

# The Tree of Life Design

## From Central Asia to Navajoland and Back (With a Mexican Detour)

### Part 1

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Antrocom-Onlus sez. Veneto

The Tree of Life design is thought to be originated in Central Asia possibly from shamanic cultures, and can be seen as a favorite pattern in many carpets and rugs produced in a huge area, from Afghanistan to Eastern Europe. From the Middle East, together with other Christian and Moorish designs, it was imported to Central America where it mixed with the local versions of Tree of Life. Traders who brought Oriental carpet patterns to be reproduced by Navajo weavers made it known to them, but it was only after the 1970s that the design has had a real success together with other pictorial rugs.

#### Introduction

In the late 1970s for the first time I saw a number of samples showing the so-called Tree of Life design embellishing the walls of a restaurant in the Navajo reservation. In one or two trading posts and art galleries in the Southwest I also saw some Tree of Life rugs made by Navajo weavers, and also some Zapotec imitations, sold almost clandestinely by a roadside vendor at a ridiculously low price. The shops selling Mexican *artesanias*, both in the US Southwest and in Mexico, however, displayed only a type of Tree of Life: a ceramic chandelier-like, very colorful item that had very little to do with the Tree of Life design in the Navajo rugs and their Zapotec imitations. Moreover, the Mexican serapes and blankets, such as the Saltillo serapes (McCormick Gallery, 2011) and the Chimayo blankets (James 1920), which influenced the early Navajo weavers, do not sport this pattern. Yet, the Tree of Life as a cosmological *axis mundi* is very common in Mesoamerican pre-Columbian cultures. In addition, I could not help but note that, although the Navajo design is often definitely NOT a tree, but a corn stalk, usually growing from a wedding basket, in spite of that, it had a Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance’ with some Oriental as well as Western designs one can find woven, embroidered, painted or carved.

Hence I started a survey of the possible source or sources of the Navajo Tree of Life design, albeit in a fashion more similar to a background noise, or a lazy task, until I had enough material for a fabric, so to speak. This paper is the final result. Here I will illustrate the origin of carpet weaving, the development of an Eastern-Western trade, the first examples of Oriental carpets in the wealthy homes of Europe, the origin of the Tree of Life concept and its development both in Asia, Europe and America, and the fashion of Oriental carpets as status symbols both in Europe and the USA. Finally, I will show that the Navajo rugs were not a slavish copy of

the original Oriental designs, but a re-interpretation coherent with Navajo culture.

### **The Origin of Carpets and Rugs in the Old World**

There are some indications that weaving was already known in the Paleolithic era: the earliest evidence of weaving is that represented as textile and flexible basketry impressions on burnt clay from Pavlov in the Czech Republic which date from between 25000 and 23000 BC. The oldest woven cloth so far discovered is made from flax, dates from about 7000 BC and comes from Turkey. Textiles are also well known from finds in the pile dwellings in six countries around the Alps, in Switzerland, Austria, France, Germany, northern Italy and Slovenia. Numerous artifacts of textile production as well as finished products, fabrics and netting, dating from the period between 3900 and 800 BC have survived in the archaeological layers of late Neolithic and Bronze Age wetland settlements in these countries.

On the other hand, carpet -weaving in the Old World dates back to the fourth-third millennium BC as witnessed by the Gultapin excavations in Azerbaijan, where carpet weaving tools were discovered in the site. Although there are references to carpets by early Greek and Arab writers, just when the first Oriental rug was woven is unknown. In 1949, a Russian archaeological expedition to the Altai mountains in southern Siberia excavated a Scythian royal burial mound (*kyrgan*) that contained a preserved frozen carpet, known as the Pazyryk carpet, that dates from the 4th or 5th century B.C. Radiocarbon dating puts it to a period of 500 BC.. It is the earliest-known surviving example of a hand-knotted carpet: it was used as a saddle cover for a horse interred in the burial mound. The Pazyryk Carpet, currently at The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, measures 6'x6'7" and was hand-knotted with 278 Turkish knots. The origin of the Pazyryk carpet is controversial: where was it woven, before reaching the Altai prince's abode? Some experts in oriental carpets hypothesize that it is of Urartian (today's Armenian) workmanship (Gantzhorn1998, Schurmann 1982:24, 46). Others (Bohmer 1997, see also <http://www.themagiccarpet.biz/oriental-rugs-d2/pazyryk-rug-c54/>) say that, through chromatography, we know that the dyes were created from local insects and plants, hence the carpet was woven locally. On line Persian carpet merchants state that its origin is Persian. Armenian carpet traders, on the other hand, affirm it is Armenian.

In its early stages, Central Asian history was largely determined by successive incoming waves of nomads from the north-east, who proceeded to displace the settled inhabitants of the area forcibly. This process was repeated over the centuries. The expansion of Scythian cultures stretching from the Hungarian plain and the Carpathians to the Chinese Kansu Corridor and linking Iran, and the Middle East with Northern India and the Punjab, undoubtedly played an important role in the development of the Silk Road, in particular Soghdian Scythian merchants. Soghdiana, at different times, included territories around Samarkand, Bukhara, Khujand, Panjikent and Shahrissabz in modern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

The route from China to the west was opened around 200 BC, but the golden age of the Silk Road was not until around 600 AD. In the west, the Silk Road reached its peak during the time of the Byzantine Empire; in the Nile-Oxus section, from the Sassanid Empire period to the Il Khanate period; and in the sinitic zone from the Three Kingdoms period to the Yuan Dynasty period. In Central Asia, Islam expanded from the 7th century onward, bringing a stop to Chinese westward expansion. Further expansion of the Islamic Turks in Central Asia from the 10th century finished disrupting trade in that part of the world, and Buddhism almost disappeared. During 1200 AD there was a resurgence of the Silk Road trade. The Mongol expansion throughout the Asian continent from around 1207 to 1360 helped bring political stability and re-establish the Silk Road (via Karakorum). It also brought an end to the Islamic Caliphate's monopoly over world trade. The fragmentation of the Mongol Empire loosened the political, cultural and economic unity of the Silk Road. Turkmen marching

lords seized land around the western part of the Silk Road, belonging to the decaying Byzantine Empire. After the Mongol Empire, the great political powers along the Silk Road became economically and culturally separated. With the establishment of the Ming dynasty in China came the end of the silk trade along the Silk Road. However, the interchange between oasis towns along the Silk Road has continued to some extent. Today's equivalent of the Silk Road is the Karakoram Highway, which was built by China and Pakistan and runs from Islamabad to Kashgar. Instead of camels carrying bales of silk the traffic consists of trucks carrying oil. Even today the route following the former Silk Road is a major connecting cultural route.

