstrated similar motifs of ornaments: ram's horns, a spine, bird's wings, the Tree of life, a trefoil, an amulet, a zigzag, a square and a rhombus. Almost all ornaments of animalistic, geometric, and plant origin reflect stylized images of a goat and a ram, which are the animals that occupy a special place in the life of both nomadic and settled agricultural peoples. The similarities were revealed in their religious and philosophical worldview as well. Ornaments acted as a talisman (brought good luck, happiness and wealth to the house), an amulet (against the evil eye, diseases and misfortunes), and carpets served as a sign of local and class affiliation.

Moreover, the common tradition of carpet weaving was influenced by a yurt, which walls and floors were insulated and decorated with carpets, as well as were beds and trunks, and the frame details of the dwelling were fastened with carpet ribbons. Many carpet products have



changed little over the course of several centuries. They have reached the present time only with minor variations of changes in some details of the pattern. Their compositional and decorative features also depended on the ethnicity of the masters and were closely related to cultural economic traditions. These connections were partly reflected in the solution of artistic and stylistic tasks and affected the formation of the typology of carpets.

Thus, the origin of many artistic motifs of Central Asian and Kazakh carpets originates in common source-ancient Iranian cults and beliefs. This can be explained by cultural interaction, common ethnic roots, and aesthetic canons and traditions developed over the centuries in this region. However, the totality of techniques, the use of certain raw materials and natural dyes, features of ornamental compositions, ornament elements and their balance, the color choice of both separate carpet and its various parts – all of this suggests that the art of carpet weaving of the peoples of Kazakhstan is a unique type of art craft that grew on the local soil, having a longstanding tradition.

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