

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PERSIAN CARPENTRY AND ITS FORMATION**Qovulov Jurabek Mumin ugli**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20443904>**Abstract:**

This article explores the historical formation, development stages, and cultural significance of Persian carpets and the art of carpet weaving. The research analyzes the traditions of carpet making from the ancient Pazyryk carpet through the Achaemenids, Sassanids, Seljuks, Timurids, Safavids, Qajars, and modern Iran. Additionally, it discusses the patterns of Persian carpets, weaving techniques, the use of natural dyes, and their role in Eastern and world cultures. The article also provides scientific conclusions about the "carpet design revolution" during the Safavid era and the position of Persian carpets in the international market today. The findings indicate that Persian carpet weaving is not only a form of practical art but also an essential part of Iran's cultural heritage.

Keywords:

Persian carpets, Iranian carpet weaving, Pazyryk carpet, Safavid period, Sassanid Empire, Eastern carpets, carpet design, natural dyes, hand weaving art, Islamic art, Timurids, Qajar dynasty, nomadic carpets, cultural heritage, decorative-applied art.

The true beginnings of Iranian carpet weaving remain unclear. Part of this uncertainty stems from the fact that hand-woven carpets deteriorate over time due to use, exposure to insects and natural elements, and the natural wear of materials. Additionally, the history of "Eastern carpets" may have developed from other types of floor coverings that emerged earlier, such as felt (kigiz) or the technique known as "flat weaving."

Creating flat-woven carpets involves tightly interweaving the warp and weft threads, resulting in a smooth surface without a pile. Over time, this technique transitioned to looped weaving. In looped weaving, the weft threads are passed over a rod, creating loops on the side facing the weaver. The rod can later be removed, leaving the loops intact; alternatively, the loops may be cut off, resulting in a carpet resembling a pile carpet.

In contrast, hand-knotted pile carpets are prepared by tying individual knots onto the warp threads, which are cut after each knot is tied.

The Pazyryk carpet is the oldest known pile-woven carpet, discovered in 1949 within the tomb of a Scythian nobleman in the Pazyryk Valley in Siberia. Radiocarbon dating indicates it was created in the 5th century BC. The carpet

measures 183 × 200 centimeters (72 × 79 inches) and contains 36 symmetrical knots per square centimeter (232 knots per square inch). Its intricate craftsmanship demonstrates a long-established tradition of weaving skills, making it one of the oldest carpets in the world. The central section is a deep red, featuring two animals moving in opposite directions alongside guard lines. The inner decoration showcases a sequence of deer. The outer decoration depicts men riding horses and men leading horses, each with distinct saddlecloth patterns. Within the central area, rows of identical square frames measuring 4×6 appear against a red background, with star-like decorations made by superimposing X and cross shapes within each square. This arrangement recalls later, more typical structures found in Eastern carpets: recurring motifs placed in the central field, encircled by a complex main border, often reinforced by additional secondary borders.

Sergei Rudenko, who discovered the Pazyryk carpet, initially attributed it to the Achaemenids of that era. However, scholars still debate whether it was produced on site or made by Achaemenid artisans elsewhere and then brought to the location. In any case, its careful weaving and complex design indicate that carpet weaving was highly developed during that time. Ancient Greek sources also mention carpets: references found in Homer's works around 850 BC, Pliny the Elder's claim that carpets were invented in Alexandria, and mentions in the "Odyssey." However, these early sources do not clarify whether the carpets were flat-woven or pile-woven. Importantly, flat-woven kilim carpets dating back to at least the 4th or 5th centuries AD have been found in the Turfan region (Eastern Turkistan, China). Symmetrical knot fragments have been identified, with 5–7 interwoven weft threads following each row of knots, as well as various colored patterns. Additional fragments have also been found in the Lop Nur region and are currently preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Other pieces woven using symmetrical and asymmetrical knot types have been discovered in locations such as Dura-Europos in the Syrian region and At-Tar caves in Iraq, dating to the early centuries AD. These findings indicate that the skills of dye preparation and carpet weaving were already established in Western Asia by the 1st century BC.

Around the 400s BC, the first recorded appearance of Iranian carpets is mentioned in the work "Anabasis" by the Greek author Xenophon. In this work, Xenophon refers to Persian carpets in the context of wealth and diplomatic significance: "There were rumors that Timasion had valuable Persian drinking cups and luxurious carpets when he met with Dardanian." (Xen. Anab. VII.3.18)

"As a gesture of goodwill, Timasion presented him with a silver cup and a carpet valued at ten mina." (Xen. Anab. VII.3.27)

Xenophon's account emphasizes the high value of Iranian carpets, presenting them as suitable items for diplomatic gifts. The precise weaving method of these early carpets remains unknown—whether they were pile-woven or flat-woven or made using other techniques such as embroidery or textile weaving. Nevertheless, the earliest references to Iranian carpets in world literature immediately associate them with luxury, status, and diplomacy.

