

# THE CASE FOR ARMENIAN PRAYER RUGS

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## INTRODUCTION

The dominant consensus in both the scholarly and popular discourse regarding the aesthetics of woven prayer rugs generally assumes such rugs to be of Islamic origin. This dominant consensus, what I will here refer to as the ‘Islamic thesis’, has continued to enjoy its privileged position, partially due to an absence of works investigating a specifically Armenian or Christian tradition of rug weaving, and this lacuna helped reinforce the popular perception that the evolution and advancement of rug weaving, its techniques, symbolism, and economy, was primarily an Islamic phenomenon. Despite these assumptions, historical references confirm that Armenian prayer rugs were woven by Armenians well before the emergence of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In what follows, I lay out some preliminary observations, based on both the comparative study of specific rug designs and the limited secondary literature on Armenian prayer rug design, which can open new avenues for thinking through the latter’s influence in the history of woven rugs. Given that the mainstream - consensus on prayer rug design and its history shows little acceptance of the idea of a specifically Armenian or Christian influence, the argument I am presenting here could be understood to represent t a somewhat revisionist interpretation of the subject. Nevertheless, I believe there is a case to be made that Armenians have played a significant role in the history of prayer rug weaving, and this short piece presents a preliminary study in this regard.

## THE PRAYER RUG AND THE PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY OF THE PRAYER NICHE (OR *MIHRAB*)

To this end, one of the most frequently made arguments against the existence of Armenian prayer rugs is the claim that prayer rugs were only used by Muslims, due to practitioners’ strictly observed rituals regarding prayer. Ritualistic bowing in the Islamic faith, the practice of *ruku* and *sujud*, are thought to justify the design of prayer rugs, as the practitioner’s gestures are to conform to the size of the rug. Also the key identifying marker of this celebrated rug style—the arch-shaped niche, or alter, called a *mihrab* in Arabic, is where the worshiper places himself in prayer. The design of the *mihrab* depicted on the rug purports to be a gateway to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

It is a practice that has become a tradition for many to reserve a clean and isolated space for worship. Mats like prayer rugs were used in early religions. Shamans and medicine men performed their rituals on a mat, a symbol of

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<sup>1</sup> Volkmar Gantzorn, *The Christian Oriental Carpet*, Benedict Taschen 1991, pp. 481-504

superiority or distinction, which revealed their importance and at the same time afforded an appearance of humbleness. Deriving from the Islamic tradition of praying on clean surfaces, it is said that the Prophet Mohammed began the practice by praying on a *khumra*, a simple mat made from palm leaves.<sup>2</sup>

The Prophet said to his wife Umm Salma, “Bring me the *Khumra* from the mosque.” The word *Khumra* means a small piece of *chatai* (a kind of a mat) made from palm leaf, on which only the head can be rested when prostrating.<sup>3</sup>



Left: Coptic Prayer niche with image of a Saint, 400-600 AD; Right: Entrance arch to Tekor Basilica with the oldest Armenian inscription, 480 AD

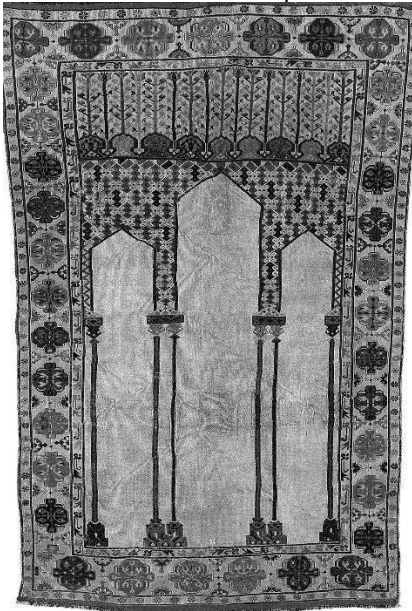
While Islamic prayer and rug design certainly make use of these rug patterns, their use is not limited to Islam, and may even predate the latter. For instance, the Armenian tradition of masonry, which was used in service of the construction of religious structures that predate Islam, also relied on designs that featured the rounded arches found in prayer niches or *mihlabs*.

By the medieval period, Armenians had become master masons and architects in service of their Muslim rulers, simultaneously building some of the greatest churches of medieval Christendom, in addition to mosques built for the conquering Seljuks, often in the same style. Perhaps the best examples of Armenian architects of the latter are Mimar Sinan (1488/1490-1588) and the

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.shia.org/aboutprayers.htm> .

