An Inscriptional Carpet from Anatolia

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An Anatolian inscriptive carpet from the collection of R. G. Hubel, probably a copy of a seventeenth-century carpet, which is kept in the Islamic collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich, is of an unusual type (figs. 116, 117). It is rectangular in shape and has an attractive palette of colours: blue-green, brick red, light ivory, ochre and dark blue; the field and borders are covered with inscriptions in a variety of scripts. The carpet has a large cruciform medallion with a symmetrical design of long, serrated leaves in light ivory colour, called saz after the name of the reed pen with which fine drawings were executed in Ottoman art, furthermore geometric patterns in ochre as well as peonies and other floral forms. This medallion is placed slightly off-centre on a light blue-green background divided into small irregular compartments. Each compartment contains an inscription in light beige naskh. There is the arm of another cruciform medallion under the central one along its vertical axis. Cartouches with inscriptions in elongated naskh are found at the end of the horizontal and vertical arms of the central medallion. The inscriptions on the right side of the carpet are a mirror image of the ones on the left (figs. 117–118). The border, which is in brick red, contains inscriptions in elongated naskh punctuated by four star-shaped elements with inscriptions in geometric Kufic script framed by inner and outer guard borders containing a chain design of inverted "S" shapes.

The highly religious inscriptions on this carpet distinguish it from others produced in the same period. The inscriptions on the field in compartments are in the form of invocations and cite the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names of Allah (asmâ‘ al-husnā), as well as related auspicious numbers. The ninety-nine names refer to the comprehensive unity inherent in all-embracing Greatest Name. The inscriptions seen at the end of each arm of the cruciform medallions bear the short invocations Allah alab ber ("God is the Greatest") and Allah alab kubrûn ("God is the Greatest..."), that is to say prayer formulas recited at the time of religious festivals or during the pilgrimage to Mecca, while the longer continuous inscription on the border contains sura 2:255, the "Throne verse" (ayat al-kursi) from the Qur'an, which reads:
FIG. 157 (opposite)
INSCRIPTIONAL CARPET WITH THE 99 MOST BEAUTIFUL NAMES OF GOD
Turkog, 13th century

The inscriptions in naskh in the many small irregular panels on the right side are a reflection of those on the left side. The vertical letters in the same calligraphic style in the broad border are specially emphasized. In contrast, the four striking octagonal star motifs on the long side of the border are filled with geometric Kufic.

FIG. 158 A (below)
DETAIL OF THE UPPER LEFT CORNER OF THE CARPET
Allah, there is no God but He the living, the eternal! He neither slumbers nor sleeps. Whatever is in the heaven and earth belongs to Him. Who can intercede with Him without His permission? He knows what is in front of them and behind them (now and in the future) and they can partake of His knowledge only in so far as He wishes. His throne embraces the heaven and the earth and maintaining both are no burden for Him and He is the exalted, the sublime.

The geometric Kufic inscriptions in the star-shaped medallions within the border contain the invocation which is recited before the call to prayer.

The original function of this rug is somewhat perplexing. This carpet is very similar to one found in the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna, Austria, which has been referred to as a prayer rug (sağda). Like the Vienna example, the Munich carpet does not contain a niche and thus does not follow the traditional prayer rug format; the dimensions are clearly larger than a typical sağda and since the entire border and field are covered with inscriptions - including the area at the bottom on which the worshipper placed his feet - it is unlikely that a true Muslim believer would place his feet on Qur'anic verses during prayer. However, the extensive use of Qur'anic inscriptions as ornament suggests that it was likely used in a religious context. Perhaps, these carpets were used as talismanic objects and intended to protect their owner(s) from harm. The inclusion of auspicious numbers reinforces this argument.

Visually, the Vienna and Munich carpets are quite similar. However, while the Munich example has a more pleasing colour palette and a more balanced composition, the weaving in the Vienna carpet is finer and the designs more sophisticated. The field of the Vienna carpet is mustard yellow with inscriptions in dark blue; the two cross-shaped medallions contain saz-like forms in beige and floral scrolls in dark blue and red on a dark brown ground. Both carpets are covered with irregular compartments containing inscriptions in the same style of naskh and have cross-shaped medallions slightly off-centre with quarter medallions under the central one. The Munich example is in better condition, less worn and is woven more evenly and mechanically. However, one of the chief differences between the two carpets is in the borders. In the Vienna example, the border contains saz-like scrolls which are intertwined with the large naskh inscriptions, whereas the Munich example does not include any vegetal pattern in the borders.

A careful reading of the inscriptions on both carpets reveals that the Vienna carpet served as the model for the Munich one, since the inscriptions in the Vienna example are highly legible and comprehensible while the ones on the Munich carpet are not always legible. They appear to have been woven by weavers not particularly conversant with the Arabic language and script. The inscriptions seem as though they were drawn rather than written, suggesting that the Munich example is a later copy, most probably from the nineteenth century, woven in a provincial workshop or by a foreign weaver.

Angela Wilke of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst attributes the Vienna carpet to the western Anatolian Uşak region based on materials, techniques and structure. This carpet was said to have been found in a mosque in the Syrian town of Aleppo. This carpet is distantly related to a large group of inscriptive prayer rugs in the traditional prayer rug format (with niches) in the Topkapi Sarayı Museum collection in Istanbul, several of which belong to the so-called Sallng group, now firmly attributed to fourteenth-century Central Iran. The Fletcher inscriptive prayer rug at the Metropolitan Museum in New York has also been associated with this group.1 Looking at the Vienna and Munich examples it is possible that they were inspired by the Sallng group of inscriptive prayer rugs, although the format is quite different. The Sallng carpets are, for the most part, traditional prayer rugs with niches whereas the Vienna and Munich examples both contain cruciform medallions. The symmetrical knot is used in both the Vienna and the Munich examples, and is not used in the so-called Sallng group, which is typically woven using an asymmetrical knot.

It is not unusual for a carpet to be a later copy of an earlier original. Great carpets were often copied not only during the same period and in the same region, but centuries later and in remote regions from their original models. The Vienna carpet is a prime example; it is the original model for the Munich carpet and was subsequently copied several times. The existence of these copies poses intriguing questions. Further research and analysis of this group of carpets would shed light on their production and allow for a more certain attribution of the Munich example.