One theory about the origin of the carpet (Barber 1992:171) is that the technique of knotting carpets was begun by the nomadic tribes of Central Asia. These tribes, credited with spreading the art of carpet-making, produced small rugs typically decorated with geometric motifs inspired by plant and animal forms. For the nomads, the rugs were both decorative and utilitarian, serving as floor covers, wall hangings, curtains and saddlebags. Some of the greatest carpet-making centers developed in Caucasus, Central Asia, Persia and Turkey.

Oriental carpets, that is pile-woven carpets from the Islamic world, began to show up in Europe after the crusades in the 11th century. At the beginning of the 13th century, the Oriental carpets could be seen in different paintings. Actually, many groups of Islamic carpets from the Middle East are today called by the names of European painters who depicted them: Lotto, Holbein, Ghirlandaio, Crivelli, and Memling are among the European painters whose names are now used to describe certain groups of carpets woven in Ottoman Turkey. By the sixteenth century, carpets were frequently depicted in portraits as a signifier of high social and economic status. By the seventeenth century, depictions of carpets were widespread throughout Europe.

Carpets with Indo-Persian designs were introduced in Europe through the Dutch, British and French East India Companies in the 17th and 18th century. In the 18th Century Oriental rugs were first used on floors as well as table coverings and wall hangings. Until the middle of 18th century they were mostly used as wall decorations and on tables. During the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Oriental rugs were introduced to America. This rug exhibit made a lasting impression on the Americans who saw it. The founder of W.J. Sloan, William Sloan, bought the entire collection from the exhibition and opened the first major retailing store for Oriental rugs in America.

## **The Tree of Life in the Old World**

### ***a) The Mesopotamian and Caucasian Tree of Life***

According to Finnish scholar Simo Parpola (1993:161-208) a stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium B.C., it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization.' The meaning of the motif is not clear, but its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist art. The question of whether the concept of the Tree of Life actually existed in ancient Mesopotamia has been debated, however, and thus many scholars today prefer the more neutral term "sacred tree" when referring to the Mesopotamian Tree.'

Sumerian civilization originated in what is now southern Iraq, just upriver from the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. A Sumerian clay tablet is one of the earliest examples of a Mesopotamian Tree, and it is among the original Sumerian cylinders and clay tablets excavated circa 2,500 BCE. An alabaster cylinder seal (38 x 14 mm, Ur III period, c. 2100-1900 B.C.) depicts a god with a crescent-topped staff in front of two sacred trees and a two column inscription. A black steatite cylinder seal (36 x 17 mm, c. 2100-1800 B.C.), the stone in the style of Ur III, shows a goddess, perhaps Inanna, picking fruits from the sacred palm tree. This may have influenced the

forbidden fruit episode in Genesis. We have the goddess, fruit in hand standing in front of a small sacred tree, a large palm tree with ripe fruits and two birds, later a frequent attribute of Inanna, on the ground. A four character boxed inscription completes the seal. In ancient Sumeria it was not the apple tree that was sacred but the palm. The palm tree is also most important at the oracle of Delos, the Greek island in the Aegean Sea.

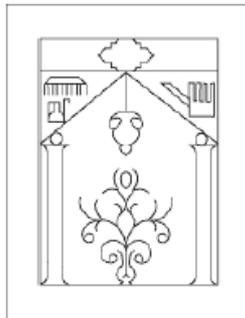
The Garden of the Gods or Sumerian Paradise is the divine paradise of the Annanuki, the gods of Sumer. The concept of this home of the immortals was later handed down to the Semitic Babylonians who conquered Sumer, and from them it percolated into the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions. In Babylonian mythology, the Tree of Life was a magical tree that grew in the center of paradise. The Apsu, or primordial waters, flowed from its roots. It is the symbol from which the Egyptian, Islamic, and Kabbalistic Tree of Life concepts originated. The Epic of Gilgamesh describes a plant with powers of rejuvenation; the hero acquires the plant, only to lose it to a passing snake, which obtains the ability to shed its skin and renew itself.

In Egyptian mythology, in the Ennead system of Heliopolis, the first couple, apart from Shu and Tefnut (moisture and dryness) and Geb and Nuit (earth and sky), are Isis and Osiris. They were said to have emerged from the acacia tree of Iusaaset, which the Egyptians considered the tree of life. A much later myth relates how Set killed Osiris, whose coffin becoming embedded in the base of a tamarisk tree. The Egyptians' Holy Sycamore also stood on the threshold of life and death, connecting the two worlds.

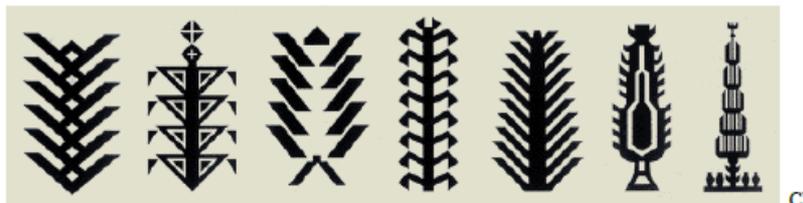
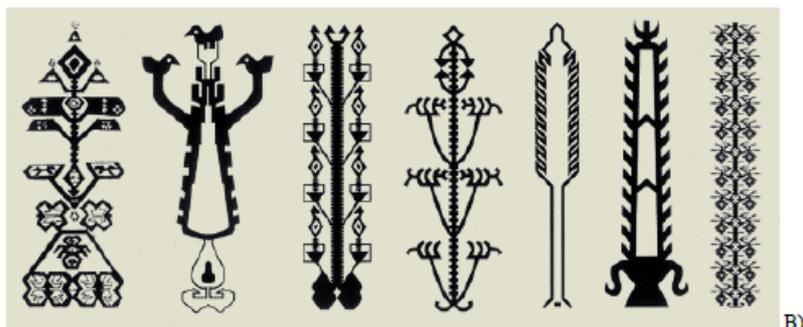
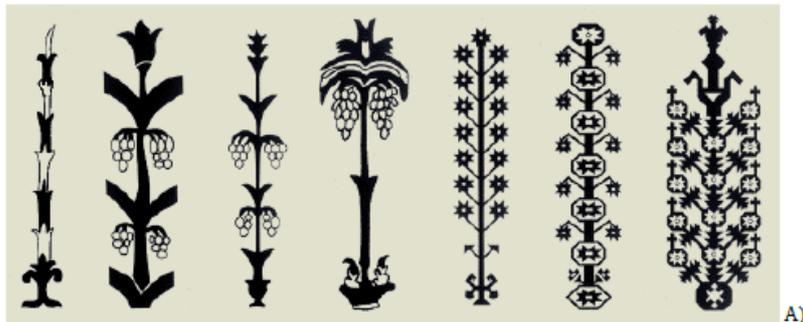
The forms of the Tree from Harappa, Punjab, northeast Pakistan, attested in pottery, glyptic, and script since 2400 B.C., display Proto-Elamite and Akkadian influence. The earliest Egyptian examples date from the sixteenth century and reveal an affinity with contemporary Babylonian forms: they appear to represent an import from the Levant connected with the Hyksos invasion and Egypt's expansion under Tuthmosis I, as also indicated by the Osiris myth explicitly associating the Tree with the city of Byblos. The earliest Greek examples, from the 15th century, are even more pronouncedly Babylonian (Parpola 2003).

