Carpets and “Kufesque”

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Over the course of more than 500 years, a certain family of border designs has stubbornly appeared and reappeared on carpets from a widespread area that includes Iran, Turkey, and the Caucasus. The name used by the carpet trade for this type of border is “Kufic”; carpet scholars generally use more cautious versions of the term—“pseudo-Kufic,” or “kufesque.” All such designations imply some relationship to Arabic writing, since the primary use of the word “Kufic” is to designate, albeit somewhat loosely, a family of angular Arabic scripts developed in the early Islamic period and initially used for copying texts, most significantly that of the Qur’an.

Judging by remaining specimens and fragments, fifteenth-century carpets with the border designs under consideration are thought to have been woven in several areas, including Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. But their predominant centers of production lay to the east, within the Persian-speaking world extending from Tabriz to Samarqand. Iranian carpets of this period are rare; in fact, there is only one on which the borders remain intact. It was recently discovered in Tibet and is now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Made of silk, it features an octagonal central medallion with interlace motifs and the representation of a chessboard on a field of endless repeats. For the purposes of this study, however, its most interesting feature is its border of alternating interlace devices and upright motifs.

Given this scant bit of carpet evidence, how can I claim that the epicentre for “kufesque” carpet border design is the Islamic world? In fact, the visual evidence for the designs of early Iranian carpets is provided almost exclusively by paintings deriving from manuscripts produced in the royal courts of Samarqand, Herat, Shiraz, and Tabriz. One example shows courtiers playing backgammon on a carpet with a version of the border design in question, which displays a repeated scheme of upright elements flanking a central motif (figure 1).

The borders of any carpet represented in fifteenth-century Iranian painting are overwhelmingly likely to display a similar scheme, for which the term “kufesque” is most specific and apt. This word was coined by the numismatist expert George Miles in 1964 and combines the words “Kufic” and “arabesque.” Miles used “kufesque” to denote ornament that utilized Kufic script in non-readable combinations.

In a 1976 article written as a memorial to Miles, Richard Ettinghausen took up a subset of the “kufesque” forms that Miles had studied. Ettinghausen termed this subset of “kufesque” the “tall-short-tall syndrome,” and he found it represented in medieval European art and on different media from the Islamic world, including fifteenth-century carpet borders. Seeking to explain how this “tall-short-tall syndrome” came into being, spread, and persisted, Ettinghausen concluded that it derived from an embellished form of the word Allah.

He noticed that, on certain ninth-century Egyptian tombstones, Allah exhibited an ornamental peculiarity: an arch in the middle, between the two lines. Here, he argued, lay the potential source for the tall-short-tall syndrome of “kufesque” (figure 2). Of approximately 400 published ninth-century tombstones that I have surveyed, however, a mere ten percent exhibit the key feature of the embellished Allah, although all of them invoke God, often repeatedly. And as Ettinghausen himself admitted, “...arches do occur in other words; the arched feature was not understood as an exclusively distinguishing mark of the word Allah...but rather as a means of lengthening words to fill the given space.”

One might furthermore ask how a peculiarity that originated on tombstones would have spread, since grave markers were certainly not meant to be portable objects. Ettinghausen reasonably suggested that textiles were the medium by which the elaborated Allah traveled and from which the tall-short-tall element was then extracted. Tiraz textiles, for example, generally invoke Allah, and some show the elaborated form of the word; most, however, do not. Furthermore, the tall-short-tall effect can be achieved by actual letters of the Arabic alphabet, without added ornamentation. The inscription on a tenth-century Persian textile in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for example, repeats the phrase, “Dominion belongs to God”—al-mulk illah. Despite its damaged condition, one can still discern a repeated tall-short-tall element, within the word al-mulk; the short motif between two jims is a mim. In contrast, illah lacks any extra elaboration (figures 3 and 4).

The formula al-mulk illah is very common. In her study of monumental inscriptions in tenth- and eleventh-century Iran and Transoxiana, Sheila Blair notes that this phrase is “so frequently repeated as to be [a] cliché or even [a] space filler.” Although it is not nearly as well reproduced in drawings and photographs as is the word Allah itself, I surmise that al-mulk illah, specifically the al-mulk component, is an alternative candidate for the source of the tall-short-tall syndrome. I shall certainly return to the word al-mulk as a later supplier of significance to “kufesque.”

Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that the ornamented Allah recurs widely: Ettinghausen cites examples that span the Islamic world from Spain to Dehli. Although he notes an example from as late as 1357, most date from a relatively early period—that is, from the ninth and tenth centuries.

