

## The Use of the Kufic Script, an Element of Islamic Ornament in Turkish Rug Art

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**Abstract:** The kufic script, was used in writing the Koran from the birth of Islam until the 10th century and then, was used as a decorating element of the Islamic art in a wide range of areas from architecture to tile and from ceramics to textile. In our rug art, which was introduced to the Islamic world by Turks and then became an important part of the Islamic art, has found a wide area of use and it has been used, since Anatolian Seldjuk rugs successfully, presenting rich varieties. In this research, the kufic script which was used in all the periods from the 13th century Anatolian Seldjuk Rugs to the 19th century Hereke Rugs in Turkish rug art was explained with samples.

**Key words:** Aarabic, Kufic script, rugart, textile, Islamic art

### INTRODUCTION

The kufic script, which is a style of Arabic calligraphy, was used in writing the Koran from the birth of Islam until the 10th century and then, was used as a decorating element of the Islamic art in a wide range of areas from architecture to tile and from ceramics to textile.

The belief in only one god in the Islamic religion resulted in the denial of all kinds of illustrations and sculptures that can be qualified as an idol to be worshipped. As a consequence of this impediment to depiction, the decorating elements in Islamic art changed and calligraphy and especially the kufic script, became an indispensable element of decoration.

The script which was known as “El-cezm” before Islam went through various stages in the town of Kufah, developing into its new form to be named after the town as “kufic”.

Researchers have classified Kufic script differently. However, it can primarily be divided into two as “hand-written kufic script” and “hand-made kufic script”.

Hand-written kufic script is the form of the writing produced by using the hand and a pen, as the name also implies. In hand-written kufic script, there are no separate ornament elements (Fig. 1). The use of hand-written kufic script diminished when the 6 scripts (*muhakkak, reyhani, sulus, nesih, tevkâ and rikâ*) known as aklâm-i sitte (the 6 hands) appeared as a result of the studies of Ibn Mukle, who tried to set rules for the Arabic script. In the Ottoman period, kufic style was not in demand as a script either, but it was mainly used as a decorating element. Hand-made kufic script, on the other hand, is the kind of script that takes place in architectural decorating



Fig. 1: The kufic script which was used in writing the Koran (VIII.c.) (Alparslan, 2004)

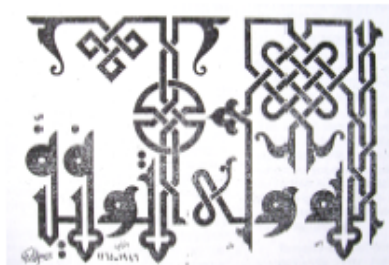


Fig. 2: Hand-made kufic script (Yazir, 1981)

and is presented by drawing or illustrating rather than writing by hand in pen (Fig. 2). Hand-made kufic script is also known as celi kufic script, plaited kufic script, kufic script with flowers or kufic script with leaves (Yazir, 1981; Alparslan, 1992, 2004; Bstacioglu, 1993; Serin, 1999).

Furthermore, there is another kind of kufic style in which all letters are angled and geometrical. This is the type of the kufic script which is mainly used in



Fig. 3: Square kufic script (XVI.c.), wooden minbar in the Friday mosque of Khvaf Horasan-Iran (Baer, 1998)



Fig. 4: Silk woven, Spain. (XIV. c.) (Anonymous, 1992)

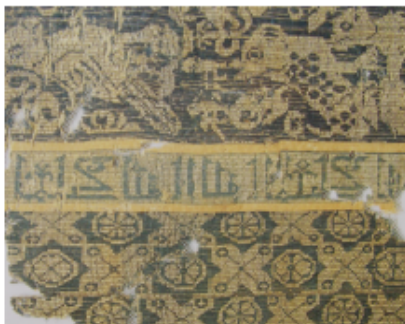


Fig. 5: Silk woven, West Asia Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (S. Etikan)

architecture as a decorating element and called the 'square kufic script' (chess style kufi (Ma'kifi)) (Baer, 1998; Serin, 1999; Can and Gun, 2005) (Fig. 3).

In Islamic art, scripts have been used as an element of expression and ornament on tile, wood, metal, glass, leather, stone, plaster, marble, textile, bones, ivory and precious and semi-precious stones apart from architecture. The use of the kufic script on 2 pieces of silk fabric between the 11th and 12th centuries and in the 14th century are shown in Fig. 4 and 5, respectively. The kufic script was also widely used in rug art, particularly as a decorating element, starting from the Abbasid period; yet,

its use as a script lost its significance and it slowly changed into a decorating element (Anonymous, 1992; Aslanapa, 1987a; 1993; qolley, 1994; Baer, 1998; Acr, 1999).