About the middle of the second millennium, as Parpola (1993:161-208) points out, 'a new development in the iconography of the Tree becomes noticeable leading to the emergence of the so-called Late Assyrian Tree under Tukulti-Ninurta I. With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, this form of the Tree spreads throughout the entire Near East and continues to be seen down to the end of the first millennium. Its importance for imperial ideology is borne out by its appearance on royal garments and jewelry, official seals, and the wall paintings and sculptures of royal palaces, as in the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II in Calah, where it is the central motif.' This form of the Tree is principally characterized by the 'garland' of cones, pomegranates, or palmettes surrounding its crown and/or trunk. Its formal development through the Middle Assyrian period can be traced from dated seal impressions and datable seals. Neo-Assyrian characteristic features stand out even in the crudest examples and make it generally easy to distinguish the neo-Assyrian Tree from its predecessors. Essentially, it consists of a trunk with a palmette crown standing on the stone base and surrounded by a network of horizontal or intersecting lines fringed with palmettes, pinecones, or pomegranates. In more elaborate renditions, the trunk regularly has joints or nodes at its top, middle, and base and a corresponding number of small circles to the right and left of the trunk. Antithetically posed animal, human, or supernatural figures usually flank the tree, while a winged disk hovers over the whole. Even the most schematic representations are executed with meticulous attention to overall symmetry and axial balance. The flanking animals consist of goats, ibexes, gazelles, and stags, all associated with sexual potency and animal instincts, but also with regeneration (the ibex specifically with Ea, the god of Wisdom and Life). While extremely common in earlier periods, animals are rare in Late Assyrian representations, where their place is largely taken by various kinds of protective genies and/or the king, the latter often portrayed in a mirror image on both sides of the Tree (on private seals, the royal figure could be replaced by that of the private individual). The genies, mostly depicted in the act of sprinkling the king and/or the Tree with holy water, largely consist of mythical sages serving the god Ea: the *apkallu*, the mythical equivalent of

court scholars, or *ummdnu*, whose primary function was to protect the king and attend to his moral integrity, that is purify his soul. Neither the mirror-imaged king nor the mythical sages are attested as flanking figures before the emergence of the Lake Assyrian Tree, so they certainly represent genuine Assyrian innovations. Clearly, the Tree here represents the divine world order maintained by the king as the representative of the god Assur, embodied in the winged disk hovering above the Tree. Secondly, it was observed some time ago that in some reliefs the king takes the place of the Tree between the winged genies. Whatever the precise implications of this fact, it is evident that in such scenes the king is portrayed as the human personification of the Tree. Thus if the Tree symbolized the divine world order, then the king himself represented the realization of that order in man, in other words, a true image of God, the Perfect Man.



Anatolian prayer rug design with vase design in the mirhab.



A, B, C: Anatolian Tree of Life designs.

The Caucasian Tree of Life has been influenced by the nearby Mesopotamian cultures. In ancient Armenia, the

Tree of Life was a religious symbol and was drawn on walls of fortresses and carved on the armor of warriors. The branches of the tree were equally divided on the right and left sides of the stem, with each branch having one leaf, and one leaf on the apex of the tree. Servants stood on each side of the tree with one of their hands up as if they are taking care of the tree. The Borjgali (or Borjgala, Borjgalo) is an ancient Georgian symbol of the Sun with seven rotating wings over the Christian Tree of Life and is related to the Mesopotamian and Sumerian symbols of eternity. It is usually depicted within the circle that symbolizes the Universe. The roots of the Tree go into the "past" and its palm-like branches are for the "future". The Tree itself symbolizes the continuity between past, present and the future. The Borjgali is usually placed above the tree and symbolizes the Sun, eternal movement and life. The name Borjgali has Georgian roots; its Megrelian variant is Barchkhali, and means 'light, lighting, shine'. Other historians argue, that Borjgi is an ancient Georgian word meaning 'root', 'foundation', while the word 'gal' means 'pure' (healthy, true, right one) fruit (product)'. So, by this theory, "Borjgali" means pure fruit which came from pure roots. At the same time, "borjgli" is called the deer's antler or the branch having many small twigs. The Borjgali, representing the sun, and also connected to the wheel, is seen on many balconies, gates, tools and weaponry.

### ***b) The Scythian-Saka Tree of Life***

The idea of the Cosmic Tree, often called Tree of Life by the scholars, is common to many peoples around the world, and in the Old World it is shared along an eastern-western route from Korea and China to Scandinavia and the Mediterranean world. From the Scythian-Sarmatian peoples of the steppes, speaking Eastern-Iranian languages, come some pieces of jewelry showing the Tree of Life motif. A 1<sup>st</sup>-century. A.D. gold diadem with semi-precious stones was excavated in 1864 from a Sarmatian kurgan, the Khokhlach burial mound, near Novocherkassk, in ancient Scythia in the Lower Don River region of Russia. In the center are two opposed deer flank a tree. Below is a carved gem of a woman's face swathed in gold, and below it sports the carved gem of a woman's face, swathed in gold. It belonged to a woman's grave, probably the queen of the Sarmatian Aorsi tribe.

The most noteworthy discovery in the Kelermes kurgans, Kuban region, now Krasnodar territory, is a 7<sup>th</sup>-6y<sup>h</sup>-century BC ceremonial hatchet, actually an iron axe with the handle and butt encased in gold. In the lower part of the golden handle the Assyrian pattern of the tree-of-life composition-figures of gods on either sides of the tree, however, are replaced here by figures of goats standing on their hind legs similar to the Sumerian 'Ram in a thicket' (more correctly goats) nibbling the leaves of a (sacred) tree excavated in Ur, in southern Iraq, and which dates from about 2600-2400 BC.