In contrast, the tall-short-tall syndrome of “kufesque” anywhere but on carpets flourishes from the eleventh century into the fourteenth. It was during this middle period that various mystical developments led to a literature on the esoteric
rendered would certainly have been forbidden and regarded as a crime, had the origin and true meaning of the motif been known. But as is shown in many fifteenth-century Iranian paintings, such borders were indeed walked upon. Ettinghausen surmises that, on carpets, the relationship of "kufesque" to the word Allah, and even its relationship to Arabic letters, must therefore have been forgotten. What accounted for its being forgotten? According to his seemingly circular reasoning, it was where "kufesque" was put—the very fact that it appeared on carpets, which "did not create the right mental association" with the written word.

Impatient with this argument, Herwig Bartels proposed in 1986 that "kufesque" carpet borders were not based on Arabic letters after all, but rather on earlier Sasanian vegetal forms. Notwithstanding Bartels's argument, I contend that when the borders of carpets depicted in Persian paintings are examined, their asymmetrical features—ligature along a bottom line, and intertwined and leaf-topped vertical shafts—resemble contemporaneous Kufic script in various media that one can hardly credit Bartels's argument.

But there remains the question of whether these script-derived carpet borders have any semantic resonance, any residual signification. If metalwork and other portable arts of the middle period could take on mystical meaning—however vaguely understood that meaning may now be—I would argue that on carpets, at least as early as the fourteenth-century period of Ilkhanid (Mongol) rule, the tall-short-tall syndrome of "kufesque" acquired, or possibly reclaimed, a semantic association that, at least throughout the fifteenth century, helped perpetuate it as the carpet border design par excellence.

One of the supreme feats of Persian manuscript painting is the Great Mongol Shahnama, probably commissioned in Tabriz in the 1330s. This manuscript of Ferdowsi's great epic was cut apart and mangled in the early twentieth century by the dealer Georges Demotte, and its text and many of its paintings were lost. Nevertheless, a remaining fifty-seven, although dispersed, provide an unrivaled window into Ilkhanid material and political culture, meticulously depicting a courtly setting in which

"kufesque" border design one would expect to see on the king's carpet on the back of his throne and in a bold frieze across the top of the painting (figure 5). Nearly all enthronement scenes where rugs are thus obscured have this sort of "substitute" decoration on throne backs or walls. In the rest of such scenes, however, these forms of decoration are not just script-related but are legible inscriptions—border-like friezes that repeat the word al-mulk, without the following Allah of the standard phrase. The tall-short-tall element occurs just as surely within the embrace of al-mulk as it did in the examples of the embellished Allah cited earlier; the short element, embraced by two tasnim, is the min (figure 7).

No carpet depicted in the Great Mongol Shahnama has a border...
with an _al-mulk_ inscription; only by association does the tall-short-tall syndrome on carpets take on the connotation of “dominion.” But in a manuscript compiled for the Jatayrid successors of the Ilkhansids, some forty years after the Great Mongol _Shāhnāma_ was created, the connection between “kuskesuq” carpet borders and the “al-mulk syndrome” is made visually explicit. A lavishly illustrated copy of the _Kāfīla wa Dimna_, produced in Tabriz around 1370–75, was dismembered in the early sixteenth century, and many of its paintings were pasted into an album for an official of Safavid Shah Tahmasb.

One of these paintings illustrates the tale of how a rich man foils a night-time robbery of his house (figure 8). The couple’s mattress rests on a carpet of which only the border is visible. Eitingerhausen, in fact, illustrated this border in his article about “kuskesuq,” observing, “interestingly enough, it uses our syndrome in two versions, which are placed in two different directions and are combined with a third motif of garbled _Kuskesuq_.” But had he imagined looking at the border of the carpet from the vantage point of the wife in the painting, he might have noticed that it is in no way garbled. Like the frizzles and thron ebacks in the Great Mongol _Shāhnāma_, it consists of _al-mulk_, repeated and perfectly legible (figure 9).

That “kuskesuq” rug borders should connote domain—at least in the Iranian world of this period—is logical, given the contexts in which the carpets bearing them were most often depicted by Persian manuscript painters. Constantly present in princely scenes from the fourteenth century throughout the fifteen, such borders seem to have endured even into the first half of the sixteenth century, when carpet field designs had become decidedly floral.

In a frontispiece depicting Timur’s grandson Ulugh Beg is a canopy inscribed with this Timurid governor’s name and titles and the formula _kullida mukhku_—“may his dominion endure forever” (figure 10). The border designs on the carpets beneath him and his consorts, I would assert, and on Iranian carpets from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth in general, may be understood to encode such a message.