The Sassanid Empire emerged after the Parthian Empire and, alongside the Byzantine Empire, became one of the major powers for over 400 years. Its territory largely encompassed the borders established by the Achaemenids, with its capital located in Ctesiphon. During this period, the Sassanid dynasty adopted Zoroastrianism as the state religion. The exact origins of pile carpet weaving and production in Iran during this time are also unclear. However, knowledge of carpet weaving and floor covering design was present throughout the region, extending from Byzantium to Anatolia and then to Iran. Anatolia, located between Byzantium and Iran, had been under Roman rule since 133 AD. This gave it both geographical and political significance, serving as a "bridge" between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Iranian Empire. As a result, artistic styles and decorative motifs could be exchanged; this is evident in Roman mosaics and architecture, including those in Antioch. For instance, the Turkish carpet pattern found in Jan van Eyck's "Paele Madonna" can be traced back to the late Roman period, and there are similarities with the early Islamic floor mosaics from the Umayyad period found in the palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar.

During the Sassanid era, flat weaving and embroidery became established crafts. Fine silk textiles from the Sassanid period have been preserved in churches across Europe, where they were used to cover relics (sacred monuments). They have also been found in Tibetan monasteries. The description of the "Khosrow spring" carpet, captured by Arab conquerors as loot in 637 AD, suggests that this carpet may not have been pile-woven, as its complex design indicates.

Fragments of pile carpets found in northeastern Afghanistan (originating from the Samangan province) have been radiocarbon dated to the late 2nd century AD or the early Sassanid period. Some fragments depict animals arranged in a sequence, resembling the Pazyryk carpet style. These early carpets use wool for the warp, weft, and pile. They are made from coarser spun yarn and utilize the asymmetrical knot type characteristic of both Iranian and Far Eastern carpets. After every few rows, additional elements—unspun wool, fabric scraps, and

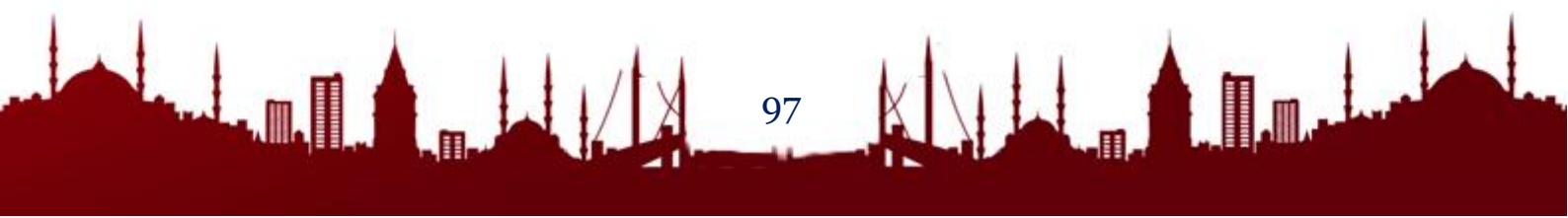
leather pieces—are woven in. Although these fragments are consistently dated to the early Sassanid period, they do not match the famous palace carpets depicted by Arab conquerors. The presence of coarse knots on the back (reverse side) covered with a shag-like texture indicates a need for stronger insulation; this may suggest a nomadic craft style. The conquest of Persian territories by Muslims in 651 AD marked the end of the Sassanid Empire and gradually contributed to the decline of Zoroastrianism in Iran during the Islamic Caliphate period. Arab geographers and historians visiting Persia recorded the first information confirming that carpets were used as floor coverings. The author of al-'Alam notes that carpets were woven in Persia. A century later, al-Muqaddasi mentions carpets in the Qainat region. Yaqut al-Hamawi also writes that carpets were woven in Azerbaijan in the 13th century. These sources indicate that during the Caliphate period, carpet weaving resembled more of a rural or tribal (clan) industry in Persia.

Islamic art and Islamic carpets—The rule of the Caliphate in Persia ended in 1258 when the Mongols captured the city of Baghdad. Subsequently, the Abbasid Caliphate was restored in Cairo in 1261, although with diminished political authority. It maintained its influence in religious matters until the Ottomans conquered Egypt in 1517.

During the Mamluk dynasty in Cairo, large carpets referred to as "Mamluk carpets" were produced.

As the Seljuks expanded into Anatolia and northwestern Persia, a distinctive "Turko-Iranian" tradition began to emerge. Fragments of carpets found in places such as the Alaeddin Mosque in Konya (a city in Turkey) and the Eşrefoglu Mosque in Beyşehir provide insight into what Seljuk Turkish carpets may have looked like. These fragments are considered to belong to the Anatolian Seljuk period (1243–1302).

Additionally, fragments found today in Fostat, on the outskirts of Cairo, indicate that these carpets were part of trade networks. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether Seljuk carpets truly influenced Persian weaving patterns and techniques. In the unique Iranian carpets and weavings from that period, it is challenging to distinctly identify such influences: they may either be absent altogether or difficult to differentiate. Western scholars suggest that the Seljuks may have introduced new design traditions into the Iranian region—if not the direct craft of pile weaving itself. In such cases, the ideas may have blended with existing Persian traditions.



Between 1219 and 1221, Persia experienced unrest due to Mongol invasions. After 1260, the title "Ilkhan" was adopted by the descendants of Hulagu Khan and other Borjigin princes who governed Persia. In the late 13th century, Ghazan Khan chose to adorn his palace floor with carpets brought from Persia. Following the death of Ilkhan Abu Said Bahatur in 1335, Mongol power began to wane, and Persia fell into political disorder. In 1381, Timur invaded Persia, establishing the Timurid Empire; he governed much of it until it gradually faded into the "White Sheep" Turkmen confederation led by Uzun Hasan in 1468. Uzun Hasan and his successors governed Persia until the power of the Safavids began to rise. A line in the Shahnameh states, "Kay Kavus crowns his grandson Kay Khusrow," depicting a carpet from the Ilkhanid period.

In 1463, during the Ottoman-Venetian War (1463–1479), the Venetian Senate began diplomatic relations with the court of Uzun Hasan. In 1473, Gioasafat Barbaro, sent to Tabriz, noted the presence of impressive carpets in the palace, including some regional carpets woven from silk. Between 1403 and 1405, Rui González de Klavixo served as the Castilian ambassador at Timur's court; he observed that carpets covered the floors. Timurid miniature paintings reflect geometric designs, octagonal shapes, stars, recurring knot patterns, and border decorations inspired by Kufic script. Unfortunately, no carpets woven before 1500 have survived.

In 1499, a new dynasty associated with Uzun Hasan emerged, founded by Shah Ismail I. Shah Ismail I is remembered as the first national ruler of Persia after the Arab invasion and established Shia Islam as the state religion. Subsequent rulers, such as Tahmasp I and Shah Abbas I, embraced Persian Safavid art.

The royal workshops likely began in Tabriz during Shah Tahmasp's reign, but they were firmly established during the period of the Ottoman-Safavid War (1603–18) after Shah Abbas moved the capital from Tabriz to Isfahan in Central Persia. This change elevated carpet weaving from home-based craftsmanship to a highly regarded fine art level.

The Safavid period is seen as a peak era in Persian art, including carpet weaving. Carpets preserved from the later Safavid years display intricate and detailed designs. Even the oldest surviving carpets exhibit such polish and skill, indicating that the art had been developing for some time before the creation of the magnificent Safavid palace carpets. Due to the absence of early Safavid carpets, researchers often rely on illuminations and miniature paintings from Timurid books. These works depict carpets adorned with recurring geometric patterns, often presented in a chessboard layout, featuring vibrant colors and

borders enriched with motifs similar to Islamic calligraphy. Notably, these designs closely resemble Anatolian carpets from the same period, including the "Holbein carpets," indicating a common design source. Timurid designs may have influenced both Persian and Anatolian carpets during the early Safavid and Ottoman periods. By the late 15th century, carpet designs depicted in miniatures underwent a dramatic transformation. Large central medallions became standard and began to appear along with complex curvilinear floral patterns. These carpet designs often featured broad spirals, floral motifs, and animal representations, frequently reflecting balance and rhythm due to their alignment along the carpet's axes.

At the same time, the previous "Kufic" border style was replaced by detailed tendrils and arabesques. These patterns required more advanced weaving techniques as they were more complex than the previous linear designs. Furthermore, close collaboration between artists and weavers, along with a practical method for conveying the intended design—typically referred to as the carpet "cartoon"—was necessary. How Safavid workshops achieved this complexity through specific production methods remains unknown.

Nonetheless, their results were later described by Kurt Erdmann as the "carpet design revolution."

Attempts to classify and date Safavid carpets often begin with famous examples such as the Ardebil carpet, which features woven inscriptions and dates.

The inscription on the Ardebil carpet reads: "My only refuge in this world is your threshold. My only shelter that protects my head is this door. The work of the slave Maqsum from Kasa in 946." The year 946 in the Islamic calendar corresponds to 1539–1540 AD, indicating that the Ardebil carpet was created during Shah Tahmasp's reign. Later, Shah Tahmasp gifted the carpet to the shrine of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili, who is revered as the spiritual founder of the Safavid dynasty.

Another inscription exists on the "Hunting Carpet," which is currently preserved in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan, Italy. It notes that the carpet was completed in 949 AH / 1542–1543 AD.

The inscription on the Hunting Carpet in Milan reads: "Completed with the loyalty of Giyath al-Din Jam. This famous work enchants us with its beauty. In 949."

By the 17th century, more sources existed to confirm specific dates and origins. As diplomatic relations strengthened, Safavid carpets continued to be exchanged as diplomatic gifts to cities and states in Europe. In 1603, Shah Abbas

presented a carpet woven with gold and silver threads to the Doge of Venice, Marino Grimani. European nobles also began to order carpets directly from workshops in Kashan and Isfahan, requesting specific designs, including those related to heraldry in Europe.

These purchases were meticulously recorded. For example, in 1601, the Armenian ambassador Sefer Muratovicz was sent to Kashan by Polish King Sigismund III Vasa to order eight carpets, which featured the coats of arms of the Polish royal court. The Kashan workshop produced the carpets, and on September 12, 1602, Muratovicz delivered them to the Polish king along with an invoice. Although Western art historians initially referred to them as "Polish" or "Polonaise" carpets, they were later more accurately termed "Shah Abbas" carpets based on Kurt Erdmann's suggestion.

After the Russian revolution, Persia became a battleground. In 1917, Great Britain planned to use Persia as a base for an unsuccessful attack on Russia. As a result, the Soviet Union annexed northern Persia and established the Persian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920. Meanwhile, the Iranian government largely lost control outside the capital. In 1925, with British backing, Reza Shah Ahmad Shah Qajar (the last Qajar ruler) was overthrown, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty. During Reza Shah's rule, Iran adopted a constitutional monarchy, which lasted until the Iranian revolution in 1979. Reza Shah initiated social, economic, and political reforms aimed at modernizing the Iranian state. To stabilize and legitimize their power, Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sought to revive the ancient traditions of Persian carpet weaving. Carpet weaving—often based on traditional designs—became an important and meaningful part of this cultural revival. In 1935, Reza Shah established the Iranian Carpet Company, bringing carpet weaving under government control. Fine carpets woven with gold and silver threads were prepared for export and used as diplomatic gifts. During the Pahlavi era, the Iranian government aimed to centralize and modernize the country, increasing control over its citizens. Reza Shah's land reform program in 1962 ("White Revolution") disrupted the traditional political systems and lifestyles of nomadic tribes. By the end of the 19th century, the use of commercial synthetic dyes and standardized designs had already led to a decline in Persian nomadic carpet weaving. The policies of the last imperial dynasty nearly eradicated nomadic weaving altogether.

After the Iranian revolution, information about carpet weaving in Iran was initially limited. However, interest in Persian Gabbeh carpets grew in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. These carpets—initially woven by nomadic tribes

for personal use—captivated Western buyers through their rustic weaving methods and simple, abstract designs. In 1992, the first "Grand Persian Conference and Exhibition" took place in Tehran. This event marked the first display of modern Persian carpets and carpet designs in such a large setting. Renowned Persian master weavers like Razam Arabzadeh showcased regional carpet styles woven based on traditional techniques but with unconventional modern designs. Subsequent grand conferences highlighted two main trends in contemporary Iranian carpet weaving.

On one hand, Iranian producers are developing modern and innovative artistic designs while introducing ancient design traditions into the 21st century. On the other hand, there has been a resurgence of interest in natural dyes—especially among commercial enterprises that order tribal design regional carpets and rugs from rural weavers. This approach helps maintain a stable income for rural weavers. Typically, companies provide materials and specify designs while allowing weavers some creative freedom.

At the same time, Persian carpets in today's market face restrictions due to the US embargo. This has intensified competition from other carpet-producing countries with lower origins and labor costs, as well as more economical production methods. Machine-woven carpets and tufted regional carpets, along with more mass-produced hand carpets employing quicker and cheaper looped weaving techniques, may produce "Eastern-style" carpets, but they often lack significant artistic value.

Traditional handmade carpets—crafted from sheep wool dyed in natural colors—are increasingly in demand. These carpets are generally sold at higher prices due to the extensive labor they require; this labor volume has seen little change over the years. Their artistic designs also enhance their value. For this reason, Persian carpets continue to thrive as symbols of luxury, beauty, and art in the modern world, maintaining their esteemed place.

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