## THE USE OF KUFIC SCRIPT IN TURKISH RUG ART

It is known that Samarra, the center of the Abbasids in the 9th century, was a city where Turkish Troops of Guards lived with their families and they contributed significantly to the quality of Abbasid Rug Art of that period. This is also the period when kufic script was first used as a decorating element in rugs.

Some rug pieces found in Fustat between 1935 and 1936 also contain kufic borders. It is believed that these pieces may belong to the Abbasid period and as their borders were woven in a more developed form, it has been asserted that they may belong to the early Turkish-Islamic states such as the Tulunids and Akhshids or to the Fatimis (Aslanapa, 1987a).

Later samples are seen in the rugs of the Seldjuk Turks. The 8 rugs in the Konya Alaaddin Keykubat Mosque have pioneered the discovery of the Seldjuk rugs. These rugs, which are also called "Konya Rugs", have been woven at large sizes. Among them are also some rugs that are about 15 m<sup>2</sup>. Although these rugs, which have been woven with a background in dark blue or red, do not contain a variety of colours, as different shades of the colours were used together, a richness and harmony in colour can be observed. While geometrical motifs have been placed in the background according to the principle of infinity, the borders include ornaments developed from the kufic script. Figure 6 illustrates the details of a Seldjuk rug from the 13th century. In the center of this rug, which was found in the Sultan Alaaddin Keykubat Mosque and which is at display in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, the 'elibelinde' motifs have been placed in a geometrical and switching order. On the border, on the other hand, there are ornaments developed from the kufic script. The large ornaments woven on a dark blue background have been placed horizontally in the border which is actually quite wide. In Fig. 7, the details of another Seldjuk rug can be seen. In the center of this rug, the motif called the "philodendron" takes place on a dark yellow background and in the borders, yellow kufic script has been woven on a red background (Aslanapa, 1987b; Yetkin, 1991; Deniz, 2000; Turkmen, 2001).

Another example of the group of Konya rugs is seen in Fig. 8. This is a piece of a large Seldjuk rug which has survived up to date. In the narrow border that is on a red background, there are arrows pointing right and left



Fig. 6: Seldjuk rug, detail (XIII.c.) Museum of (XI - XII.c.) (Anonymous, 1993)

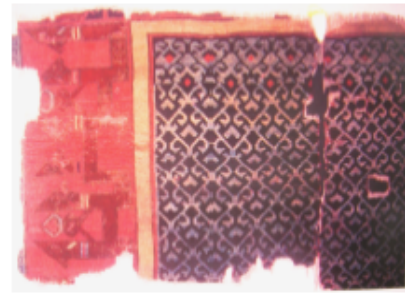


Fig. 9: Seldjuk rug, detail (XIII.c.) Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 7: Seldjuk rug, detail (XIII.c.). Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 10: Seldjuk rug, detail (XIII.c.) Museum of Mevlana, Konya (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 8: Seldjuk rug (XIII.c.) Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (S. Etikan)



Fig. 11: Seldjuk rug (XIII.c. - XIV.c.) Stockholm National Museum (Aslanapa, 1987)

alternately and in the wide border, there are large kufic letters woven in white. In Fig. 9, yet another Konya rug from the 13th century is shown. In the middle, navy blue motifs have been placed in a geometrical order on a yellow background, while in the wide border, there are large kufic letters in red.

In 1930, 3 more rugs from the Seldjuk Period were found in BeySehir ESrefoglu Mosque. The borders of these three rugs were also filled with motifs developed from the kufic script. One of these rugs can be seen in Fig. 10. In the wide border of this Seldjuk rug, which is thought to date back to the 13th century, on a dark

background, there are red stars with blue octagons around them, which are surrounded by geometrical shapes that look like the kufic script. In the narrow borders that are adjacent to the both sides of the wide border, white motifs that have been developed from the kufic script have been sequenced on a red background (Aslanapa, 1987b; Deniz, 2000; Turkmen, 2001; Kayipmaz, 2006).

In addition to the rugs found in Konya Alaeddin Keykubat and BeySehir ESrefoglu Mosque, many rugs from the 13-15th century were found in Fustat and it was agreed that seven of them were Seldjuk rugs. The piece of rug illustrated in Fig. 11 is also a Seldjuk rug dating back to the late 13th and early 14th centuries. From this piece which has survived up to date, it can be thought that the rug was woven using the shades of brown and yellow and

it is seen that the part that is probably thought to be the border has been decorated with motifs developed from the kufic script.

Another group of rugs that is known to have remained from the Seldjuk Period is the type classified as the Tibet Group Rugs. These rugs, which look like the Beylik Period rugs with animal motifs, can be exemplified by the rug shown in Fig. 12. In the middle background of the rug, which has been divided into squares, there are blue and red stylized animal motifs one within the other. The border, on the other hand, has been left wide, as in the other Seldjuk rugs and filled with large motifs developed from the kufic script (Anonymous, 1993; Aslanapa, 1997; Deniz, 2000; Turkmen, 2001).