On the earliest of the so-called small pattern Holbein carpets, the borders display an elaborate version of “kuskesuq,” with ligature along a bottom line and intertwined and leaf-topped vertical shafts—a version so closely comparable to the “kuskesuq” borders of the Timurid silk carpet now in Doha that the two designs could not have arisen independently (figure 11). But even before the end of the fifteenth century, depictions of so-called small-pattern Holbein carpets show a striking mutation in their borders, which become simpler, more symmetrical, and further from any suggestion of an epigraphic origin (figure 12). This latter version of the border is henceforth common on small-pattern Holbein carpets for the duration of their appearance in European paintings, through the mid-sixteenth century.

So-called Lotto carpets undergo a similar transition in their border designs. The earliest of these carpets have borders with asymmetrical, tall-short-tall elements that twine around a baseline and terminate in leaf-like finials, akin to script, but within less than fifty years, this form of the border has been replaced by a symmetrical version like that on later small-pattern Holbein carpets. Subsequently, Lotto carpet borders never return to their earliest “kuskesuq” form.

The rapid metamorphosis of “kuskesuq” borders on so-called Holbein and Lotto carpets immediately suggests a loss of semantic or symbolic meaning in the Anatolian context of their production. Most probably the implication of “dominion” that I have proposed as key to understanding the dominance and longevity of Iranian carpet-border designs lived on only briefly in Anatolia, if it travelled there at all. Why this loss of epigraphic and semantic association? As their frequent representation in European painting suggests, “kuskesuq”-bordered Anatolian carpets seem not to have been made primarily for domestic consumption: they do not appear in Ottoman court painting, nor have they been found in great numbers in Turkish mosques. In contrast, many are preserved in the Protestant churches of Transylvania, in modern Romania—long a trading partner with the Ottoman Empire. In the alien context for which these carpets were made, a coded proclamation of “dominion” would have had no meaning, and there was no reason to preserve an elaborate script-like aspect.
Cultural Bridges and the Exchange of Knowledge in Sciences, Letters and Arts

Ali Ibrahim Al-Namlah
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This lecture focuses on the translation movement, active in Islamic civilization during its flourishing epochs. It highlights the incentives for translation, and points out the positive as well as the negative results of this movement.

As far as the translation movement is concerned, Arabic language experienced four phases of development. First was the transmission of Greek, Indian, Persian and Egyptian learning translated into Arabic. The second was the transmission of Islamic Arabic culture and its translation directly into Latin and European languages. The third phase was the assimilation of Islamic and Jewish cultures and translation into Hebrew. The fourth stage was the transmission of Islamic and Jewish cultures through translation from Arabic into Latin and other European languages.

Syrians [working primarily in Syriac] were held in high regard in this field in the period from the 2nd to the 7th centuries A.H. Most translators were Nestorian Syrians, as they excelled in translating Greek, and were well-informed on Greek and Persian philosophy and science. Their influence went beyond linking Arabic to Greek culture; thanks to their new position, they contributed also in linking Arabic and Persian cultures. Therefore, Syriac acted as a bridge transferring to Muslims, through translation, the learning of Persia and Greece, as texts were first translated into Syriac and later into Arabic.

Syriac translations were criticised for a number of reasons including their concentration on a single aspect of the work of a philosopher or a scientist. They were also criticised for their inclusion of some ideas, based on astrology, that were prevalent in Alexandria at the time. The criticism was that this promoted science mixed with mythology.

Different motivations encouraged Muslims to build bridges with other cultures through translation. Some were purely intellectual; others were competitive, seeking parity with other civilizations. Some motives were commercial, encouraged by the willingness of the ruling elite - caliphs, governors or individuals - to pay for manuscripts explaining the knowledge and philosophy of the Greeks and the Indians.

This last point had a some what negative impact on academic accuracy, as some inadequate works of unknown authors were attributed to renowned philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and imaginary mythological figures like Hermes. Others were subject to plagiarism.

Islamic Arab heritage experienced a similar process of plagiarism practiced by translators when translating text related to Islamic Arabic culture into Latin and other European languages.

Translation into Arabic from Greek, Indian, Persian and ancient Egyptian cultures was motivated by the recommendation of Qur’an to practice rational thinking. As a result of the contact with foreign cultures, a new debate on the nature of God developed. Muslim philosophers and religious scholars referred to Greek philosophy in order to defend their doctrine against other parties. By following the policies promoted by Greek philosophers, they also had to study the sciences, of which they knew very little.

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About the journal

Hadeeth-ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth-ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 15 will get underway in October 2009 and, as with previous years, will present scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the icon of the prestigious Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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From left to right:
Bat Scraper, Frit body, moulded
Two with turquoise glaze
Eastern Iranian world; 12th - 13th century
Largest: h. 4.7 cm, l. 8.4 cm, w. 4.5 cm

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