The Saka were a Scythian tribe or group of tribes of Iranian origin living in Siberia and Central Asia, generally considered the eastern branch of the Scythian peoples associated culturally with the Sogdians, the Getae, the Massagetae, Issedones, Sakaraulis, and Ashguzai. 'Saka is more a generic term than a name for a specific state or ethnic group; Saka tribes were part of a cultural continuum of early nomads across Siberia and the Central Eurasian steppe lands from Xinjiang to the Black Sea. Like the Scythians whom Herodotus describes in book four of his History (Saka is an Iranian word equivalent to the Greek Scythos, and many scholars refer to them together as Saka-Scythian), the Sakas were Iranian-speaking horse nomads who deployed chariots in battle, sacrificed horses, and buried their dead in barrows or mound tombs called kurgans' (Millward (2007:13). What is nowadays called the Saka language is the language of the kingdom of Khotan which was ruled by the Saka. This was gradually conquered and acculturated by the Turkic expansion to Central Asia beginning in the 4th century. An interesting fact is that the name Sakha is the name the Yakuts from northern Siberia give to themselves: as a matter of fact, the Sakha-Yakuts migrated from the area of the Saian-Altai mountains to their current territory in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the Mongol invasions. While speaking a Turkish language, the Yakuts may be

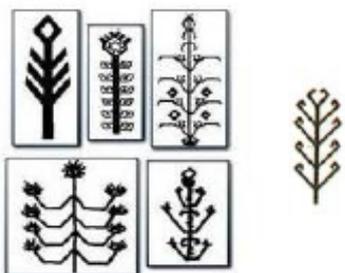
considered part of the populations of mixed origin, Indo-European and oriental Asiatic, which still call themselves Saka. The only known remnants of the Khotanese Saka language belonging to the Eastern Iranian group come from Xinjiang, China. In the Xinjiang-Uigur still exists the population known as Sarikoli, speaking an Iranian language: the name is very similar to that of the ancient Sakaraulis. Saka Rauka is the original form of Greek Sakaraukoi/Sakaurakoi/Sakarauloi or Latin Sacaraucae/Sa[ca]rauae. According to linguistic experts, Saka Rauka meant something like ‘Saka lords/kings/commanders’. The Saka Rauka were, as their name suggests, an eastern concentration of Saka tribes who lived in the Issyk-kol/Semirechye region north of the present-day Tianshan range, in the areas of southeastern Kazakhstan, northern and eastern Kyrgyzstan, and the northwestern part of the China. The Sarikoli language is a member of the Pamir subgroup of the Southeastern Iranian languages spoken by Tajiks in China. It is officially referred to in China as the ‘Tajik language’, although it is different from the language spoken in Tajikistan. From the archaeological evidence and their affinities with the evidence of Saka groups from the Altai and Tuva, the Saka peoples probably maintained close cultural relations and trade with each other.

Two golden plaques representing the resurrection of a dead hero from the Saka culture, 5th century BC, are at the Hermitage Museum. The motif is somewhat similar to the belief about the Cosmic Tree, a white birch with seven branches grows on the summit of the Iron Mountain, held by the Abakan Tatars or Khakass, a Siberian people, also called Yennisej Tatar (the name Abakan Tatars, found in Eliade, was used before the October Revolution). Currently they live in the Khakassia Republic, north of the Altai mountains, in the Krasnoyarsk District, north, in the Tuva Republic, and are scattered throughout Russia. They also live in China. Their gods use the tree as a hitching post for their horses. Moreover, a replica of the celestial tree stands in the underworld: a fir tree stands before the palace of Irle Kan, the King of the Dead. The King's sons also hitch their horses to the trunk of the tree (Eliade 1983:294-95). Crowns similar to the Scythian ones discovered in Tilia Tepe appeared later, during the 5th and 6th century at the eastern edge of the Asia continent, in the tumulus tombs of the Kingdom of Silla, in South-East Korea. (Cambon et al. 2006:282) . Therefore, it appears that the Scythian-Saka tribes represented a very important connection ring in a chain of cultural exchange going from east to west and vice versa.

### ***c) The Tree of Life in Siberia***

The Tree of Life or Cosmic Tree in Siberia and northern Asia is strictly connected with shamanism. Anna-Leena Siikala (2004:157) speaking of the initiation tales of Yakut shamans remarks that the Animal Mother, who is the incarnation of the shaman's *kut* soul, his invisible double, in the form of a bird with iron feathers, was thought to sit on a branch of the shaman's tree, incubating an egg containing the soul of a novice until the soul hatches from the egg. Gavriil V. Ksenofontov (1928:170-174) writes that ‘all shamans had a so-called mother-animal (*ija:-kyt*), which was sometimes pictured as a large bird with curved grabbing claws and a beak that resembled an iron ice axe. A mother-animal takes the soul of a future shaman and descends to the underworld and raises this soul on a branch of a spruce tree. Souls of powerful shamans are usually raised on the ninth branch counting from the bottom.’... ‘A Yakut legend describes the ‘great tree’ as a larch tree ... The bird with iron feathers (the mother-animal), hatches its egg in the nest located on the branches of this larch tree. The soul of the shaman comes out of this egg. The ‘shamanic tree’ is filled with nests where the souls of future shamans are raised. Great shamans are nested on top of the tree, average shamans are raised on middle branches, and small shamans are nested on lower branches.’ According to Lev (Leo) Ia. Sternberg (1925: 251-254) ‘The Yakut (Sakha) considered the eagle the master of the sun. ... In Yakut shamanism, ... The eagle ‘eats’ the soul of a child who is designated to become a shaman, carries this soul away, and nests an egg on this sacred tree [larch or birch]. Then the eagle breaks the egg and takes the child down to an iron cradle, which is set in the roots of the tree.’....

Yakut shamans erected models of ‘shamanic trees,’ which were represented by tall poles with crossbars and images of birds on top. During their séances, shamans usually ‘climbed’ to the heavenly sphere using these ‘ladders.’... among the Buryat the core ritual of an initiation of a would-be shaman was the ascending by a candidate ... Oroch shaman’s costumes ... have images of a larch tree used by a shaman to climb to the upper world. It was believed that if, while climbing, a shaman dropped from this tree, the whole world would be gone.’



