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Iconographic Origins of Kurdish Carpet Design  
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# RENEWAL & INNOVATION

## Iconographic Influences on Kurdish Carpet Design

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*The crisis in the political and cultural life of Persia during the 18th century proved particularly significant for the history of certain aspects of Kurdish carpet weaving. By appropriating design features from certain types of later Safavid workshop carpets, the weavers of Persian Kurdistan were able to create carpets which, by a process of transference and adaptation, acquired a characteristic Kurdish identity. In a discussion based on a paper given to the San Francisco ICOC in 1990, the author looks at this process, and considers some of the antecedents and design prototypes underlying what he believes is an identifiable 'proto-Kurdish' family of rugs.*

Nineteenth and early 20th century carpets from northwest Persia exist in considerable numbers. When discussing such later rugs, we can, with justification, start talking about individual tribal groups or regions, but it is more problematic when we attempt to link these groups with the rugs we have from the earlier history of Persian weaving.

Those later weavings that we presently classify as Kurdish with a greater or lesser degree of proof seem to offer clear evidence of a flourishing and developed weaving tradition (2). To identify the main sources of the characteristic iconography associated with these rugs, we must go back at least as far as the 18th century, and specifically to the series of events following the decline and collapse of the Safavid empire.

In Persia, the first third of the 18th century was a time of great sociopolitical

turbulence, during which the destruction, rebuilding and, in some instances, relocation, of weaving centres may well have created the necessary preconditions for a re-elaboration of the Persian carpet design tradition.

In his pioneering 1908 text on oriental rugs, the Swedish writer F.R. Martin observed: "Nadir Shah not only politically altered the whole physiognomy of Persia, but also artistically. The old carpet centres were, if not destroyed, so reduced in proportion, because he took away their best workmen, and placed them in different places in Middle Persia where shortly afterwards the finest carpets were made. This fact is the reason why different designs are made in the district limited by Joshagan, Hamadan, Kirmanshah and Sultanabad."<sup>1</sup>

Time has shown that not all of Martin's infor-



1. The Gulbenkian vase carpet (detail left), Kerman area first half 17th century. 1.83 x 4.34m (6'0" x 14'3"), Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, inv.no. T70.

2. 'Proto-Kurdish' rug, Saujbulagh area, southern Azerbaijan, ca. 1800. 1.48 x 1.98m (4'10" x 6'6"). Author's collection.







**3. 'Proto-Kurdish' carpet (detail left), northwest Persia, ca. 1800. 2.59 x 6.10m (8'6" x 20'0"). Private collection, California. Courtesy Sotheby's, New York.**

mation is reliable, but such relocations, whether intentional or as the result of the general social and economic crises which affected Persia continuously throughout the second half of the 18th century, may be of considerable help in any analysis of the movements of characteristic designs. They provide fundamental information about the ways in which design traditions that belong historically to a specific area subsequently reappear in other, apparently unrelated, weavings from completely different areas.

One substantial tradition of later weaving with a definite iconographic link to the Safavid period workshops seems to be that of northwest Persian carpets from Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. We find individual carpets, as well as large or small design groups, which range in date from the end of the 17th to the middle of the 19th centuries, the original designs of many of which are attributable to the late 16th and 17th centuries.

Some of the most interesting northwest Persian versions of Safavid designs in fact pre-date the Afsharid and Zand periods of the 18th century, or are contemporary with the earliest part of the first. Rugs that fit into this category include examples such as the medallion rug in the Keir Collection illustrated on the dust-jacket of Friedrich Spuhler's *Islamic Carpets and Textiles* (1979).

