Few Turkmen rugs are such obvious products of their environments as Beshir prayer rugs in that motifs associated with the surrounding rug weaving cultures can be clearly seen in their designs, and yet exactly where and by whom they were made still remains a matter of debate. In this context a well-known rug author and collector reviews the research into this enigmatic group and offers a method of dividing the known examples by design.

**Beshir prayer rugs**

RALPH KAFFEL
Somewhat earlier, in 1975, H. McCoy Jones and Jeff Boucher had suggested another derivation for the name. They wrote that these rugs were marketed in Bukhara, which in the Sart language, according to Heinrich Jacoby, is known as Bas’chira – hence Beshir.1

Aside from the eponyms, there is little certainty to be found in almost all writings on the subject. Even one of the most comprehen- sive articles, written by Robert Pinner in 1981, begins “Our lack of knowledge about ‘Beshir’ carpets has recently been highlighted by the publication of two opposed theories about their origin.” He was referring to the essays by Jon Thompson and Hans König published the previous year in the Washington ICOC exhibition catalogue, Turkmen.4 Under the heading ‘Bukhara’, Thompson discussed a number of rugs commonly described as Beshir, without once using the name. His view is that many of these rugs were woven by non-Turkmen people who, “in terms of culture and lifestyle, were closer to the Uzbeks.”5

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A. Felkersam, Alte Teppiche Mittelasien, translation of the 1914 Russian text, Hamburg 1979, p.88. Felkersam described the Dudin prayer rug as “Uzbek Beshir”.

Hans König, ‘Ersari Rugs, Names and Attributions’, HALI 4/2, 1981, p.139. König wrote that the prayer rugs “likely owe their origin in this area to non-Turkmen influences” and “the fact that Bukhara was a famous religious centre played a major part in this development.”

Robert Pinner, Beshir Carpets of the Bukhara Emirate, HALI 3/4, 1981, pp.293-301. Pinner pointed out in his notes that he had not seen the name ‘Olam’ in any of the tribal lists available to him, and that Moshkova had speculated that they were a non-Turkic tribe.


The Taxonomy of Most Turkmen Rugs is meticulously precise: the weavings of tribes such as the Tekke, Yomut, Chodor, Ersari and Arabachi, as well as the ‘S’ (Salor and Saryk) and ‘Eagle-göl’ groups are, in most cases, clearly and unambiguously attributed. Not so with Beshirs: authors, scholars and collectors are not even able to agree whether the Beshir attribution refers to a tribe or a place of origin.

As late as 1998, Murray Eiland proposed that Beshir weavings were named either for the town of Beshir or for the acronym formed by Besh and Shahr – ‘Five Villages’ on the Amu Darya (Oxus) River (most likely Beshir, Burdalyk, Khojambass, Chakyr and either Kerki or Kholag; all but the last two on the east bank of the river). Eiland, who has travelled to the region, wrote that although “some writers have attributed Beshir rugs to the city of Bokhara itself, Bokhara dealers are particularly clear in denying this attribution.”1

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to far-off Cairo and Istanbul than to their neighbours the Turkmen.7

In the same volume, König wrote that there was no doubt as to the Turkmen origin of Erati rugs, which include those he refers to as “Beshir type”.8 Citing V.G. Mashkov’s 1970 Russian publication, Capet of the Peoples of Central Asia, he offers the possibility that a large contingent of Salors and Olams were incorporated into the Erari tribal structure.9 Meshkov had written that the Salors, “Sinouk the best weavers… switched to the tradition of local weavers. These rich and unique traditions probably belonged to the Olams and other ancient groups who populated this part of the Amu Darya”.10

An important Russian author of an earlier generation, A. Felczek, writing in 1914, stated that in the village of Kerki on the left bank of the Amu Darya, and Beshir on the right bank, there were 4,000 houses, half of which were engaged in rug weaving. According to K. Leunroth, who had collected rugs from this area for Felczek in 1902, all weaving was done by women, with tools and dyeing the province of men. Felczek wrote that Kerki and Beshir rugs were very similar: both encompassed a group he called “Buchar”, white rugs with more complicated design of flowers, with rich colours, were called Beshir. Attempting to distinguish between “Turkmen Beshir” and “Uzbek Beshir”, he wrote that white-ground and floral prayer rugs, typical of the Turkmen, were made by the Uzbek Beshir.11 König, in a 1986 HALI article, confirms Felczek’s views, writing that Beshir rugs could not have been produced by workshops in the area, as such workshops did not exist, but were cottage industry products commissioned by agents to be sold in Bukhara and its environs, either to wealthy locals or for export to other parts of the Islamic world.12

