



THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE SYNDROME

The recent sales of carpets from the Jim Dixon collection refocussed attention on several examples of a putative group of readily recognisable but difficult to define rugs, mostly fragmentary, many of which have emerged from Tibetan sources in recent decades. Always drawn to puzzles of attribution, Alberto Levi addresses the possible provenance of these intriguing carpets from the 'Golden Triangle'



Since I first started studying antique rugs, I have been attracted to examples that defy precise attribution. Back then, many western Asian rugs that did not clearly belong to a specific type were simply labelled ‘Kurdish’. I therefore began to research this large family of weavings and identified a cluster of earlier examples, which I called ‘proto-Kurdish’. They became the subject of my paper at the 6th ICOC in San Francisco in 1990, followed by an article in *HALI* in 1992.¹

At about the same time, in March 1992, a group of early Anatolian rugs had come up for auction here in Milan and, reviewing the sale for *HALI*, I coined the term ‘Golden Triangle’ to describe the possible provenance of a wonderful green-ground medallion rug (1).² By this term I meant that the rug originated in a region that encompassed parts of northeast Anatolia, southern Transcaucasia, and northwest Persia. Far from being a pastiche of different woven dialects, the rug bears specific features from all three areas, yet orchestrated in a signature style that allows us to think of it as belonging to an independent entity. Ian Bennett followed with a similar ‘Western Golden Triangle’ attribution in his attempt to define an ‘amorphous group’ of animal and tree design carpets.³ More recently, John Taylor has compiled an extremely useful and interesting online ensemble of images of potential ‘Golden Triangle’ pieces of different kinds, demonstrating the label’s wide reach.⁴

Meanwhile news came from Tibet of a series of exciting discoveries of very early and unusual rugs, destined to become milestones of carpet history. Mostly fragmentary, many of them challenged conventional wisdom.⁵ Seeing some of these historic pieces exhibited during the 7th ICOC in Hamburg in 1993 was an eye-opening experience, together with learning the circumstances of how some of them were found and purchased at relatively affordable prices. Enough was enough: together with a long-lost friend, I decided in August 1993 to embark on a Tibetan adventure, determined to find another of these ‘Seljuk’ masterpieces.

Following our long flight to Kathmandu, we took the land route through the Himalayas, an unforgettable trip in itself. After four days we finally arrived in Lhasa and thought of trying our luck by first visiting the market outside the Jokhang Temple. Soon realising that there were no treasures to be uncovered, we headed to what we were told was the official hangout of all the main Tibetan pickers, the now sadly defunct Snowland Hotel. Here the atmosphere was more like that of a caravanserai, with brisk business conducted in a festive fashion, the traded goods consisting mainly of antique Tibetan and Chinese weavings of different kinds.

Obviously, there were no early ‘animal’ rugs in sight, but I suddenly stumbled on a completely different animal; I was faced with a patchwork of something obviously ancient, repurposed as a saddle cover, with elements of design taken from Safavid Persian rugs, although with a geometric rendering of the pattern, reminiscent of 17th-century Caucasian rugs and silk embroideries. The right-hand side fragment of this saddle cover later reappeared in a prominent south German collection (5). What was this western Asian rug doing in Lhasa?

In the days that followed I found similar pieces in piles mixed with other fragmentary 17th-century Chinese rugs, mostly in runner format. Over the course of subsequent trips to Tibet I kept discovering examples of this type, which I had by then labelled ‘Tibetan Golden Triangle’ or ‘TGT’. By this I mean that these pieces clearly originate in the ‘Golden Triangle’ region, yet something about them differentiates them from the rest of the family, as if they had been made specifically for the Tibetan market. Although nobody has ever defined the group in any sort of way, I noticed



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1 Previous page: Green-ground medallion carpet (detail), east Anatolia, ca. 1500. 1.67 x 2.31 m (5' 6" x 7' 7"). Museum of Islamic Art, Doha

2 Medallion carpet fragment with cartouches (half), Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.74 x 2.95 m (2' 5" x 9' 8"). James F. Connell collection



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3 Medallion carpet with palmettes and cloudbands, Tabriz, northwest Persia, first half 16th century. 2.45 x 5.10 m (8' 1" x 19' 9"). Bardini Museum, 730

4 Carpet with polylobed medallion, east Anatolia, ca. 1600. 1.93 x 3.29 m (6' 4" x 10' 10"). Vakıflar Museum, Istanbul, A-63

5 Carpet fragment with octagonal devices, Golden Triangle, 17th century, 0.72 x 0.63 m (2' 4" x 2' 1"). Weise collection



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that, after seeing a few examples, most would immediately recognise a TGT rug as ‘another one of those’.