There are also a few early signs of direct design transference. In the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, there is a previously unpublished long rug (4), almost certainly of Kurdish manufacture and of early 18th (perhaps even late 17th) century date which is, quite clearly, a close copy of the enigmatic Von Hirsch floral lattice garden carpet (see HALI 59, p.130) which appeared on the market in London in the 1970s, having been previously unknown to carpet scholars. The Von Hirsch garden carpet itself is probably of early 17th century date.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporaneous with the Burrell carpet is another very unusual rug (5), also quite possibly Kurdish – although this remains to be firmly demonstrated – which has a design based directly on a 17th century Mughal red-ground floral carpet of the type usually attributed to Lahore.<sup>3</sup> Given the interaction between the Safavid and Mughal empires, culminating in Nadir Shah's conquest of Lahore and Delhi in 1739, this is not a total surprise, but it does suggest a far greater degree of design transference than has hitherto been supposed.

Among the several classical traditions of carpet design that appear to have migrated from central and southern Persia to Kurdistan and then become characteristic of certain classes of Kurdish rugs, the so-called 'vase' carpet group is of particular significance (1). This extensive body of carpets, which encompasses a great variety of designs, exerted a major influence on the development of a family of relatively early Kurdish rugs, which I will call 'proto-Kurdish' (6).

Most of these early proto-Kurdish carpets are characterised by a lustrous, symmetrically knotted woollen pile. In many cases they have rust coloured wefts – a feature which a recent study of later Kurdish rugs<sup>4</sup> has also found to be typical of weavings originating from the area of Saujbulagh,<sup>5</sup> a Kurdish town situated in the southern district of Persian Azerbaijan. The coloured yarns employed for the pile of these latter rugs are extremely saturated, and are an indication of the well-known competence of the Kurds in the art of dyeing.<sup>6</sup>

The minor borders of these proto-Kurdish rugs frequently contain a version of the 'running-dog' or reciprocal 'latch-hook' pattern (15), while the main border is generally decorated by a naively drawn floral vine scroll. Field patterns are much more varied. In one such proto-Kurdish rug (6) we can clearly see a rendition of the many different floral forms that derive from the classical repertoire of vase-technique carpets.



**4. Kurdish (?) version of the Von Hirsch floral lattice garden carpet, northwest Persia (?), first half 18th century or earlier (?). 2.11 x 6.09m (6'11" x 20'0"). An example of direct design transference from a 'classical' prototype to a later Kurdish weaving. Glasgow Museums, The Burrell Collection, inv.no. 9/90.**





**5. Kurdish (?) version of a Lahore carpet, northwest Persia (?), 18th century. 1.50 x 3.48m (4'11" x 11'5"). Technically very similar to the Burrell Collection carpet in (4). Private collection, England.**



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Another design found in Kurdish rugs for which we have equivalents in the vase carpet repertoire is a field decoration of an all-over repeating shrub pattern (8). In this example, however, the main border differs from the typical proto-Kurdish scheme, showing a version of the cartouche and rosette motif found in a whole range of Safavid weavings.

In other early Kurdish rugs (2) we can see an abstract interpretation of the Afshan design often encountered on Caucasian and northwest Persian weavings. Both the Afshan and the related Harshang designs are thought to have originated from the Safavid iconography expressed in the vase carpets.

It is surely not by chance that we find these designs beginning to enter the Caucasian carpet vernacular towards the second half of the 18th century. I suggest that the Kurds may have acted as carriers of these motifs, as there appears to be a constant iconographic interchange between the Caucasus and Kurdistan, ranging from the Kurdish 'copies' of dragon carpets<sup>7</sup> to other examples which show a pattern clearly derived from the Persian floral tradition of a series of interlocking curved lancet leaves<sup>8</sup> which reappears on a number of the early Caucasian carpets referred to as 'floral' or 'blossom' Kubas (7).

Of the many carpets woven in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan between the mid 18th and mid 19th centuries which can, in design, though not in technique, be related to several groups attributed to 17th century Kerman and woven in the asymmetrically knotted vase structure, the best known are probably the garden carpets. A great number of later, probably Kurdish, versions with symmetric knotting have survived.

The garden carpet tradition obviously played a central role in the construction of a set of indigenous Kurdish designs. The earliest of the garden carpets – the Wagner (HALI 5/1, p.16), the Figdor (HALI 31, p.16) and the Jaipur carpets – in fact originate from Kerman in the early 17th century, but I suggest that the tradition may have been carried to Kurdistan in the same manner as other classical Safavid designs.

The actual location of the early Kurdish looms is a matter of conjecture, especially given the vexed question of what exactly is meant by the Caucasus or Azerbaijan in the context of 18th century weaving. Martin assigns them, on the basis of a verbal tradition current in Persia at the beginning of the present century, to the village of 'Kultuk', located near Hamadan,<sup>9</sup> though the village of Goltok is in a Turkic rather than a Kurdish area. Arthur Upham Pope, on the other hand, claims that the looms were situated in the area of Saujbulagh,<sup>10</sup> which is strongly

**6. 'Proto-Kurdish' carpet, Saujbulagh area, southern Azerbaijan, ca. 1800. 1.88 x 3.69m (6'2" x 12'1"). Courtesy Sotheby's, New York. Private collection, USA.**



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associated with a significant group of 18th and 19th century Kurdish rugs which are only now beginning to be examined in detail. The town is also commonly thought to be the source of several closely related Kurdish carpets with the garden design, for which the vase-technique carpet in Jaipur perhaps serves as the closest model. There is, however, no hard evidence for either of these suggestions, and the size of several of the known examples hardly argues for a small village workshop.

The earliest of the Kurdish versions mentioned above with the *chahar bagh* ('four gardens') design is probably the complete Aberconway carpet in Kuwait (9), and some closely related fragments. Following on from these, it is possible to construct a reasonable chronology for the other carpets of related design which have survived, among them the McMullan carpet in the Harvard University Art Museums (see HALI 69, p.111). The series appears to end in the late 18th or early 19th century with the two Kevorkian Collection carpets, now split between the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (on display in the permanent exhibition at Dahlem) and a private collection. One variant of the garden carpet design that can be securely assigned to Kurdish looms after the middle of the 18th century includes several carpets and fragments with individual floral or tree design elements contained within a rectangular lattice. Perhaps the best-known example is the complete blue-ground carpet in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin.

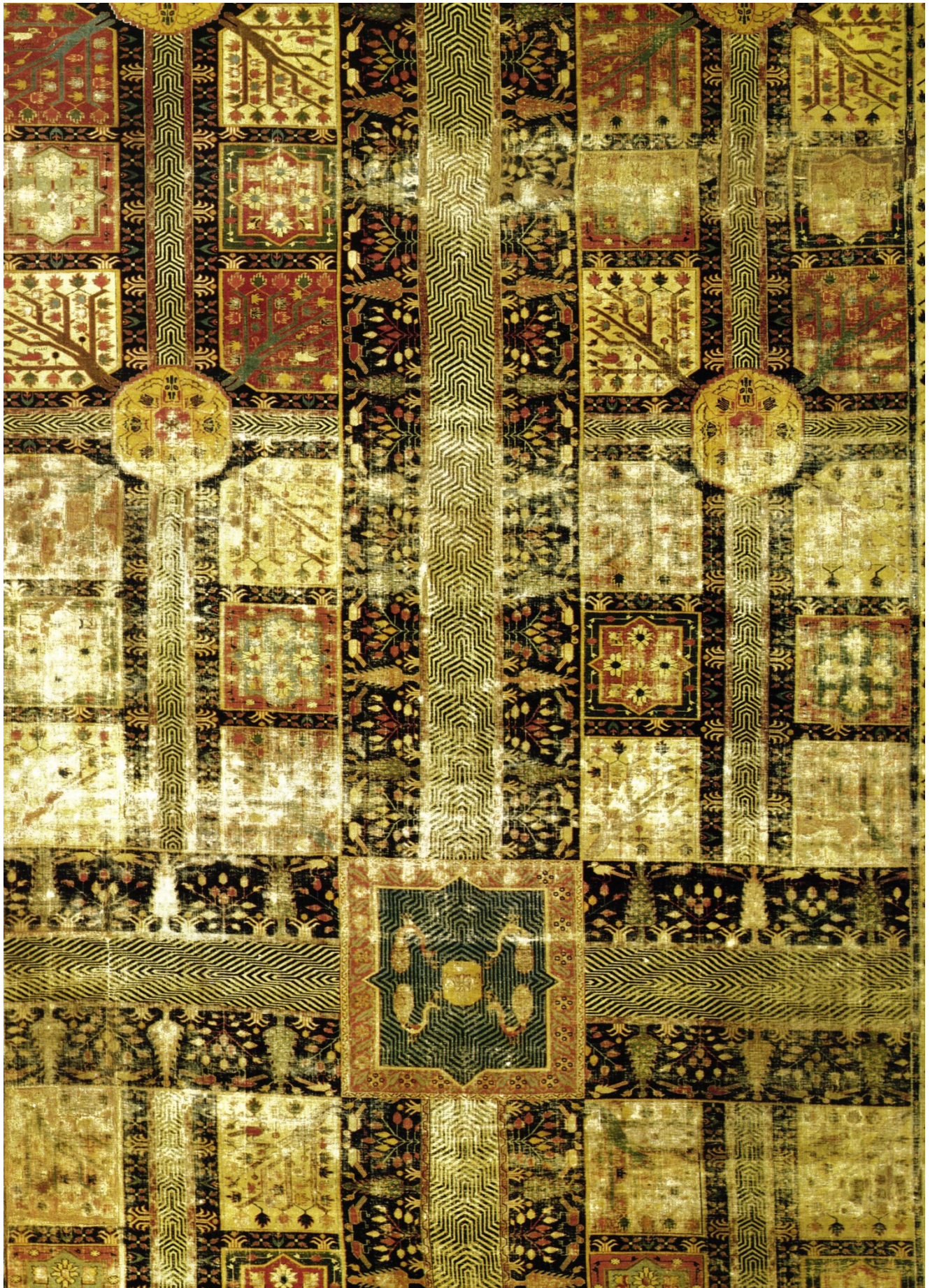
I would like to underline the fact that over the course of time the original spirit of the garden carpet underwent a gradual metamorphosis which, if compared to the process of change perceived in better documented families of carpets, would appear to be typical of the transition from court or urban workshops to town or village looms. In the Berlin example (*cover*),



7. The George Hewitt Myers Caucasian vase carpet, Karabagh or Shirvan, early 18th century. 2.44 x 6.40m (8'0" x 21'0"). Mr & Mrs Harold M. Keshishian Collection, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

8. 'Proto-Kurdish' rug, Saujbulagh area, southern Azerbaijan, ca. 1800. 1.68 x 2.74m (5'6" x 9'0"). Courtesy Clive Rogers, Brighton.







**9. The Aberconway Kurdish garden carpet (detail left), northwest Persia, 18th century. 3.75 x 9.25m (12'4" x 30'4"). The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum, inv.no. LNS10R. Courtesy Gulf International.**

one can see an overall stiffening of the composition, where two phytomorphic elements derived from the original scheme alternate with each other in what is by now a complete re-interpretation of the design. It must be stressed, however, that it is essentially through such acts of appropriation that the Kurds began to develop their own weaving language.

Sehna kilims, generally considered one of the most typical manifestations of the Kurdish weaving tradition, demonstrate this process (13). In early examples we notice the use of floral patterns derived from later garden carpets, such as those present on the Berlin piece. It is worth mentioning that this floral form, which we also encounter on many Kurdish pile weavings (8), is incorporated in the boteh pattern as it appears on the 19th century versions of these flatweaves.

The early garden carpets are the source of a plethora of designs and motifs. For example, if we look carefully at their graphic layout (9), it is possible to identify the presence of a number of elements that, once abstracted and re-interpreted through the spectrum of a different cultural sensibility, emerge as the precursors of a number of classical Persian designs that have been employed by the Kurds of northwest Persia.

The outer border of certain of the garden carpets, for example the Davis fragment and the complete Ballard rug in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is decorated with the reciprocal trefoil *medachyl* motif,<sup>11</sup> which appears in a similar form on various proto-Kurdish rugs (4) and on later Kurdish weavings from the areas of Sarab and Hamadan. In addition, we can clearly associate the four trees that spring from the small medallions located on the central axis of the composition (9) with those present in the design of so-called classical compartment and tree rugs (10), which have also been traditionally assigned to the Kurds in northwest Persia – although their structure (asymmetric *jufi* knotting on a cotton foundation) is akin to carpets originating in Khorasan in the northeast of the country.<sup>12</sup> We could rationalise this eastward movement of design if we consider the migration of Kurdish tribes such as the Çemisgezsek and the Chagani<sup>13</sup> from east Anatolia through the Caucasus and northwest Persia to Khorasan as a probable vector. These tribes were followed by their aristocracies who, having commanded successful campaigns against the Uzbeks, were awarded positions of great administrative responsibility in this eastern province by Shah Abbas.

The drawing of the trees, especially the shape of their leaves, is almost identical to both the flowering trees and the weeping willows in the so-called *bid-majnun* design, which we often encounter in 19th century carpets from the area of Bijar (14). It is perhaps worth noting here that one of the earliest representations of the full *bid-majnun* design appears on an 18th century *jufi*-knotted carpet illustrated by Eskenazi in his catalogue *Il Tappeto Orientale dal XV al XVII Secolo* (1982, pl.31).

The rows of cypresses that flank the central, horizontal watercourse of the *chahar bagh* carpets, in addition to their role in the *bid-majnun* design, are also to be found either as border or field motifs in a group of later rugs ascribed to the Kurdish village of Bakhshaish (11).

Inside the lateral compartments of the garden carpet design there are always small medallions, consisting of the superimposition of a rhomboidal form on a square. These eventually become isolated, contained within an ogival medallion, and are placed as a central motif in a series of blue-ground rugs characterised by their elongated format, and, often, by the use of the *mina-khani* pattern to decorate the blue field.<sup>14</sup> This design too has traditionally been assigned to the Kurds, who in turn may have developed it through a re-reading of the floral arabesques

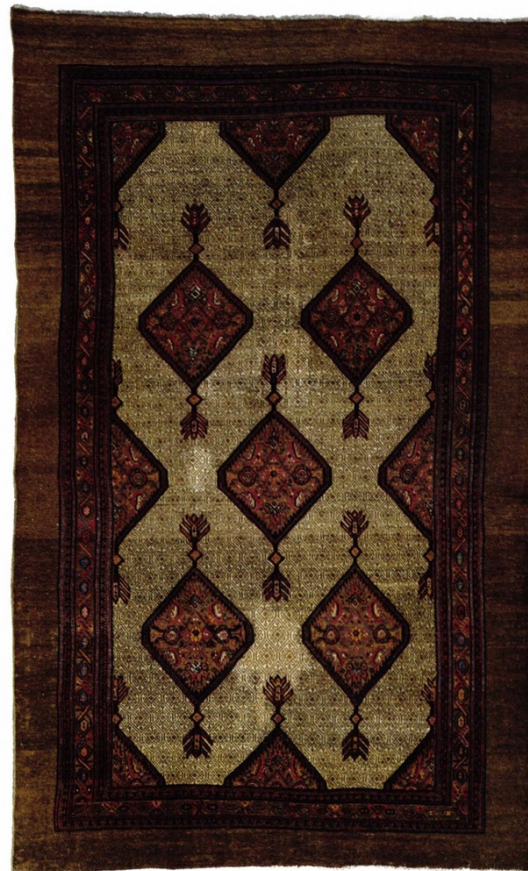


**10. Safavid compartment and tree carpet, Persia (Kurdistan or Khorasan), ca. 1700. 2.64 x 6.34m (8'8" x 20'10"). The Keir Collection, Ham, Surrey.**

that decorate certain vase technique carpets.

However, apart from the Sehna kilims, the only class of weavings that can be assigned to Kurdish weavers with absolute documentary certainty is a group of inscribed arabesque carpets (for example the rug in the Carpet Museum, Tehran, illustrated on the front cover of HALI 1/1),<sup>15</sup> which were commissioned around the turn of the century from the Kurds of the Garrus district, an area situated near the town of Bijar, which employed the design in its 19th century weavings (16).





**11. Bakhshaish rug (above left), Persian Kurdistan, 19th century. 1.40 x 2.26m (4'7" x 7'5").** Courtesy Eberhart Herrmann, Munich.

**12. Hamadan carpet (above), Persian Kurdistan, late 19th century. 2.26 x 3.72m (7'5" x 12'2").** Private collection, Italy. Courtesy The Carpet Studio, Florence.



**13. Sehna prayer kilim (left), Persian Kurdistan, early 19th century. 1.20 x 1.50m (3'11" x 4'11").** Private collection. Courtesy Axia, London.

Another of the many patterns that have been extrapolated from early garden carpet iconography is derived from the shape of the watercourses, which are indicated by a motif that resembles a tuning-fork. This recurs on the three vertical axes that define the orientation of the composition of a proto-Kurdish rug from the Saujbulagh area (15). Note that by outlining the central watercourse in a different colour, the weaver has introduced a certain degree of symmetry into the composition.

An early Kurdish rug sold some years ago in New York and now in a Californian private collection may serve to summarise the major influences that have helped to form Kurdish carpet design (3). The vertical shape of the compartments recalls in some respect the graphic layout of garden carpets, together with the stylized cypresses and trees that decorate the border. Inside the vertical compartments are placed three different orders of designs. Two are related to the arabesque, their similarity being further emphasised by the fact that they share a common background colour. The third compartment is characterised by a dark ground colour on which we see a variant of the *mina-*





14. Bijar *bid majnun* design carpet (above), Persian Kurdistan, 19th century. 2.13 x 3.35m (7'0" x 11'0"). Courtesy Eberhart Herrmann, Munich.



15. 'Proto-Kurdish' rug (right), Saujbulagh area, southern Azerbaijan, ca. 1800. 1.15 x 2.51m (3'9" x 8'3"). Author's collection.

16. Garrus Bijar wagireh (below right), Persian Kurdistan, mid 19th century, 1.43 x 1.06m (4'8" x 3'6"). Private collection, Milan.



*khani* pattern. All of these characteristics derive from that great ensemble of early Safavid designs that are grouped under the heading of carpets woven in the vase technique.

The linkages which are increasingly acknowledged between certain rugs woven between about 1700 and 1850 in the provinces of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, and those woven at an earlier date elsewhere in the country, are primarily at the level of design continuity. Although there is in fact no evidence to suggest that the weavers who made the later garden carpets, now widely attributed to the Kurds, were trained in the same weaving traditions as the weavers who made the Kerman garden carpets in their distinctive vase structure, it remains a definite possibility that the dislocation associated with the collapse of the Safavid empire resulted in the movement of weavers from south-central to northwest Persia, and that these groups carried their design vocabulary, if not their techniques, with them.

Of course, Safavid carpets represent something more than mere structure and pattern; they represent a culture and, in the case of the garden carpets, a religion too. Thus it is not surprising that the repertoire of designs from the Safavid workshops should have entered the vernacular of weaving all over Persia at a later date. However, it is the as yet unexplained concentration of these designs in the northwestern part of the country which provides us with such a rich vein for further study.

*Acknowledgments & Notes see Appendix*