In his oft-cited chapter on “Turkmen Ethnography” (1990), William Wood makes no mention of a Beshir tribe, even though the glossary in the same book, landing-bowls, defines the Beshir as a “major Turkmnan tribe”.13 In 1985, David Black, or his co-authors, identified the Beshir as “one of the most important of the Erari sub-tribes” but offered no supporting evidence.14 Writing in 1975, Sanioss Azadi, citing Karpov’s Turkmen Genealogy of 1938, identified the Beshir as a sub-group of the Urga-Tope, one of the three sub-groups of the Urga along with the Qista-Bek and Gunim.15 Elena Tsareva is, however, quite firm in her contention (1984) that “while in [ing] literature such names as Pende, Beshir, Bukhara and the like are still common… in the cases of Pende and Beshir the names of the carpets and rug derive from their places of origin”.16 I could compare published views as to the ethnogenesis of Beshir carpets at some length, but no clear uncontradictory consensus would emerge. I favour an amalgam of the ideas of Pinner, König and Moskova – that Beshir rugs were woven in the villages of the Qara-Bekaul and Gunash. In his most apparent in certain early white-ground prayer rugs. Chinese influence manifests itself in the palette, and, to a lesser extent, structure. Thacher, describing one of his prayer rugs, mentions “Chinese yellow” and “wool which is more like Chinese wool than like Turkmen”. Werner’s logos too makes specific mention of the distinctive yellow, calling it “Beshir yellow”, made from saffron, off-flower dye (yerciwell); india and occasionally pomegranate peel.17

NOTES

1. Blank, speaks of the “Beshir Erari”, who were settled and lived in domed mud-brick houses.
2. Sawaij Al-Aak, Turkmen Carpets and the Ethnographic Significance of Their Ornament, Fatghed 1975.
3. Elena Tsareva, Rugs and Carpets from Central Asia: The Russian Collections, Heemskerck 1984, p.6. Tsareva adds that while in some cases (Pende and Beshir) the names derive from their places of origin, in others (Buchar) the name refers to the place where the rug was made to market. She further states that pile weaving was not practiced in Bukhara and vicinity. James and Boucher, op.cit., add that “regardless of the origin of the name, it appears that the rugs were not woven by a Beshir sub-tribe of the Erari, as none have been identified as living here by any authority known to us.”
5. Jim Thompson, in Mackie & Thompson, op.cit., p.197.
6. Jean Leunroth, Central Asian Carpets, Fatghed 1976. In his notes to pl.14 Leunroth states: “Beshr prayer rugs in particular are highly distinctive and have been associated by some authors such as Thacher with certain types of Turkmen rather than Turkoman prayer rugs.”
10. Thacher, op.cit., p.47.
12. Edward Thacher, East Turkmen (Yomud) influence can be clearly seen in the central medallion of a large (2.5 x 5.0m) Beshir carpet advertised in HALI 30, 1980, pp.70-71, with the statement: “This important ethnological hagi- lage, although long suspected, has not been clearly demonstrated until now.” Not everyone, however, agrees on the subject of pomegranate, Frederick Splatt, Hali 197 and Martin Volkmann, Old Eastern Carpets, Munich 1978, dis- cussing pl 56, write “the red and pink brown leaves hanging from trees are, in our opinion, blossoms. The attempt to derive the figures from East Turkmen-style pomegranate does not seem convincing.”
13. Halka Kiang, in Mackie & Thompson, op.cit., p.139.
Pomegranates are an important motif in Beshir prayer rugs, pointing to strong East Turkistan (Qoqordu) influence. They appear as a major field element in one specific prayer rug design type, and can also be found on some of the prayer rugs. This frequent use of the pomegranate motif may be attributed to both the Middle Amu Darya region's proximity to Samarkand, and to the influence of East Turkistan types, particularly those of Khotan. The Beshir was among the first of the collector/authors of the 20th century to associate the “hanging pomegranates” design with Chinese Turkistan.26 and he in turn was echoed by Christopher Dunham Reed.27

König wrote that “the Ersari are the only Turkmen tribe to have produced small prayer rugs.”28 This is not completely true. While the great majority of Turkmen prayer rugs are attributed to Beshir and/or the Ersari, small prayer rugs of the Yomut, Chodor, Kürt Anak and Türkic tribes are also known.29 König also suggested that “earlier prayer rugs seem to have been smaller than later ones, but further comparisons are needed to establish this assumption as a fact.”1 One of the largest and earliest Beshir prayer rug known appears here at 7. In 1969, Ulrich Schwärzle wrote that “Ersari prayer rugs are commercially known as Beshir, belonging to the most sought after collections for dealers, for example.”15

Early authors were, by and large, much too generous in their datings for, example, Major Hartley Clark, writing in 1922, considered his prayer rug to be “old years old”, which translates to the 1760s.30 However, there is no evidence to suggest that any Beshir prayer rugs (with one possible exception) predates the 19th century.31

Primer and Eiland, in their 1999 survey of the Weidnersberg Collection, wrote that the prayer rugs were “the first Beshir type rugs to command high prices at auction.”32 That is indeed true: for instance a Beshir prayer rug prominently featured on the cover of a 1978 Sotheby’s New York catalogue, estimated at $4,000-5,000 sold for $32,000. It was later shown by Eberhart Herrmann in his 1985 Munich exhibition “Rare Rugs of the Turkmen.”33

Structurally, Beshir prayer rugs are, as mentioned above, closely knotted with woolen pile. Some have hair ends, occasionally mixed with wool, and, less frequently, goat hair or mixed warps. The asymmetric knot open right is most often used, although instances of asymmetric knotting open left are known.34 The average knot count is about 72/cm² (ca. 1,116/dm²) with highs of about 127/cm² of 40s and lows of 46. The medium size is approximately 3’5” by 5’9” (1.04 x 1.78 m).