What makes them so recognisable? I have been able to examine closely a number of these pieces, mainly from a private collection in Boston, as well as others from US and European collections. Although there are notable exceptions, most TGT rugs are woven with the symmetric knot, varying greatly in weaving density, between 20 and 200 kpsi. The first impression is that of examining a group of early village or town weavings from a particular region, where rugs were being traditionally woven in patterns originating from specific classical sources. I have found it instructive to subdivide them according to their field patterns.

Centralised designs

A consistent group of TGT pieces is distinguished by a central medallion pattern, with a clear reference to both the large-format, early Safavid court Tabriz medallion carpets as well as to its eastern Anatolian variations (1), the latter possibly originating from variously located small workshops, since we find similar examples woven either with symmetrical knots or with asymmetrical knots open to the left.⁶

A fragment of a carpet cut along its length (2) shows a polylobed medallion of the type seen on the Bardini Tabriz carpet (3) as well as on a



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rug found in the Ulu Mosque of Divriği (4), while the ground attempts at mimicking the cartouche network we see on the field of the famous carpet now in Vienna’s MAK (6). A similar medallion/field combination can be seen on a finely knotted fragment, which bears a closer similarity to the Bardini Tabriz carpet both in the shape of the medallion and in the rendition of the interlocking cartouche border (8).

Another example has a field design that yet again seems to draw inspiration from the Bardini carpet, with cloudbands running along the length of the composition (7), a feature also appearing on TGT rugs with borders of interconnected star octagons (10) as well as of the strapwork arabesque type (9). Distinguished by asymmetric knotting, the carpet in (7) features a border of an alternating interconnected polylobed, star-octagon and hexagonal cartouches, reminiscent of the frame characteristic of the proto-Kurdish group (4),⁷ which we later encounter, however stylised, on a number of 19th-century northwest Persian long rugs.

Belonging to the same cluster is a fragment with a blue polylobed medallion with an ivory cartouche at its top and a small star-octagon device in the left corner (11), which is related to another fragment with a similar pattern but with a star-octagon border (29), both of which appear to be inspired by a type represented by another Divriği rug (16), which is characterised by a 2-1-2 pattern, with a large star-octagon central

- 6 Medallion carpet with eight-pointed star cartouches, Tabriz, northwest Persia, first half 16th century. 2.97 x 7.47 m (9' 9" x 24' 6"). MAK, Vienna, T10211
- 7 Medallion carpet with cartouche border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 1.50 x 3.32 m (4' 11" x 10' 11"). Christie's, London, 15 October 1998, lot 301
- 8 Medallion carpet fragment with cartouche field and border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.91 x 1.52 m (3' 0" x 5' 0"). James D. Burns collection
- 9 Medallion carpet fragment with cloudbands and strapwork arabesque border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.79 x 1.75 m (2' 7" x 5' 9"). Formerly Jim Dixon collection
- 10 Medallion carpet fragment with cloudbands and star octagon border, Golden Triangle, circa 1700. 1.92 x 2.64 m (6' 4" x 8' 8"). Benjamin Banayan collection



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medallion flanked by two pairs of small octagons, each containing an eight-pointed star inscribing a small star-octagon.

Other TGT rugs with centralised designs include (12) and (13), where the medallion, superimposed on an infinite repeat pattern of stylised palmettes, contains a lively arrangement of swirling cloud-band motifs, later seen on south Caucasian Chondzoresk rugs from the Qarabagh region as well as on an early group of Bakhshaish carpets from northwest Persia. Here the border consists of an alternation of interconnected cartouches and octagons, an almost identical rendering of yet another Divriği rug in the Vakıflar (15), with a medallion composed of an eight-lobed cloud-collar design, the latter motif reappearing later on a specific type of Khamseh Shahsavan sumakh bag (30).