A glance at the chronological order of our rug history will show that the 13th century Seldjuk rugs were followed by the Period of Rugs With Animal Motifs which continued for about 200 years from the beginning of the

14th century until the end of the 15th century with a rich variety of rugs. In these rugs, the backgrounds were divided into squares placed in octagons which were filled with animal motifs. Sometimes, the animal motifs were sequenced on switched axes, without dividing the background (Aslanapa, 1987b; Yetkin, 1991; Deniz, 2000; Turkmen, 2001).

In some of the rugs that belong to this period, kufic borders can be found. In Fig. 13, a rug with animal motifs can be seen. Here, the composition expresses the fight of the Dragon and the Phoenix, probably placed in octagons in the squares on the background. The narrow borders of this rug, too, are formed by sequencing motifs developed from the kufic script.

In Fig. 14, another rug with animal figures, dating back to the end of the 15th century, is illustrated. In the octagon medallion that has been placed in the middle of



Fig. 12: Seldjuk Rug with animal motif, detail (XII - XIV.c.) Kirchheim Collection (Aslanapa, 1997)



Fig. 13: A rug with animal, detail (it's borders are formed by sequencing motifs developed from the kufic script) (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 14: A rug with animal, (it's borders are formed by sequencing motifs developed from the kufic script), (XV.c.) Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 15: Plaited kufic script (Serin, 1999)

this red-background rug, there are bird and dragon motifs. In the border, there are motifs developed from the kufic script. However, this kufic ornament is different from the others and it has been converted into a form in which the vertical movements of the hand-written kufic script, which is also classified as hand-made kufic script, were covered with plaits. It is notable that this kind of ornament, which is also named as plaited kufic script (Fig. 15), are placed in

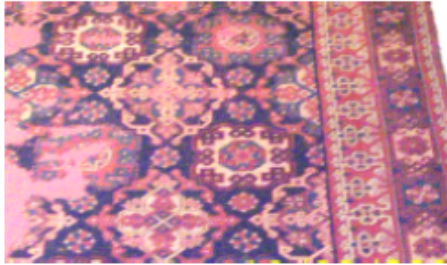


Fig. 16: Early Ottoman period rug. Type I., detail (XVI.c.) Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (S. Etikan)



Fig. 18: Early Ottoman Period Rug. Type II., detail (XVI. c.) Museum of Victoria and Albert (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 17: Early Ottoman period rug. Type I., detail (XVI. c.) Art Museum of New York Metropolitan (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 19: Early Ottoman Period Rug. Type III., detail (XVI.c.) Museum of Islamic Arts Berlin, (Türkmen, 2001)



Fig. 20: Early Ottoman period rug. in the fresco by V. Foppo. Type III., (IV. c.) (Aslanapa, 1987)

the borders of the rugs made after the 15th century (Yazir, 1981; Aslanapa, 1987b; Anonymous, 1992; Serin, 1999).

Along with the 15th century rugs with animal motifs, rugs whose backgrounds were divided into geometrical shapes that were filled with floral motifs were also started to be woven. In the border ornament of most of these rugs, which are examined in four sub-groups under the Early Ottoman Period Rugs group of the Ottoman Period Rugs, there are motifs developed from the kufic script even though the background ornament changes.

In the first sub-group of the four groups of the Early Ottoman Period rugs, the background has been divided into small squares and the octagons placed inside the squares have been filled with geometrical shapes. In the borders, motifs created from kufic letters have been sequenced. In Fig. 16, a rug from the 16th century, which is at display in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts which symbolizes the first group, can be seen. In this rug, the plaited kufic pattern has been used in the narrow border from the outer to the inner direction and in the two wide borders that follow it. In Fig. 17, another example, which has the pattern characteristics of the first group and a white plaited kufic pattern on a red background in its borders, has been illustrated.

In the second group of rugs, the geometrical motifs in the octagons have been replaced with floral motifs. In some of these rugs, the emphasis on the lines around the octagons has diminished. In the borders of some of them, plaited kufic script can be observed (Fig. 18).

The third group of rugs has a background divided into large squares or rectangles, in which octagons filled with floral patterns have been placed. Both small and large squares have been placed on the background of the rugs in the fourth group. It is seen that some of the rugs in the third and the fourth groups have borders containing the plaited kufic script.

In Fig. 19, the details of a rug from the 16th century, which reflects the characteristics of the third group, can be seen. In the borders of this rug, which is exhibited in the Berlin Islamic Art Museum and the rug in Fig. 20, which was depicted in the fresco by Foppo and dated 15th century, motifs formed from the plaited kufic script have been sequenced.