Examples of the kouch-topped prises are attached to a mihrab, here they are discussed in Type A, (with one possible exception) predates the 19th century.35 The tassels, usually a ‘Uzbek-type’ star octagon, sometimes represented ‘Eight Heads’ or ‘Elephant Head’ in a flower petal, are attached to a mihrab, forming a mihrab, usually a ‘Uzbek-type’ star octagon, sometimes represented ‘Eight Heads’ or ‘Elephant Head’ in a flower petal, are attached to a mihrab, forming a mihrab, usually a ‘Uzbek-type’ star octagon, sometimes represented ‘Eight Heads’ or ‘Elephant Head’ in a flower petal. They are bound and often with the same width as note 40 above, flowering on their side with multiple-niche prayer carpets. They are not included in the sample, but which are briefly mentioned below.

Type A consists of small rugs (1.50 x 2.00 m), among them the famous and much published Durdun rug in St Petersburg [4], which is considered to pre-date 1800 (HALI 27, 1985, p.14). It was bought by Samuel Durdun in Samarkand in 1901, and was assigned to Uzbekistan as the work of the ‘Uzbek Beshir’ by Felmers and, together with a rows of small rugs, including an unexplained central horseshoe and a red koum, the Greenwich Collection, Washington DC [4.2]. It has a white-ground covered with repeating clusters of cusped leaves on slender winding stems or tendrils, described by Pérez as “plat shaped”.36

Rugs with style qumquz (‘Oriental prayer rugs’), are found in the centre of the “Göllü göl”, and are considered to pre-date 1800 (HALI 27, 1985, p.14). It was bought by Samuel Durdun in Samarkand in 1901, and was assigned to Uzbekistan as the work of the ‘Uzbek Beshir’ by Felmers and, together with a rows of small rugs, including an unexplained central horseshoe and a red koum, the Greenwich Collection, Washington DC [4.2]. It has a white-ground covered with repeating clusters of cusped leaves on slender winding stems or tendrils, described by Pérez as “plat shaped”.36

According to a list of the designs of Suzani embroidery, given in the catalogue for the exhibition “Weavings of the Steppe Tribes in Afghanistan” in London, 1922, no.10, there are 24 white-ground rugs with tree motifs, of which 13 are included in the sample.

NATIONALS

Dennis R. Dodds & Murray L. Eiland, eds., Oriental Rugs from Austria and Afghanistan. Rugs and Carpets of the 19th Century. Second Half 19th Century. Courtesy of the Atlantic Collection, Vienna 1983, pl.96. The Oriental Rugs from Austria and Afghanistan is considered to pre-date 1800 (HALI 27, 1985, p.14). It was bought by Samuel Durdun in Samarkand in 1901, and was assigned to Uzbekistan as the work of the ‘Uzbek Beshir’ by Felmers and, together with a rows of small rugs, including an unexplained central horseshoe and a red koum, the Greenwich Collection, Washington DC [4.2]. It has a white-ground covered with repeating clusters of cusped leaves on slender winding stems or tendrils, described by Pérez as “plat shaped”.36

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The Тurkmen tribal rugs group discusses various characteristics and features of these rugs, comparing them to other rug types and highlighting their unique designs. The text begins by mentioning the popularity of Turkmen tribal rugs, particularly in the 2000s, and refers to specific examples and their characteristics. It discusses the extensive use of blue and green in these rugs and the significance of the pomegranate motif, noting its absence in the Moshkova catalogue.

The text also highlights the diversity within the Turkmen tribal rug group, emphasizing the lack of a typical border for this subgroup. It points out that while some rugs have simple borders, others have more elaborate designs, including meandering borders, star octagons, and more.

In terms of the rug’s central pillar, the text notes that it is often wide and elaborately decorated, and the borders are often wide and complex. It also mentions the use of floral motifs, such as flowering shrubs, flowers, and plants, and how these are intertwined with geometric elements.

The text refers to specific examples, such as the Dixon rug, which was exhibited in ‘Oriental Rugs from Pacific Collections’ at Fort Mason in December 1997, and other rugs with similar designs, such as the Dudin rug, which has a much narrower meander border compared to the Dixon rug.

Overall, the text provides a detailed and comprehensive overview of the Turkmen tribal rug group, highlighting its diversity and unique features.