⑤ **Tree of Life** ⑥ *Direct path from Earth to Heaven*

Persian Tree of life designs.



Central Asian Yurtas

Also the Tungus, the Ostyak (modern Khanty), and many other tribes tailored their shamanic costumes in the form of birds. These costumes were decorated with a long fringe, which symbolized feathers and wings. ‘Nivkh, Oroch, and Orok shamans had their shamanic trees ... Near their dwellings in fulfillment of the will of their spirits, they erected ... special ‘totem’ poles with carved images of their ancestors topped with huge images of birds. According to a Yakut legend, all shamans have their own shamanic trees, which start to grow when shamans begin their careers and wither when they die.’

Discussing Sakha (Yakut) shamanism today, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (1996:305-318) states that ‘two key concepts suggested by comments of Sakha consultants, including shamans and curers, provide a framework for initial discussion: birds as helper spirit-mediators and birds as souls or soul manifestations. In séances, including some that still occur, the sounds of animal and bird spirit helpers are not so much mimicked as embodied by the most effective shamans. Some of the iron ornaments of the Sakha, Even, Evenk, and Yukagir shaman's cloak symbolize bird feathers, certain bird bones (especially the humerus), and, often, full bird forms of various bird helper spirits. In certain séances, depending on their purpose and context, the shaman, instead of bringing spirits to the bedside of an ill patient, must travel to upper or lower worlds of the shamanic cosmos. Bird spirits are so

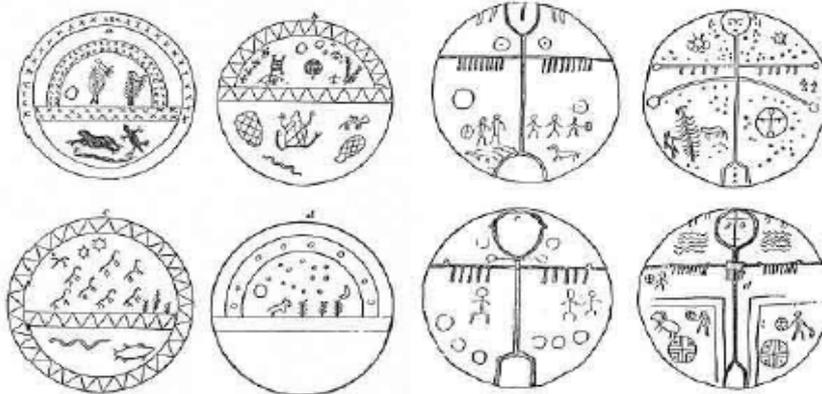
salient that the Russian ethnographer Vladimir Jochelson suggested that the full shaman's cloak 'represents a bird's skin, with the help of which the shaman is transformed into a bird ... he is a bird-man ... supposed to rise to the upper world by means of his coat' (1933:111). As birds help shamans ascend through difficult, multilayered cosmic terrain to capture lost souls or find spirits of sickness, they loan shamans their qualities for example, the eagle's piercing eyesight and endurance. An illustration of the degree to which shamans were identified with their helper spirits is the nickname of one of the great deceased Sakha shamans of the Kolyma region, Kuba-oiuun (Swan-shaman). A current example is Kytalyk-oiuun (White Crane-shaman), whose name is significant because many still revere the crane as a sacred, rare, and protected bird, associated with femininity, blessing, and seasonal balance (p. 306-307).<sup>2</sup> She also reminds (p. 309) that: 'in Eliade's summary, a bird-of-prey mother, with her iron beak, hooked claws, and long tail, transports the shaman to the underworld to be torn apart by spirits of disease and then reborn. Alternatively, training takes place in a giant pine "world tree" of the sky, where the bird-of-prey mother, with the "head of an eagle and iron feathers," hatches "great, middling, and lesser shamans" by sitting on eggs containing their souls for "respectively three years, two years and one year" (Eliade 1964[1951]:36-38).<sup>3</sup> However, 'Eliade's bird-of-prey mother is overgeneralized and simplified even as Yakut, much less for all of northern Asia, although certain Sakha concepts of the mother beast do resemble those of their Tungusic neighbors, the Even and Evenk.'



Altaic Drum



Siberian Drum



Tatar-Mongol Drums

Marazzi (1997: 251-52) points out that the contact between the shaman and the supernatural world is made possible by the axis mundi, which may be a mountain, a tree or a ladder. The world tree as a kind of cosmic pillar

is central to shamanic ideology: the shaman climbs the tree-axis mundi clad in a bird costume, his drum had been prepared with the wood from the world tree, on the drum it is painted the world tree and the universe articulated into three cosmic levels, and so on.

In Turkic and Mongolian mythology, the birch tree, regarded as a cosmic axis between earth and sky, was regarded as sacred to Bai Ulgan, a Turkic and Mongolian creator-deity, usually distinct from Tengri but sometimes identified with him, as was the horse (horse-sacrifice was a part of his worship). In Eliades's (1983: 294-295) classic work on shamanism, he writes that its branches reach to the palace of Bai Ulgan. In the legends of the Khakass, a white birch with seven branches grows on the summit of the Iron Mountain. The gods use the tree-Pillar of the World as a hitching post for their horses. The Goldi (today the Nanai, a Tungusic people of the Far East) believe that there are three cosmic trees, the first in the sky and here the souls of the dead are perched on its branches like birds, waiting to enter into a new-born baby on the Earth, another tree is on the Earth and a third in the Underworld. According to Siberian Tatars, a replica of the celestial tree stands in the underworld. A fir tree stands before the palace of Irle Kan, the King of the Dead. The King's sons also hitch their horses to the trunk of the tree.

According to Eliade (1983:296-297) the mythologies of the central and northern Asian peoples were influenced by southeastern civilizations. For the Mongols, Kalmyk and Buryats Eliade sees a possible Iranian model, but there are also Indian and Chinese influences in a number of mythological motifs. The notion that children's souls are perched on the world tree's branches before their birth and that shamans go there to look for them can be found also in other places, such as Indonesia (Ngadju Dayaks in Borneo) and Angola (Lunda). Eliade remarks, however, that the motif of the soul(child)-bird-World Tree is specific of central and northern Asia. He also notes that the cosmological pattern 'Tree-Bird (Eagle)' and 'Tree with Bird on the top and Snake in the roots, it is specific to central Asia and the Germanic peoples, but may have Near-eastern origins, although it already appears in prehistorical remains.