In another rug from the 16th century, which reflects the pattern traits of the fourth group very well and is presented in Fig. 21, it is seen that there are plaited kufic motifs in the borders (Aslanapa, 1987b; Yetkin, 1991; Deniz, 2000; Turkmen, 2001).

Another 15th-century Anatolian rug, which contains the plaited kufic script in its border, is one which has been woven by using Turkish knots and influenced by Memluk motifs that cannot be classified into a specific group. In



Fig. 21: Early Ottoman Period Rug. Type IV., detail (XVI.C.) Museum of Istanbul (Aslanapa, 1987)



Fig. 22: Anatolian Rug, detail (XV. c.) Rug Museum of Wakfs, Istanbul Turkish and Islamic Arts (Yetkin, 1991)



Fig. 23: Prayer Rug (saf seccade), detail (XV. c.) Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul (Aslanapa, 1987)

this rug, on which blue motifs have been woven on a red background, the borders with large kufic motifs are quite wide as in the Seldjuk rugs (Aslanapa, 1987b; Yetkin, 1991) (Fig. 22).

'Seccades', i.e. prayer rugs, constitute an important part of our rug art. There are differences in the design of prayer rugs which are distinguished from the other rugs in terms of their function considered important in the Islam religion. The central background contains a mehrab that can be in various forms, such as plain, knotted, stepped or hooked and it is bordered by several lines. Above the mehrab there is a narrow rectangular section on which one can kneel and touch the forehead while



Fig. 24: Anatolian prayer rug, (XVc.) Museum of Islamic Arts Berlin (Mills, 1991)



Fig. 25: Hereke silk prayer rug (XVc.) Museum of Topkapi Palace (Leloglu-Ünal, 1999)

praying and that may contain the verses of the Koran ('alinlik' or 'ayetlik') and likewise there is a rectangular shape below the mihrab to stand on while praying ('tabanlik'). In the 15th and the 16th centuries, samples of Anatolian prayer rugs with rich artistic value were woven.

Figure 23 contains a prayer rug with rows (on which prayers stand side by side to pray), 'saf seccade', belonging to the 15th century. The border of this prayer rug, on which the side-by-side mihrab arrangement has been placed in two rows on the rug background, includes white plaited kufic motifs on a red background. One group of prayer rugs from the 15th-century Anatolian prayer rugs is notable for their original mihrab arrangement. In these prayer rugs, which are also frequently seen in the paintings of many European artists, the motif identifying

the mihrab surrounds the middle background and forms a recess in the section below the mihrab. Such a prayer rug is seen in Fig. 24, in which the borders contain the plaited kufic script (Aslanapa, 1987b; Mills, 1991)

There is another kind of kufic style which is mainly used in architecture as a decorating element and in which all letters are angled and geometrical. A best example for this type of the kufic script that is called the 'square kufic script' (chess style kufi (*Ma'kali*)) is seen in the Hereke Prayer Rug provided in Fig. 25. In this prayer rug, verses from the Koran have been inscribed in the sulus script in alignment with the mihrab above, in the narrow and wide borders and in the corners of the mihrab. Furthermore, the square-kufic-script ornaments are seen in the square medallions that are in the middle of the wide border on the long sides.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The rare examples of our rug art that have survived up to date show that the kufic script of Islamic art has been a widely used decorating element in the art of rug weaving, in addition to being one of the most prominent decorating elements in architecture as well as textile, tile, ceramics and leather.

As a result of the hindrances brought in against the use of some figures in the decorating arts in Islam, inscription gained importance in decoration and starting from the Abbasids period, it took place in the art of rug making. The kufic script, which was used in all the periods from the 13th century Anatolian Seldjuk Rugs to the 19th century Hereke Rugs, was in the form of large kufic letters in the wide borders of the Seldjuk rugs, but it gradually lost its letter characteristics and it was used in the form of motifs developed from the letters in the 14th and 15th century rugs with animal motifs. In the Early Ottoman Period rugs, on the other hand, it became a decoration element in which sharp letters have taken a round form and connected to each other with plaits. This kind of kufic ornament, which is also known as the plait kufic style, was widely used in the border ornament of the 15th century Anatolian prayer rugs. Inscription also has an important place in the designs of Silk Hereke prayer rugs. In these prayer rugs, the square kufic script, a common type of the kufic script, has been used together with other script types to inscribe some of the verses on the prayer rug. The square kufic script, one of the important decorating elements of the Islamic architecture, has also been used in the borders of these prayer rugs in small medallions.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, in our rug art, which was introduced to the Islamic world by Turks and then became an important part of the Islamic art, inscription has found a wide area of use as an important decorating element of Islamic art and it has been used since Anatolian Seldjuk rugs successfully, presenting rich varieties. However, in time, the kufic script and the motifs developed from it have also been adversely influenced by the changes in the traditional designs of our rugs due to various reasons.

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