<sup>3</sup> Sunni Alim Maulana Vahidul Zamankhan, *Anwar-ul-Lughat*, Ch. 7, p. 118.

Balyan family (1725-1894), who both practiced their craft during various periods of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup>



Left: The oldest surviving arch-form *mihrab* carpet, 16<sup>th</sup> century, clearly showing the cross-section of a cruciform, dome-shaped church, symbolizing the gate to paradise;  
right: Evangelistery from Ardeche, dated 1301, Matenadaran

Likewise, it is equally possible that Coptic influences also mark the Islamic prayer niche or *mihrab*. Evidence of similar arches is found in the oratories of Coptic Christian monks, and the concept of a prayer niche was additionally used by Eastern Christians and Jews, well before the advent of Islam, to indicate a special room in the house, and continues to be preserved in some forms of Judaism and Christianity where *mihrabs* are rooms used for private worship. Indeed, the word *mihrab* in Arabic originally had a non-religious meaning and simply denoted a special room in a house, suggesting the word could have been a reference to the architectural features present in pre-Islamic, Christian, Roman or Byzantine architecture, a throne room in a palace, for example.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Donabédian, “Armenia – Georgia – Islam: A Need to Break Taboos in the Study of Medieval Architecture,” in *L’arte armena: Storia critica e nuove prospettive (Studies in Armenian and Eastern Christian Art)*, Aldo Ferrari, Stefano Riccioni, Marco Ruffilli, Beatrice Spampinato (eds.), 16, Edizioni, 2020, pp. 76-82.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mihrab>, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

While prayer rugs began as ritual objects, they eventually took on additional meaning and were often treated as works of art under the Ottomans, the major traders within the Empire being the Ottoman-Armenians. The rug-making industry thrived as rugs were traded from the Ottoman Empire to Morocco, Europe, Central Asia, and India, establishing what became known as the “rug belt.”<sup>6</sup>

#### HOW THE SIMPLE *KHUMRA* MIGHT HAVE EVOLVED INTO A KNOTTED PRAYER RUG

Prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, before the Arabs conquered the Caucasus, there is no record of the production of knotted rugs in the Arab world. The Arabs did not even have a word in their vocabulary for knotted rugs.

According to Thomas Wier, Linguist, Caucasologist and Assistant Professor at the Free University of Tbilisi, the Arab term for rug, *Khali* or *gali*, which has been used in the Muslim East for centuries, is derived from the name of the Armenian city renowned for its production of rugs. *Khali*, is an abbreviation for Kali-kala, (Kali-town), the Arabic name of the Armenian city of Karin, known today as Erzurum in eastern Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

Carpet-making activities were so prevalent in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Karin - (Erzurum), then capital of Armenia, that the Arabs named their word for - “carpet” after the city. Thus, it is my belief that the Arabs did not use knotted prayer rugs in their present form until they saw their use in the Caucasus.

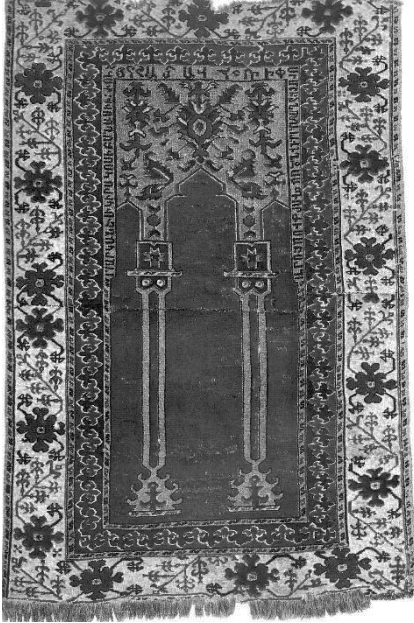
In the Caucasus, Arabs likely witnessed Armenian worshippers sitting and praying on rugs in churches. Before the modern age, Armenian churches did not have pews. Additionally, the floors of the churches were made of large stone blocks and became especially cold during bitter Caucasian winters. To keep parishioners warm and comfortable, the floors of the churches were covered



Armenian Church in Kayseri, 19<sup>th</sup> century. Note the rugs covering church floor and traditional prayer rug in front of altar

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihrab> .

<sup>7</sup> Der Manuelian, *Weavers, Merchants and Kings, The Inscribed Rugs of Armenia*, Kimbell Art Musum, Fort Worth, 1984, p. 19.