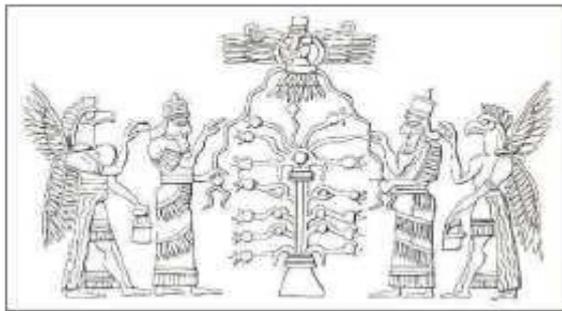
#### **d) European Trees of Life**

Michael West (2007:346-47) remarks that the notion of a World Tree, so important in Indo-European cultures since the beginning, probably is an import from north Asiatic cosmology. I think that it is very likely, according to at least one theory among the Proto-Indo-European Urheimat hypotheses. The Gimbutas-Mallory Kurgan hypothesis (Gimbutas 1997, Mallory 1989, 1997) seeks to explain the Indo-European language expansion by a succession of migrations from the Pontic-Caspian steppe. Spencer Wells (2002), on the other hand, suggests that the distribution and age of haplogroup R1a1 points to an ancient migration corresponding to the spread by the

Kurgan people in their expansion from the Eurasian steppe. Moreover, ancient DNA has confirmed the connection with kurgan burials directly. Significantly R1a also appeared in later kurgan steppe burials through a series of related cultures up to the Scythians, known to speak an Indo-European language.

In Norse mythology, the oak was sacred to the thunder god, Thor. Thor's Oak was also a sacred tree of the Germanic Chatti tribe. According to legend, the Christianisation of the heathen tribes by Saint Boniface was marked by the oak's being replaced by the fir (whose triangular shape symbolizes the Trinity) as a sacred tree. The tree of life appears in Norse religion as Yggdrasil, the world tree, sometimes considered a yew or ash tree. Perhaps related to Yggdrasil, accounts have survived of Germanic 'Tribes' honoring sacred trees within their societies. Examples include Thor's Oak, sacred groves, the Sacred tree at Uppsala, and the wooden Irminsul pillar. In Norse Mythology, the apples from Iðunn's ash box provide immortality for the gods.

In Greek mythology, the oak is the tree sacred to Zeus, king of the gods. In Zeus's oracle in Dodona, Epirus, the sacred oak was the centerpiece of the precinct, and the priests would divine the pronouncements of the god by interpreting the rustling of the oak's leaves. In Baltic mythology, the oak is the sacred tree of Latvian Pērkonis, Lithuanian Perkūnas and Prussian Perkūns, the god of thunder. In Slavic mythology, the oak was the most important tree of the god Perun. In Celtic religion, Taranus, being a Thunder God, was also associated with the oak tree. It appears, therefore, that the Indo-Europeans worshiped the oak and connected it with a thunder or lightning god.



Akkadian Tree of Life or Mesopotamian Tree.



Babylonian Tree of Life.

Hungarians are members of the Finno-Ugric peoples. The Hungarian is a Uralic language, more specifically a Ugric language, and its most closely related languages are Mansi and Khanty (former Ostyaks) of western Siberia. The world tree (Hungarian: *világfa*), is a typical element of Hungarian folk art and folk tales and a distinct folk tale type. In Hungarian it has several other descriptive names like "*Égig érő fa*" (the tree reaching into the sky), "*tetejetlen fa*" (tree without a top), "*életfa*" (life tree). Several of these tales have versions in the Transylvanian, German, Romanian, Roma, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Turkish and other cultures in Asia, but the origin of the Hungarian tales goes back to the *táltos* traditions of Hungarians. The *táltosok* are the humans who are entitled to climb up the *égig érő fa* and wander in the seven or nine layers of the sky. One version of these tales is about the small swineherd (in Hungarian *kiskondás*) who climbs up the tree to save the princess who is held captive by a dragon. The world tree often grows out of a reindeer or a horse, and it often carries among its branches the Sun and the Moon, a concept typical of Uralic and Siberian peoples. The tree often stands on the world mountain,

with its top in the sky and roots in the hell, where snakes and toads live. In the tales often birds sit on the tree, like eagles, hawks or the mythical Hungarian bird, the *turul*.

The mythical imagery of the Baltic World-Tree is probably a reflection of the holly oaks and ash-trees, as it may be concluded from the folk-tales. The World-Tree is a widely spread image in the Lithuanian folk painting, and some hint of it is also found in the Lithuanian and Latvian folklore. It is frequently engraved or painted on the objects of daily use among peasants: dowry chests, cupboards, towel holders, distaffs, laundry beaters, crochet works, etc.. Wood engravings of the World-Tree sometimes contain two segmental symbols of the Sun, surrounded by a circle of stroked squares, triangles and rhombs. The latter are symbolic imagery of tilled earth and sowed fields. The upper Sun shines in the daytime and gives warmth, while the lower one was believed to cross the underground lagoon from the west to the east in a small boat, bringing dew to grass and crops. The oldest grave monuments in Lithuania are wooden *kriksčiai*, made from a board incised in the form of a tree. They used to be erected at the dead man's feet. The World-Tree imagery can also be seen in Lithuanian memorial crosses and wooden roofed poles, erected at farmsteads, roadsides and cemeteries. Very common are three-storied roofed poles, where each storey represents a separate sphere of the World-Tree.

### **The Tree of Life in the Old World Carpets and Rugs**

*‘It is generally understood that the term "oriental rug" refers to pile rugs, a category which includes carpets. The difference between a kilim area rug and a carpet or a pile rug is that whereas the design visible on the kilim is made by interweaving the variously colored wefts and warps, thus creating what is known as a flatweave, in a pile rug individual short strands of different color, usually of wool, are knotted onto the warps and held together by pressing the wefts tightly against each other. In this case the whole design is made by these separately knotted strands which form the pile, and the patterns become clearly visible after any excessive lengths of the knotted materials are shorn off to create a level surface.... Having researched the matter in some detail in numerous sources we have arrived at the following definition: Kilim, a word of Turkish origin, denotes a pileless textile of many uses produced by one of several flatweaving techniques that have a common or closely related heritage and are practiced in the geographical area that includes parts of Turkey (Anatolia and Thrace), North Africa, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia and China’ ([http://www.kilim.com/about\\_kilims/whatskilim.asp](http://www.kilim.com/about_kilims/whatskilim.asp)).*

Prayer rug designs are traditionally associated with Anatolia and still constitute the underlying format of most Anatolian rugs. Prayer rugs also form the fundamental basis of most Belouch, and a number of other tribal patterns. In prayer rug designs an arch shaped form is usually found at the top end of the composition, although it is sometimes employed at both ends in what are generally referred to as “double ended” prayer rugs. It represents both the physical mihrab of the mosque and the spiritual archway to Paradise, and is often flanked by the “pillars of wisdom” The area below the mihrab, which is knelt upon when praying, is known as the prayer field, and can be taken symbolizing the floor of the mosque in front of the mihrab. In addition to the prayer niche and prayer field, which are the essence of all prayer rugs, a number of religious objects, particularly incense burners and washing vessels, are often employed. The prayer field is sometimes left open, or undecorated, but vase, tree of life and other motifs are frequently incorporated. Such patterns are sometimes referred to as paradise or ceremonial designs.