Repeat patterns

The other main group of TGT rugs consists of infinite repeat patterns, some of which clearly have a directional character. These patterns are composed of elements which are ‘skewered’ along one or both axes and arranged in offset rows. In the carpet in (14) we see parallel rows of shield palmettes joined by a vertical pole, flanked by offset rows of secondary cruciform motifs and framed by a border of interconnected cartouches in the Bardini Tabriz style. The guard stripes are embellished with a dotted coin motif, a peculiar characteristic that appears to be specific to the TGT group.

Another piece from the same collection (18), distinguished by a coarser structure including goat hair wefts, shows a similar directional pattern although the shield palmettes are not connected and alternate with offset rows of interconnected Talish-type rosettes. The border is composed of joined octagons containing eight-pointed stars, while the outer guard stripe is a variant of that on (14), with the chain composed of interconnected small boxes instead of dotted coins. These two examples illustrate the range of weaving qualities we are to expect with TGT rugs.

Some TGT rugs seem to follow the early Caucasian ‘blossom’ design idiom more closely than others. On (19), which is curiously composed of a random arrangement of symmetric and asymmetric open left knots, the



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repeat pattern consists of a sawtooth-edged palmette flanked by cloudbands alternating with a type of ‘snowflake’ palmette containing a star-octagon. The latter motif, which also frames the composition, forms what appears to be a signature TGT border, which reminds us of the border on another very early Divriği rug (21), as well as firmly belonging to the lexicon of silk embroideries from Azerbaijan (17).⁸

The profusion of dotted motifs seen in various design elements also seems to be quite typical; we find it in the dotted chain employed in the inner guard stripe of (14) and (19), as well as in the orderly arrangement of dots embellishing the profile of the star-octagon motifs in the border (19).

One example (22) shows parallel and offset ‘skewered’ rows displaying a similar snowflake-type palmette, alternating here with a Talish-type of rosette as well as to a large lozenge flanked by blossom pendants. The interconnected cartouche border in the Bardini Tabriz style clearly links this rug to both (8) and (14).

Another early Caucasian-inspired piece is an extremely finely knotted TGT rug with a field pattern composed of parallel and offset rows of interconnected, feathery, directional palmettes alternating with rosettes composed of dotted circles (20). This fragment again illustrates the pointillist character of many design elements that make up the group: beginning with the rosettes in the field (which always enclose a star-octagon), moving to the chain of bicoloured dotted circles in the guard stripes (flanked by narrower yellow stripes with black dotted elements),



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11 Carpet fragment with polylobed medallion and star-octagons, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.67 x 1.25 m (2’ 2” x 4’ 1”). James F. Connell collection

12 Carpet with cloudband medallion, palmettes and cartouche border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. Present whereabouts unknown

13 Carpet fragment with cloudband medallion, Golden Triangle, circa 1700. 1.40 x 1.63 m (4’ 7” x 5’ 4”). Gidon Cohen collection



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14 Carpet fragments with shield palmettes, Golden Triangle, ca. 1700. 1.50 x 2.11 m (4’ 11” x 5’ 11”). James F. Connell collection

15 Carpet with eight-pointed star medallion, east Anatolia, 17th century. 1.09 x 3.20 m (3’ 7” x 10’ 6”). Vakıflar Museum, Istanbul, A-1

16 Carpet with quincunxial design, east Anatolia, 16th century. 1.67 x 2.13 m (5’ 6” x 7’ 0”). Vakıflar Museum, Istanbul, A-119

17 Silk embroidery with star octagons (detail), Azerbaijan, ca. 1700. 1.03 x 1.38 m (3’ 5” x 4’ 6”). Sotheby’s, London, 26 October 2022, lot 153