The 17<sup>th</sup> century “Hripsime carpet”  
used as a curtain covering the holy  
of holies  
and the Gohar rug dated 1701, on  
the right



with rugs, usually donated by parishioners, sometimes with inscriptions that honoured important dates or deceased family members.

#### CARPETS AND RUGS, AN INTEGRAL PART OF ARMENIAN CULTURE

For centuries, the art and craft of carpet weaving has been an integral part of Armenian culture and history. Carpets were not simply used as household objects but have always had a great ritual meaning. Throughout the ages, carpets have been national symbols and have had unique historical and cultural value. Carpets served as entrance veils to sacred spaces, decoration for church altars and vestries, thrones for Kings, gifts to dignitaries; they were paid as tribute to conquerors, donated to Churches as offerings, sold or bartered for other valuable goods and even used as shrouds to bury the dead. They were represented in Armenian art under the feet of saints and kings. As in Islam, the message of the arch-form/*mihrab* carpet merged with the design of Khachkars (Armenian cross-stones) in that the arch represented the gateway to eternity or paradise.

## ARMENIAN PRAYER RUGS IN CHURCHES

The Armenians have a long history of using rugs in churches and for the private use of an individual in prayer.

### ***Armenian prayer rugs as veils to sacred spaces***

Certain branches of Christianity, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, continue to have a tradition of a holy of holies they regard as a most sacred site -- the innermost sanctuary and the earthly representation of God's throne in heaven. The ciborium, a permanent canopy over the altar in Armenian churches, once surrounded by rugs at points in the liturgy and later replaced by a curtain, symbolizes the holy of holies.<sup>8</sup>

The 17th century "Hripsime carpet" is of great importance because, aside from the significance of its being dated 1651, it is the only one to document its use as a curtain covering the holy of holies in its inscription.

Door curtain to the temple of the holy of holies of Saint Hripsime in the year of our Lord, 1051 (AD 1602) or (1) 651. I Gorzi, the artist, made this."<sup>9</sup>

### ***Armenian prayer rugs as a personal offering to one's church***

The Armenian use of inscriptions in their own alphabet is a long-standing tradition since the development of their alphabet. Inscribed donations were not limited to gifts from the noble class. Some were composed by the craftsmen themselves. The patrons and craftsmen who inscribed their donations regarded them as a personal prayer-offering to God in gratitude for the salvation of their souls. Every pious offering was of value whether a silver vessel, *khachkar* or rug.

An example is the famous "Gohar carpet" from 1701, whose humble - inscription is the prayer of a woman named Gohar, who wove the rug as an offering to her church: "I, Gohar, full of sins, have woven this with my own hands. May he who reads this pray for my soul." The "Gohar Carpet" is unusual in that it records the maker's name.<sup>10</sup>

Rugs used by individuals for private worship were also venerated objects. Armenians used prayer rugs in their homes, hung them on the wall and used them as an altar in either a special corner or a separate room. Although this tradition generally does not persist today, hanging a rug on a wall is still common in Armenian homes.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy\\_of\\_Holies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_of_Holies) .

<sup>9</sup> Gantzhorn, pp.484-85.

<sup>10</sup> Der Manuelian, pp. 41, 44.



The Virgin and Child seated on a carpet over the doorway of Noravank

### **Armenian prayer rugs represented in art**

Armenian illuminated manuscripts of royalty and religious scenes also contain illustrations of Armenian rugs. A rug is shown under the feet of Hovhannes the Evangelist drawn by Toros Roslin in 1256. This miniature is from Roslin's earliest manuscript 'The Gospel of Zeytun'.

Another use of the prayer rug is demonstrated in Armenian architectural decorations. An example is the tympanum over the doorway at Noravank carved in 1321. The Virgin and Child, seated on a rug with tassels, are shown against a background of intricately carved floral motifs.<sup>11</sup>

### **Armenian-woven prayer rugs for the Islamic and the Western world**

Inspired by mosque decoration and intended for use in public worship, the prayer rug became a common decorative household object in the Muslim world, the property of everyone who could afford one. The Kaaba, the cuboid-shaped structure at the center of Islam's most important mosque in Mecca, was often depicted in *mihirabs* in order to distinguish them from Christian carpets.