Tree of life designs are based on one of the oldest and most universal of all religious and mythological symbols, predating both Islam and Christianity. The proper symbolism of a prayer rug is the abstract illustration of the Garden of Paradise and the Tree of Life in the midst thereof. The Tree of Life with birds, stylized, is another traditional theme along these lines, alluding to the "language of the birds." In Islam, it symbolizes the bridge between Paradise, the world of men and the world below, and still retains a religious significance. It is usually used in conjunction with a garden, vase or prayer rug design. In Persia, Anatolia, India and Pakistan weavers produce extremely intricate and naturalistic interpretations of this scheme, and more stylized, geometric versions are found on a number of village and nomadic rugs from Persia, Anatolia and Afghanistan. It is also a popular

field decoration on Belouch prayer rugs. Different cultures have used different plants such as cypress, date, palm, pomegranate, fig, olive, wine, beech and oak to symbolize the tree of life. In Anatolia the prominent figure is a cypress tree. The birds on the tree of life is a widely used theme. They are the birds of life which will fly when the time comes. This theme is also used on the gravestones in Anatolia.

The term 'Vase' is applied to a number of compositions employing a vase, or group of vases, as the principal design element. The motif was most probably introduced into Persia from China, where it had been used for centuries as a symbol of peace and tranquility, and has subsequently been adapted to fulfill both the schematic and symbolic requirements of Islamic weavers. It now forms a substantial part of the repertoire of several Persian Anatolian and Indian workshop groups, particularly when incorporated as subsidiary element into prayer rug, tree of life and medallion and corner patterns.

What is meant by the term 'tree of life' in weaving? According to Peter (1997) the Tree of Life is a pervasive motif in oriental rugs, occurring in many variations, naturalistic, geometricized, and abstract. Generally speaking, it is a design motif with a long vertical axis and horizontal or upward pointing limbs (Brown 2009 part 1). Paine (1997) identifies four guidelines for determining when the purpose and pattern of tribal and peasant embroideries are mythological in origin in embroidered textiles. She states that images of a mythological origin, such as the tree of life, often appear on textiles that are associated with some ritual or rite of passage, for example, marriage or death, or with something of symbolic significance, such as a woman's hair (Brown 2009 part 1). Paine's second guideline for identifying a pattern of mythological origin is when it is accompanied by symbols such as birds, chevrons, zigzags, or a worshipping figure (Brown 2009 part 1). Paine's third guideline for identifying a pattern of mythological origin is what she refers to as the "deformation of figures" – for example, women that are depicted as half trees or half birds, or who have a solid base rather than legs (Brown 2009 part 1). Paine's fourth guideline is that patterns of mythological origin are often flanked by guardian or worshipping animals or birds, which may be realistic or fantastical (Brown 2009 part 1). In a Persian carpet, for example, a tree is flanked by three tiers of opposing lions with suns on their backs, and a fourth tier with opposing camels and two birds above them.

Versions of the tree of life are manifold. According to Sheila Paine, trees can be depicted in embroidery as a tree goddess, a vase of flowers (as in the Balkan embroidered textiles and the Saruk carpets), a fountain, or some symbol of local iconography, such as an eagle or a heart. It may be a simple linear pattern intended to signify a particular tree, such as a palm, or to convey the general concept of growth and fertility. When the tree of life is depicted as an actual tree, it is often stylized to convey mythological significance. In these instances, foliate patterns or simple branched devices signify the tree of life (Brown 2009 part 1). A large felt found in one of the tombs of Pazyryk in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia shows repeated across its width what Paine describes as a seated goddess figure holding a sacred branch. She is believed to be Tabiti, deity of the hearth and, therefore, of fire and fertility, who was worshipped in the Altai region in pre-Scythian times, before 700 B.C. She is approached by a male rider on a horse, possibly a worshipper or a Persian rider.

In "Turkoman Studies I" (1980), Robert Pinner and Michael Franses, have called an 'animal tree' a center tree-like element flanked with an animal form (most usually a bird form) on each side. The birch symbolizes the 'flight' of the human soul and thus stylized trees are often delineated in concert with equally stylized hinds, the latter either 'complete' or in part. Eventually, tree and birch 'merge' into one motif. According to common shamanistic belief, heaven and earth are connected by a tree which grows at the earth's center. This has to be climbed by the shaman spirit on its journey to heaven; on the way, the spirit has to pass through various levels, denoted by the tree's branches. Reverence for the ram also has an important role in the shamanistic beliefs of the Turkmen's and their ancestors. It is not only a symbol of strength but was also regarded as containing the spirit of dead forebears. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that its horns were used as part of the design repertoire of

Turkmens weaving, being known as the *kotshak* motif. The pelts of mountain rams were supposed to have served in the ecstatic journey of the soul, a use similar to that accorded to tiger skins in Tibet and China. The ram's skin is also supposed to have been spread as a prayer mat in shamanistic rituals and was subsequently represented, albeit in a highly stylized manner, on felts.

Baluchi rugs are mainly woven by Baluchi tribal weavers in southwest of Pakistan, northeast of Iran and northwest of Afghanistan. Baluchi rugs are mainly geometric and generally made in small sizes. The Baluchi tree-of-life prayer rug is the most well known of all Baluchi designs. Other designs include repeating all-overs with floral motifs or repeating all-overs with abstract living creatures such as animals (birds are common) and humans. The main colors used in Baluchi rugs are red, dark blue, camel, beige and white. A common border design is a zigzag design also seen in Turkoman and Anatolian borders. The Baluchi tree-of-life prayer rug has several minor borders and guard strips. The mihrab is in a camel color, usually undyed camel hair, which looks like a very geometric narrow and long human trunk with a square head. Above the mihrab arch, on the field, there are two square corners very similar to the design and the color of the interior of the mihrab itself. The design inside the mihrab includes a tree with several branches with maple leaves. Each leaf is divided into four quarters. The quarters across from each other are the same color; two are blue and two are red. Inside the head (top of the tree) the leaves become more similar to the Turkoman gul. The borders are generally in red, navy and very little white with small geometric shapes that look similar to hooks or the Turkoman gul.