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on to the star-octagon border, which is embellished by a dazzling, confetti-like array of bicoloured dots. A later evolution of this pattern can be seen on a rug in the Kaffel collection, originally labelled as Kurdish (23). We see a similar pointillist-like effect on an example from the Burns collection (31), and on a rug formerly in the Bode collection, purchased at auction at Leo Spik in Berlin in 1963 by Kurt Erdmann, who gave it to the Museum für Islamische Kunst (24).⁹ While eminent authorities were attracted by the mystique of this rug, Ernst Kühnel's attribution to 'Caucasus, ca. 1700' and Erdmann's to 18th-century Turkey, shows that even they could not agree on its origin, and could have settled for a border region.¹⁰

Peculiar TGT rugs
While most TGT pieces seem to follow an early Caucasian trajectory, some appear in both Caucasian and Anatolian versions, exemplifying the very nature of the Golden Triangle. For instance, a TGT fragment shows parallel and offset rows of directional palmettes and rosettes including a specific motif which extends sideways (26), a design typical of a group of rugs with clear east Anatolian features such as (25), in which the border consists of an elongated hexagonal cartouche alternating with a small octagon containing an eight-pointed star, a motif we have seen as characteristic of TGT rugs, flanked by ivory guard stripes reminiscent of (24).¹¹ Although most TGT rugs appear to fall quite neatly into specific groups, there are others that differ either in design, structure, or both. For example, a fragmentary star-medallion rug with an octofoil border is woven with asymmetric knots open to the left and shows a considerable warp depression (28). A similar fragment has a nearly identical back, although it employs the symmetric knot (34).

A rug cut into four fragments, each of a size approximating that of the khaden used as beds on the wooden platforms in the traditional Tibetan household (27),¹² has the directional pattern arranged in parallel and offset rows in a similar fashion to TGT rugs such as (22), yet the structure (asymmetric knots open left on goat hair warps and single wefts), colours and handle point towards Central Asia rather than the Golden Triangle. Was this pattern so popular as to warrant it also being commissioned elsewhere? We certainly see a continuum from early examples such as a yellow-ground carpet with parallel and offset rows of two successions of conjoined polychrome hooked motifs with pendants (32) to relatively later variations such as an early Kazak with a similar network, composed of an alternation of shield, hooked and star-octagon devices (33).

Why Tibet?
Having handled a considerable number of TGT pieces, my perception was that the main body originated from one region, with various weaving locations revolving closely around a centre. How all such rugs ended up in Tibet remained, however, the big question. Little did I know that a vital clue that would lead to the answer would surface on social media. In a Facebook thread dedicated to Golden Triangle rugs, Thomas Wild brought to our attention an article describing the creation of an Armenian trading post in Lhasa in 1682, at a time when there already was a well-established Armenian community in Tibet.¹³ The article points out that following the unification of Tibet in the 17th century by the 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682), the country began to prosper and much effort was devoted to the refurbishment of many of the country's temples and palaces. Demand for large-format rugs could not have been satisfied by local production, and therefore these were



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- 18 Carpet fragment with directional palmettes, Golden Triangle, ca. 1700. 0.81 x 1.42 m (2' 8" x 4' 8"). James F. Connell collection

19 Carpet fragment with snowflake palmettes and cloudbands, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.66 x 1.54 m (2' 2" x 5' 1"). James F. Connell collection

20 Carpet fragment with feathery palmettes, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.28 x 1.55 m (11" x 5' 1"). James F. Connell collection
- 21 Carpet with star-octagon pattern (border detail), east Anatolia, 13th century. 2.30 x 3.80 m (7' 7" x 12' 6"). Vakıflar Museum, Istanbul, A-344

22 Carpet with snowflake palmettes, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 1.37 x 2.13 m (4' 6" x 7' 0"). Gidon Cohen collection



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commissioned from nearby China and elsewhere. In time these rugs were cut into smaller pieces and repurposed according to the individual needs of the monasteries. As I mentioned earlier, the TGT pieces were typically found in piles mixed with Chinese Ningxia fragments of the Kangxi period (1654–1722), often framed with similar pieces of red monastic fabric as well as sharing a common patina, a clue which indicated that they had possibly been sourced together. The 17th-century date also seems to be a good approximation regarding the age of the earlier TGT pieces. I believe that these rugs were originally supplied through the Armenian trading network, which connected Tibet to the Golden Triangle, with Tabriz at its centre.