In 982, an anonymous Persian geographer reported that prayer rugs were woven at that time in Armenia, and he added that these rugs came from a flourishing city in Armenian Azerbaijan named Vardan, which is north of Ardabil in Persian Azerbaijan. An Arab chronicler named Beha ed-Din (1137-1193) testifies in his book on Saladin's life that an Armenian source provided the rug on which Saladin prayed. Historian Haroutioun Gayayan makes a case for an Armenian origin of the prayer rug type since such rugs were used in churches. He cites Al-Idrisi, the twelfth-century Arab geographer as praising the Armenian prayer rug, which Al-Idrisi called both 'Armani' and 'Armenian' "*tapastak* rugs", saying these small rugs were especially valuable to the Islamic world.<sup>12</sup>

By the Middle Ages, Armenia was a major exporter of carpets to places as far away as China. In many Medieval Chinese artworks, for example, carpets

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<sup>11</sup> Der Manuelian, pp. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Der Manuelian, p. 24.

with some even clearly depicting Christian crosses. In time they developed the western commerce in rugs.<sup>13</sup>

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century Armenian rugs and merchants were thoroughly established in Northern and Southern Europe. It is highly probable Armenian merchants and craftsmen were responsible for the trade between Romania and the Ottoman Empire that placed more than 400 prayer rugs in Transylvanian churches from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After all, they had both the weaving capabilities and the credibility of being devout Christians in order to sell these rugs to churches. But what is most remarkable from historical accounts is that the carpets made were not simply the small-scale production of home looms, but were the result of organized, commercial enterprises.<sup>14</sup>

The merchants in Armenia, in particular, used this dispersed network of expatriate Armenians to their advantage since they acted as the middlemen for trade between the Mediterranean, Asia, and Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Another impetus for trade occurred in 1604, when Shah Abbas forcibly relocated approximately 10,000 Armenian families from Nakhichevan and Yerevan to Isfahan and other regions of Iran. Historians claim the reason was to create a human buffer zone between the Persians and the Ottomans. However, another important reason was to make use of Armenian business skills to conduct his international trade in silk and rugs. There was lack of efficiency and some barriers for Persian businessmen in global markets. The Armenians were ethnic businessmen who had acquired the necessary experience in this field.<sup>16</sup>

This new opportunity allowed Armenian traders to further expand their trade links by developing communities and trading posts all the way to India and even Tibet. Armenians had established a trading post in Lhasa in 1682. It was recently concluded that a group of 17<sup>th</sup> century rugs found in Tibet with both Caucasian and Persian design elements, the so-called “Tibetan Golden Triangle” rugs, had been supplied by the Armenian merchants of Tabriz.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> H.M. Raphaelian, “*Rugs of Armenia*”, Anatol Sivas Production, 1960, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Stefano Ionescu <http://www.transylvanianrugs.com/?p=2425> .

<sup>15</sup> James Mark Keshishian, “*Inscribed Armenian Rugs of Yesteryear*”, James M. Keshishian 1994, pp. 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Zainullah Karimi, “The Role and Reason Why Armenians Were Selected as Iranian Businessmen during the Shah Abbas’s Era”, *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 7(11):2019 [www.ijstrm.in], p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> H. E Richardson, “*Armenians in India and Tibet*,” *Journal of the Tibet Society*, 1:1981, pp. 63-7.

Below are a few 19th and early 20th century examples of Armenian prayer rugs.

**Armenian Shirvan prayer rug dated 1897**

This prayer rug is fascinating for many reasons. Firstly, it was woven in Shirvan, an area that was predominantly Muslim. Although early Russian census data show that Armenians inhabited parts of Shirvan and Kuba districts, they were minority populations, and there is little reason to believe that they ever were the most important weaving group in these areas. Nevertheless, there are a number of Armenian prayer rugs from these areas.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, there is an Islamic date of 1897. Use of an Islamic date does not preclude Armenian provenance. Even after the Russians extended Christian dominion over most of the Caucasus, Islamic dates were standard in areas controlled by either Turks or Persians. They were ordinarily used at that time by Christians as well.<sup>19</sup>

And lastly, included in this rug's design is a small intricate motif woven discretely into a side margin of the field that represents a woman with a Christian cross over her head. The weaver seemingly portrayed herself wearing a dress, an apron, and a scarf. By connecting a tiny cross to her head, this weaver was asserting that the cross represented her as a Christian and the rug as a prayer rug.



Detail of the Armenian Shirvan rug: a human figure

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<sup>18</sup> Murray L. Eiland Jr., "Passages, Celebrating Rites of Passage in Inscribed Armenian Rugs", Armenian Rugs Society 2002, pp. 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, pp. 5-6.