Carelian Kaspaiikka (ritual cloths), Russia and Finland.



Russian Tree of Life



A)



B)



C)



A) Czech, B) Ukrainian, C) Dutch.

Gul is the Persian name for flower. However, some rug scholars argue that the Turkoman gul has originated from an ancient Turkish word meaning family or tribe, and historically each tribe had its own symbolic version of gul. However, as the result of battles between the tribes, the symbolic gul of defeated tribes were used by their conquerors. Still, some guls could be associated with certain tribes. The guls are usually octagonal forms that are quartered and placed in rows. Often a large gul will alternate with a subsidiary one. Guls, known as

"rosettes" is Western art history, are part of the common artistic heritage of the Silk Roads. The Islamisation of Central Asia never succeeded in eradicating completely earlier shamanistic beliefs: even after Islam was officially adopted in the major centers such as Samarkand and Bukhara, these beliefs still exerted considerable influence.

Caucasian rugs are woven by tribal weavers of the region south of Russia, near the Caucasus Mountains, between the Black and Caspian Seas. This area includes the countries of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. There are approximately 350 different tribes, speaking 150 different dialects in this area. Caucasian rugs, even though made by different weaving groups, still have very common characteristics. One common characteristic among Caucasian rugs is the positioning of similar shapes in different sizes next to one another. Another common characteristic is their colorful and bright palette. Colors of blue, red, purple, yellow, green, navy, black and beige can all be combined in one rug. The patterns are very geometric. The common designs tend to be stripes, crosses, squares, diamonds, hexagons, triangles, botehs (the design motif known as paisley in the English-speaking world is taken from the ancient Aryan boteh (botteh) motif. Boteh is a Persian word meaning bush, shrub, a thicket, bramble, herb. In Italy it is often called Kashmir design), 'S' shapes (derived from old dragon designs), some very geometric animal figures such as crab and tarantula, and even sometimes geometric human figures. The crab figures are mainly woven in the borders. The shapes tend to be placed inside one another. Weavers of Caucasian carpets and rugs wove them for their own use without any idea of selling them. The rug was their floor, their bed, their dining room table, their door and often their partition between rooms. The tent bag was their trunk and wardrobe, the pillow their suitcase, the saddlebag on donkey and camel practically their only means of transportation. Naturally they wove into the rugs objects associated with their daily lives and designs of religious significance.

Persian rugs are made up of a layout and a design which in general included one or a number of motifs. The Iran Carpet Company, a specialist in the subject, has identified 19 groups of designs. The familiar "Tree of Life" dates back to ancient Mesopotamia, while other images are attributed with great symbolic power. The Tree of Life is a Cypress tree, symbol of life survival in the after-life, Pomegranates are also symbols of eternal life. Animal motifs are frequently found in Persian carpets, from the nomadic rugs to the finest silk masterpieces. Camels mean riches in abundance. The sacred bird, the dove, means peace and good omens. The peacock, symbol of wealth and happiness, appears in the mythology of a variety of Eastern cultures as a sacred bird and is often included in rug design; the rooster represents the devil, woven into the rug to protect its owner from the evil eye. Beasts and birds of prey, such as lions and falcons, indicate courage, victory and glory; the heron symbolizes long life, and the hawk victory. The comb means cleanliness, while the sword stands for supreme power. The pomegranate brings abundance, the carnation happiness, and the Botah, a type of palm tree, is interpreted today in the paisley pattern, as fertility.

Antique Turkish rug weaving in Anatolia first began with the arrival of the Turkish tribes from Central Asia, who settled in this region. Some of the oldest examples known are the eighteen surviving pieces woven by the Selcuk Turks in the 13th century. The 16th century saw the beginning of the second successful period of Anatolian rug-weaving. The rugs from this period are called "Classical Ottoman Rugs". The reason these rug are called "Palace rug" is that the design and colors would have been determined by the palace artists and then sent to the weaving centers. In the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17th and 18th century, Gordes (Ghordes), Kula, Milas, Ladik, Mucur, Kirsehir, Bandirma and Canakkale (Dardanelles) gained importance as rug-weaving centers, along with Ushak and Bergama. The rugs woven in some of these regions are known as "Transylvanian Rugs" because they were found in churches in Transylvania, Romania. Transylvania continues to be the repository of the richest and best preserved corpus of Antique Turkish rugs outside the Islamic world. The rugs woven in the agricultural areas of Anatolia owe their origins to the settlers or nomadic cultures. In Europe, these rugs, woven with wool on wool, are generally called "Anatolian Rugs". Caucasian tarantula and crab motifs can also be seen in Anatolian rugs, and similar to Caucasian rugs, Anatolian motifs tend to be inside one another.

Many varieties of rugs have only come into existence in this century. If, for example, you know that a rug was made in Pakistan it won't be an antique oriental rug because Pakistan only started producing handmade rugs after World War II. Similarly all the thick, heavy types of Indian and Chinese rugs are modern. The Persian Qum rugs have all been made in the last sixty years or so, as have the Persian "white" Kashans. White Kashans were only made after 1920, in response to the western markets' demands for pale rugs. The pastel-colored Taba-Tabriz rugs another example of Persia's efforts to please western buyers who wanted, in addition to pastel colors, thicker rugs than Tabriz had been making. The "Persian Design" Romanian rugs, which are made in the state-owned workshops, appeared on the scene less than 30 years ago.

Romanian rugs. While technically textiles, these rugs deserve their own category, because no other textiles so dramatically reflect their regions of origin. Most are flat-weave kilims, probably introduced centuries ago by the controlling Ottoman Empire. Today's hand-weavers mix traditional vegetable-dyed yarns with commercial aniline-dyed yarns to produce startling accents within traditional patterns and colors. Rugs from Oltenia reflect nature, with flowers, trees and birds. Those of Moldavia have patterns of little branches repeated in rows to create a tree of life. Rugs from Maramures tend to have geometric shapes, resembling those from Turkey and the Caucasian mountains (<http://www.romaniatourism.com/traditions-folklore.html>).

*To be continued at Part 2 in the next issue*