John Wertime and Richard Wright’s undervalued formulation of the ‘Tabriz Hypothesis’ for the early Caucasian ‘dragon’/‘blossom’ group of carpets informs us that, since the late 15th century, Tabriz had a large Armenian population with its own quarters, with Armenian villages existing north of the city since 1500.¹⁴ There is a parallel between the range of weaving qualities we see in the early Caucasian ‘dragon’/‘blossom’ group, which Wright and Wertime quite convincingly attribute to the region around Tabriz, and those we have encountered in TGT rugs.

It is reasonable to believe that Armenian entrepreneurs were commissioning these rugs to the various towns and villages centred around Tabriz, populated by different ethnicities. We also see that demand was clearly for specific designs in a range of qualities, and the Armenian merchants seem to have had great deal of control over the whole enterprise. That both the early Caucasian rugs of the ‘dragon’ and ‘blossom’ type as well as the Golden Triangle group were largely discovered in mosques and monasteries is a significant clue as to the possible specialised role of Armenian traders.¹⁵



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23 Carpet with directional palmettes and rosettes, Golden Triangle, ca. 1700. 1.17 x 2.59 m (3’ 10” x 8’ 6”). Ralph and Linda Kaffel collection

24 Carpet with dotted palmettes, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 1.23 x 2.29 m (4’ x 7’ 6”). Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, I.39/63

25 Carpet with directional palmettes, Golden Triangle, 18th century. Alan Marcuson advertisement, HALI 2/2, 1979, present whereabouts unknown

26 Carpet fragment with directional palmettes, Golden Triangle, ca. 1800. 1.35 x 1.89 m (4’ 5” x 6’ 2”). Weise collection

27 Carpet fragment with blossoms and cypresses, Central Asia, 19th century. 0.76 x 1.59 m (2’ 6” x 5’ 3”). James F. Connell collection



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28 Carpet fragment with star medallion and octofoil border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.66 x 0.86 m (2’ 2” x 2’ 10”). James F. Connell collection

29 Carpet fragment with polylobed medallion, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.81 x 0.99 m (2’ 8” x 3’ 3”). James F. Connell collection

30 Shahsavan sumakh saddlebag face with eight-lobed cloud-collar design, Khamseh region, northwest Persia, 19th century. 0.51 x 0.59 m (1’ 8” x 1’ 11”)



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31 Carpet with dotted palmettes, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 1.73 x 2.13 m (5' 8" x 7' 0"). James D. Burns collection

32 Fragmented yellow-ground carpet with hooked motifs and pendants (detail), Golden Triangle, 17th century. 1.73 x 3.35 m (5' 8" x 11' 0")

33 Carpet with shield, hooked and star-octagon devices, Golden Triangle, ca. 1800. 1.19 x 2.13 m (3' 11" x 7' 0"). Gidon Cohen collection

34 Carpet fragment with octofoil border, Golden Triangle, 17th century. 0.74 x 0.53 m (2' 5" x 1' 9"). Patrick Pouler collection

35 Green-ground carpet with compartments, Golden Triangle, 18th century. 1.27 x 2.20 m (4' 2" x 7' 3"). Author's collection



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Notes

1. A. Levi, 'Renewal & Innovation—Iconographic Influences on Kurdish Carpet Design', HALI 70, 1993, pp.84-93.

2. HALI 63, 1992, p.171.

3. I. Bennett, 'Animal and Tree Carpets—An Amorphous Group', HALI 73, 1994, p.91.

4. <https://www.rugtracker.com/2017/10/rugs-of-golden-triangle.html>.

5. Most are published in M. Franses, *Anatolian Tribal Rugs 1050-1750—The Orient Stars Collection*, London, 2022.

6. For example (i) is woven with the symmetric knot, while the closest comparison (F. Spuhler, *Islamic Carpets and Textiles in the Keir Collection*, London, 1978, p.98, no.45) has asymmetric knots open to the left. In Franses 2022, op.cit., p.272, the author argues quite plausibly for the possibility that (i) comes from an east Anatolian Armenian workshop where, from the late 15th century, rugs were being woven in the Tabriz style.