Armenian Kazak (1912) and Karabagh (1851) prayer rugs

**Armenian Kazak Prayer Rug dated 1912**

The inscription reads “1912 Grigorian”. The Hand (Khamsa), particularly the open right hand, is a sign of protection that also represents blessings, power and strength and is seen as potent in deflecting the evil eye by all peoples of the Middle East, Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. The double *mihrab* is also host to birds, stars, a water ewer and combs for cleanliness and an arrow towards heaven.<sup>20</sup>

**Armenian Karabagh Prayer rug dated 1851**

The Armenian Karabagh prayer rug has a church form in the arch of the *mihrab*. This rug is covered throughout the field by scarab-like forms and - horizontal S-shaped serpents that ward off evil. In addition, there is a colorful “Dice 5” internal border treatment representing the five wounds of Christ.

**CONCLUSION**

To conclude, this paper has sought, in a preliminary fashion, to establish that an Armenian prayer rug tradition existed prior to the emergence of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. To this end, Armenian prayer rugs were an established tradition in historical Armenia before the emergence of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Armenians have a long tradition of using prayer rugs with Christian symbols both in church and for private use. Arab and Persian sources

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<sup>20</sup> Keshishian, p. 38.

acknowledge the supremacy of Christian Armenian prayer rugs, even though these rugs are often thought of as the quintessential Islamic art form. The many ancient inscribed personal rugs made as prayer-offering to God for salvation illustrate this. The earliest known surviving prayer rugs from the 15th century clearly show the influence of Armenian architectural design and Christian symbolism. It is not uncommon to find Christian and Jewish symbols in these and Islamic designs, as Islam is based on Jewish and Christian ideas. Hands in supplication, votive lamps and a hundred symbols of the mixed religions of Western Asia were used as decorations in prayer rugs. Western Christianity is generally unfamiliar with the colourful vestments, decorations, and usages of the Eastern Church.<sup>21</sup> That is why Western rug scholars believe these Armenian prayer rugs to be Islamic. The Christians of the East were the first Christians, and in their long history of living in the midst of other Oriental religions and traditions have influenced and been influenced.

In this way, I have no doubt Armenians wove prayer rugs for themselves and produced their share for others. The Armenian merchants had the means of production, sales, and distribution. That they also had some influence on rug design cannot be overlooked. Together with the Venetians and Genoese of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Armenians were important traders between Europe and the Near East.

Finally, this analysis suggests some further questions for study. First, although difficult to decisively study or capture, is the question about how to understand the exchange of ideas between practitioners of the Armenian and Christian woven rug tradition and those of the various Islamic traditions of rug weaving. Second, another important question regards tracing the origins of how the Islamic thesis became dominant in the west in the discourse about woven rugs.

This short overview cannot possibly address these questions in their entirety, but I hope I have presented enough material in a sufficiently provocative manner so that others may also take up these questions.

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<sup>21</sup> H.M. Raphaelian, *The Hidden Language of Symbols in Oriental Rugs*, Anatol Sivas Production, 1953, p. 59.

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(ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ)

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Ուսումնասիրությունը լուսարձակի տակ կ'առնէ հայկական աղօթագորգերու պարագան, հարցականի տակ դնելով ընդհանրապէս աղօթագորգերու իսլամական-թրքական ծագման վարկածը:

Գիտական շրջանառութեան դրուած տեսակէտերու մեծամասնութիւնը աղօթագորգը կը նկատէ թրքական-իսլամական: Հեղինակը կը հակադրուի այս տեսակէտին, նախ հարցականի տակ դնելով վերոյիշեալ ուսումնասիրութիւններուն անկողմնակալութիւնը, մանաւանդ որ անոնք ամբողջութեամբ կ'անտեսեն եւ շուքի մէջ կը պահեն հայկական աղօթագորգին գոյութեան փաստն ու անոր առանձնայատկութիւնները: Հուսկ, հեղինակը պատմական փաստարկումներով, օտար պատմիչներու եւ այլ վաւերական տուեալներու լոյսին տակ, բերելով նաեւ հայկական արձանագրութեամբ հայկական հնագոյն աղօթագորգեր, հայկական մանրանկարներու վկայակոչումով՝ ցոյց տալով նաեւ հայկական գորգերու յատկագծումի աղբիւրները՝ կը հերքէ աղօթագորգերու լոկ թրքական-իսլամական ըլլալու փաստը ու ամրօրէն կը տեղադրէ հայկական աղօթագորգերը աղօթագորգերու համաշխարհային քարտէսին վրայ: