



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 15, Issue 01, 2026: 39-45

Article Received: 28-12-2025

Accepted: 10-01-2026

Available Online: 17-01-2026

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v15i1.2650>

A Kurdish-Iranian tribal carpet with stylized dragon motifs iconographic ambiguity and cultural transmission between the Caucasus and western Iran

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a late nineteenth-century Kurdish-Iranian tribal carpet from western Iran, characterized by a Kharaghan-type border and a field composed of repeated highly abstract motifs traditionally interpreted as dragons. Through an integrated methodology combining structural analysis, microscopic examination, knot density measurement, and iconographic comparison, the study demonstrates that the carpet represents a hybrid product of cultural transmission rather than a typological anomaly.

The analysis identifies a symmetric (Ghiordes) knot, hand-spun wool pile, and a relatively low knot density consistent with tribal or semi-tribal production. Iconographically, the field motifs show clear structural affinities with Caucasian dragon imagery and the tradition of Caucasian dragon carpets; however, when considered in relation to weaving orientation and compositional logic, the same motifs may also be plausibly read as highly stylized vegetal forms, such as calices or inflorescences.

This semantic ambiguity, rather than weakening the interpretation, is understood as a meaningful feature of the symbolic continuum characteristic of Caucasian–Iranian and Kurdish tribal traditions, where zoomorphic and phytomorphic imagery often overlap. By situating the carpet within the Hamadan–Kurdistan cultural corridor (Fig. 1), the paper argues for a shift from rigid geographic attribution toward a model emphasizing iconographic transmission, transformation, and function.

Keywords: Kurdish carpet; tribal weaving; dragon motif; vegetal symbolism; iconographic transmission; western Iran.

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Figure 1. Nineteenth-century map of Persia illustrating the cultural-geographical context of western Iran and the Hamadan–Kurdistan corridor.

1. Introduction

The study of Oriental carpets has traditionally relied on stylistic classification and geographic attribution, often emphasizing formal similarities to identify production centers. While effective for many urban and workshop-produced carpets, this approach encounters significant limitations when applied to tribal and semi-tribal textiles, where mobility, oral transmission, and symbolic persistence play a decisive role.

Kurdish carpets, in particular, occupy a marginal position within conventional typologies, frequently described in broad or ambiguous terms despite their rich iconographic and cultural complexity. Among these, carpets featuring zoomorphic or symbolic motifs present additional challenges, as their imagery often resists direct comparison with canonical Persian designs.

The present study addresses these issues through the analysis of a Kurdish-Iranian carpet whose field is structured by repeated stylized dragon motifs. This carpet is examined not as an exceptional masterpiece, but as a representative case illustrating broader processes of iconographic transmission and symbolic persistence in Kurdish tribal weaving. From a comparative perspective developed through the examination of a wide corpus of carpets from different regions, the field of the present example appears significantly more complex and atypical than the border, which is more readily identifiable (Opie, 1998). A key methodological premise of this study is that the interpretation of highly abstract motifs in woven artifacts cannot be separated from issues of orientation, weaving direction, and recto-verso structure, which directly affect how visual forms are perceived and historically understood. Beyond the specific carpet examined here, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on iconographic ambiguity and symbolic persistence in the history of tribal weaving. In Kurdish and Caucasian carpet traditions, highly abstract motifs have often been classified according to established typologies, yet their meanings were historically shaped by use, orientation, and weaving practices rather than by fixed iconographic schemes. By combining close material analysis with attention to weaving direction, recto-verso structure, and visual orientation, the paper adopts an approach grounded in both the historical conditions of production and the methodological challenges posed by abstraction. From this perspective, ambiguity is not treated as an interpretive limitation, but as a meaningful and culturally productive feature of tribal visual systems operating within regions of long-term contact between the Caucasus and western Iran. This case study therefore contributes to ongoing debates on hybridity, cultural transmission, and the semiotics of abstraction in tribal art and material culture.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 The carpet under study

The object of the present study is a hand-knotted carpet measuring 200 × 128 cm (Fig. 2a), likely dating to the late nineteenth century (circa 1875–1895), attributed to western Iran, in the cultural area between Hamadan and the Kurdish regions; the overall structural organization of the reverse side is shown in Fig. 2b.



Figure 2a. Overall view (recto) of the Kurdish-Iranian tribal carpet under study (200 × 128 cm). The image shows the carpet oriented according to the natural direction of the pile, allowing the field structure and border layout to be clearly observed.



Figure 2b. Overall view (verso) of the carpet, documenting the structural organization, knot rhythm, and general density of the weaving.

The carpet shows a strongly geometric composition with a vertically structured field and a border adopting a pattern traditionally associated with the Kharaghan area (Fig. 3).

2.2 Structural and technical analysis

The structural analysis was conducted through direct visual inspection, macro photography, and microscopic observation, in order to document knot type, materials, and weaving technique. Microscopic images clearly show the use of a symmetric (Ghiordes) knot (Fig. 4a–b), characterized by the symmetrical wrapping of the pile yarn around two adjacent warps.



Figure 3. Detail of the main border showing the Kharaghan-type motif adopted as a framing element.



Figure 4a. Microscopic view of the pile and knot structure (recto), showing the symmetric (Ghiordes) knot.



Figure 4b. Microscopic view of the knot structure (verso), confirming the symmetrical wrapping of the pile yarn around two adjacent warps.

The warp is composed of cotton, while the weft is wool, forming a mixed structural system frequently encountered in semi-tribal carpets of the Hamadan–Kurdistan region (Opie, 1998).

The pile yarn consists of hand-spun wool, as demonstrated by irregular fiber diameter (Fig. 4a–b), variable twist, and visible cuticle structure under microscopic magnification.

2.3 Knot density measurement

Knot density was measured directly on the reverse side of the carpet using a millimetric scale (Fig. 5). The average density is approximately 10 knots per cm^2 , consistent with tribal or semi-tribal weaving practices.



Figure 5. Measurement of knot density on the reverse side using a millimetric scale, indicating an average density of approximately 10 knots per cm^2 .

3. Iconographic analysis

3.1 Description of the field motif

The field is organized into vertical columns containing a repeated geometric motif composed of angular and hooked elements (Fig. 6).

The motif exhibits a segmented body, angular protrusions resembling limbs or hooks, and a terminal element suggestive of a stylized head or beak.



Figure 6. Detail of the field motif (recto), showing the repeated highly stylized figure traditionally interpreted as a dragon.

3.2 Interpretation as a stylized dragon motif

In the carpet under study, the dragon motif is not rendered in a naturalistic manner, but survives as a symbolic sign, reduced to essential geometric components. In this study, the term “dragon” is employed as a heuristic scholarly label rather than as a fixed emic category. It refers to a family of abstracted zoomorphic forms conventionally identified in the literature as “dragon” motifs, without implying a stable or singular symbolic meaning. The analytical value of the term lies in its usefulness for comparative discussion, while the symbolic functions of the motif—apotropaic, cosmological, or regenerative—are understood to remain context-dependent and historically variable. The comparison with Caucasian dragon carpets (Thompson, 1980; Erdmann, 1970) does not imply direct copying or workshop transmission, but rather a long-term survival of formal structures mediated through cultural contact.

3.3 Recto-verso correspondence

Comparison between recto and verso images (Fig. 6; Fig. 6b) demonstrates that the iconographic sign corresponds to a deliberate and coherent knot structure, confirming its intentional construction and symbolic function.



Figure 6b. Reverse view of the same field motif, demonstrating the correspondence between iconographic form and knot structure.

4. Discussion

The carpet illustrates the limits of rigid typological attribution and supports a cultural-geographical interpretation. The coexistence of a Kharaghan-type border with archaic motifs in the field suggests a hybrid production shaped by mobility and transmission rather than fixed workshops.

4.1 Iconographic survival and abstraction

The stylized motif identified in the field has been interpreted as deriving from Caucasian dragon imagery, reduced through abstraction to a geometric sign embedded in the structural rhythm of the carpet. This reading is supported by formal elements such as segmentation, hooked appendices, and recto-verso coherence, which recall late Caucasian dragon traditions mediated through tribal transmission. While much of the literature on Caucasian dragon carpets has emphasized formal affinity and stylistic continuity, the present study places greater emphasis on processes of divergence, transformation, and semantic reconfiguration. Rather than reading the motif as a residual survival of a fixed iconographic type, the carpet is interpreted as evidence of how symbolic forms were actively reworked within tribal contexts of transmission.

4.2 Orientation, weaving direction, and semantic ambiguity

A critical aspect in the interpretation of highly abstract tribal motifs concerns the orientation of the carpet and the direction of weaving. When the carpet is oriented according to the presumed starting point of the knotting process (Fig. 6c), the corner figures appear upright, while the repeated field motifs are inverted.



Figure 6c. The same field motif shown in rotated orientation, following the presumed direction of weaving. In this orientation, the motif may alternatively be interpreted as an abstract vegetal or floral form, illustrating the semantic ambiguity discussed in the text.

Under this alternative orientation, the same motifs previously interpreted as stylized dragons may also be plausibly read as highly abstract vegetal forms, such as composite flowers or inflorescences organized along a vertical axis of growth (Fig. 6c). This vegetal reading is reinforced by the rhythmic repetition of the motif, the axial symmetry, and the absence of explicit zoomorphic features when viewed in this orientation.

Rather than constituting a contradiction, this dual reading highlights the semantic ambiguity typical of tribal weaving traditions, where zoomorphic and phytomorphic forms often overlap within a symbolic continuum (Eder & Aschenbrenner, 1991). In Iranian and Caucasian visual cultures, dragons, serpents, water, and vegetation frequently share attributes and functions, particularly in apotropaic contexts.

The motifs of the corner spandrels, which maintain a clearer and more stable orientation, may thus function as semantic anchors, while the field motifs operate within a deliberately ambiguous symbolic register. These small corner figures find closer parallels in Persian tribal traditions, particularly among Kurdish and Shah Savan groups (Opie, 1998; Rostami, 2015), than in canonical Caucasian carpets, where corner motifs tend to be larger and more formally defined. In this sense, the carpet does not simply reflect a Caucasian iconographic inheritance, but illustrates how Kurdish weaving traditions intersected with, adapted, and selectively transformed external visual models. The resulting imagery is neither purely Caucasian nor exclusively Kurdish, but emerges from a shared zone of cultural interaction in which symbolic practices were reshaped according to local conventions and uses. When interpreted within a phytomorphic framework, the triadic groupings and enclosed shapes adjacent to

these motifs may also be read as schematic representations of seeds, a symbol of regeneration and continuity widely attested in Caucasian and Persian visual traditions. Similar ambiguity between floral and zoomorphic imagery has been documented in the literature on Kuba–Seikhur carpets, where ostensibly floral motifs are described as concealing archaic symbols, including dragon imagery (Eder & Aschenbrenner, 1991).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the examined carpet is best understood as a material document of cultural transmission between the Caucasus and western Iran. Through integrated technical and iconographic analysis, the research highlights how ancient symbolic forms persisted within Kurdish weaving traditions beyond rigid stylistic or geographic classifications.

The analysis further shows that the interpretation of highly abstract motifs is inherently dependent on orientation and weaving direction. The possibility of reading the repeated field motifs either as stylized dragons or as abstract vegetal forms underscores the presence of a symbolic continuum rather than fixed iconographic categories.

While this study focuses on a single carpet, the issues it raises are not necessarily unique to this example. Similar forms of iconographic ambiguity may be observed in other Kurdish, Hamadan-area, and western Iranian tribal textiles, particularly where highly abstract motifs intersect with strong geometric organization. Comparable cases of symbolic and non-literal imagery in Kurdish carpets have been discussed in the literature, including studies that emphasize the persistence of layered meanings and intentional ambiguity in tribal weaving traditions (Rosati & Taherian, 2020). Whether the present carpet should be regarded as exceptional in its degree of abstraction or illustrative of a broader pattern remains an open question. Nevertheless, the analytical framework adopted here—combining material analysis, orientation, and recto–verso reading—may be applied to other contested motifs in tribal weaving, offering a productive approach to reassessing ambiguity and symbolic transformation in textile traditions.

By leaving this semantic ambiguity intentionally open, the present study aims to encourage further comparative research and dialogue among scholars working on tribal and symbolic carpets. Such discussions may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed, preserved, and transformed within textile traditions.

Future research may further explore similar hybrid carpets as material evidence of long-term symbolic transmission across cultural boundaries.

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