7. Levi 1993, op.cit., p.89, fig.8.

8. Caucasian silk embroideries represent a true reservoir of motifs that appear on Golden Triangle rugs. For an extensive survey of the subject, see M. Franses et al., *Stars of the Caucasus—Silk Embroideries from Azerbaijan*, London, 2018.

9. I.39/63. A similar pointillist style is seen on what C.G. Ellis defines as a 'Rug with Bizarre Repeat Pattern', distinguished by parallel rows of palmettes with sickle leaves, both fully embellished with dots. Interestingly the guard stripe is of the chained-box type, which we have seen as typical of TGT rugs (Early Caucasian Rugs, Washington DC, 1975, p.77, pl.23).

10. F. Spuhler, *Oriental Carpets in the Museum of Islamic Art*, Berlin, London, 1998, no.31, p.44.

11. A yellow ground runner, attributed to Kuba, with the same field pattern but a different border, woven on a cotton foundation [Nagel, Stuttgart, 14 October 1991 = HALI 60, December 1991, p.158], is reminiscent of a yellow-ground carpet (J.V. McMullan, *Islamic Carpets*, New York, 1965, pl.44) with similar sideways-oriented palmettes and a strapwork arabesque border like that of (24), as well as to one with wool warps and cotton wefts and a border in the Caucasian silk embroidery style (Ellis 1975, op. cit., p.105, pl.37). The Golden Triangle syndrome is particularly evident in this group, as both the Nagel rug as well as one in the Keir Collection (Spuhler 1978, op. cit., p.136, no.70, also on a cotton foundation) are framed by a motif which reappears quite frequently in the northwest Persian Sauj Bulag proto-Kurdish group (e.g. J.D. Burns, *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan*, London, 2002, p.158, pl.48), therefore going full circle.

12. I would like to thank Thomas Cole for the personal communication about these fragments, as he has handled two of the three known examples.

13. T. Wild, 'The Bigger Picture', HALI 207, 2021, pp.55-56; M.I. Aguilar, 'Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso and the Unification of Tibet in 1642', in *The Tibet Journal*, no.2, 2016; H. Richardson, *Journal of the Tibet Society I*, 1981, pp.63-67.

14. J.T. Wertime & R.E. Wright, 'The Tabriz Hypothesis—The Dragon & Related Floral Carpets', in J. Tilden, ed., *Asian Art: The Second HALI Annual*, London, 1995, pp.30-54.

15. Ellis 1975, op. cit., p.73, pl. 21 includes a pair of fragments discovered by Frank M. Michaelian in the Armenian cathedral of New Julfa (Esfahan).

16. I am paraphrasing Ralph Yohe's 'Kurdish Syndrome' when describing the common denominator unifying Anatolian Kurdish weavings. See 'The Kurds of Turkey and Their Weavings' in R. Biggs, *Discoveries from Kurdish Looms*, Chicago, 1983, p.7.



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Tabriz also has easy access to northeast Anatolia along the Tabriz–Bursa caravan route, as well to the nearby southern Transcaucasus, facilitating the transmission of motifs to and from the areas. The relative closeness of the different ethnicities composing the Tabriz fabric would eventually crystallise this syncretism of weaving languages into its own style, that of the Golden Triangle.

A vast majority of contested attributions in rug studies are from examples that originate from the crossroads of northeast Anatolia, the southern Caucasus and northwest Persia. When I started collecting Kurdish rugs, I wanted everything I found to be Kurdish. I soon realised that while specific types might have been characteristic of certain tribes and villages, most of the earliest and most intriguing pieces were quite difficult to attribute with certainty to a specific ethnic group. Instead there appears to be some kind of syndrome at work.¹⁶ Look, for example, at the carpet in (35). Is it Kurdish? Shahsavan? Is it Armenian?

Rather than making educated guesses, I suggest that we should learn to appreciate the Golden Triangle group as an independent family of rugs that represents the material culture of a diverse network of peoples who have flourished in this area, which has been archaeologically fundamental, biblically and historically important, since time immemorial. ❖