

Photo: Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü

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On Birds and Bektashi: Two Tribal Karamânî Rugs of Central Anatolia, 1450-1550

Ahmet Balkan traces the migration of birds from Central Asia to Anatolia, covering six centuries and multiple mythologies

Text: Ahmet Balkan

Carpets are more than mere functional objects – they are repositories of cultural heritage, mythologies, and the visual expressions of the communities that create them. Two Central Anatolian carpets, the *Vakıflar Bird-Tree Rug* (circa 1500-1550) and the *Mevlânâ Forty Birds Rug* (circa 1450-1500), exemplify this intersection of art, culture, and belief. Found in the Vakıflar storage in Ankara and the Mevlânâ convent in Konya respectively, these rugs feature highly developed bird-tree and bird motifs that offer insights into their origins and the communities that wove them. Recent research[1] suggests that these carpets are deeply tied to Turkmen tribal groups and the Bektashi Sufi tradition of Anatolia, revealing a rich tapestry of symbolism, mythology, and historical context.

Decoding the rugs' origins

Turkmen tribes of Karamania

Accordingly, both rugs are most likely the work of Turkmen nomads, a significant population in Anatolia following the late medieval period. Ottoman cadasters (tax records) from the 16th century meticulously documented tribes inhabiting the Karaman province, numbering some 7,000 tents within three jurisdictions of Eski-İl, Turgud, and Bayburd.[2] These jurisdictions were nomad groups based on different migratory routes, all part of the At Çeken (Horse Drovers), a predominantly Turkmen tribe. Historical records link the At Çeken to Khorasan, especially Turgud and Bayburd, who in-migrated to Anatolia along Dediği Sultan, a contemporary dervish of Hacı Bektâş-ı Velî, the founder of the Bektashi order.[3]



Photo: Ahmet Ertuğ

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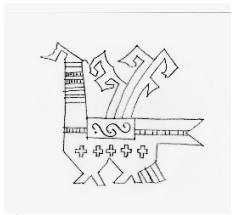
1 The *Vakıflar Bird-Tree Rug*. 2.24 x 1.53 m. Istanbul Vakıflar Museum, inv. no. E-1

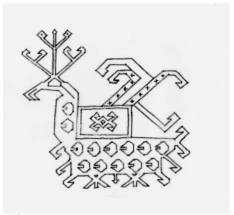
2 The *Mevlânâ Forty Birds Rug*. 2.15 x 1.08 m. Konya Mevlânâ Museum, inv. no. 841



3a)



3b)



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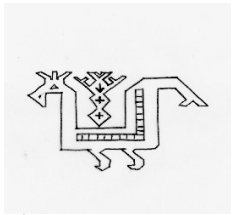


3d)

3 Anatolian and Turkestani birds (author's drawings). 3a) The Huguet (1455-60), 3b) the Mevlânâ (1450-1500), 3c) the Vakıflar (1500-1550), 3d) the Hoffmeister Bird (1700-1800)



4a)



4b)



4c)

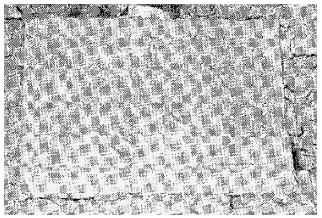
4 Iconographic continuity of the bird-tree: ongun birds as divine mediators. 4a) Uyghur (?) votive panel, 8th century. (British Museum, 1925,0619.35), 4b) Vakıflar Gül, 16th century, Anatolia (Vakıflar E-1), 4c)Turkmen Gül, 18th century. West Turkestan (Fine Arts Mus. of San F., 2000.186.11)

The Turkmen clans' connection to birds – and thence to these rugs – is underscored by the *ongun*, sacred bird emblems associated with the main Oghuz tribes. Hunting birds like falcons, hawks, and eagles were revered and considered divine intermediaries, embodying the Turkic concept of *kut*, or heavenly blessing.[4] This bird symbolism is evident in the rugs' motifs (3b, c), featuring an established type of saddled bird, which also appears in a Catalan painting of the period (3a) and remains woven up until 18th century Western Turkestan (3d), likely referencing the Turkmen tribes' spiritual and cultural heritage.

The bird-tree iconography

Part of this bird symbolism is the bird-tree motif of the *Vakıflar Rug*, strongly resonating with Turkic cosmology and mythology. In East Turkestan, for example, Khotan murals depict haloed sovereigns accompanied by *ongun* birds, receiving the divine favor or *kut* via a world-tree from mythological ancestors (4a). These visual elements find astounding parallels five centuries later with the Seljuk of Anatolia,[5] as they do in weaves of the *Vakıflar Rug* and later Turkestani trappings (4b, c).

Such iconographic continuity between early Uyghur, Anatolian and later West Turkestani nomadic art, reveals the persistence of tribal Turkic symbolism nearing a thousand years, reinforcing the argument that these bird rugs are products of Turkmen weaving traditions. Particularly the 'C'-shape in the *Vakıflar Rug*'s bird, aligns it with the Türkmen 'C'-gül medallion, while its dotted body connects it to that of the *Mevlânâ Rug*.



5 Dediği Sultan bird-tree panel. (After Prof. Ö. Bakırer, 1975)



6 Karaca Ahmed bird-tree panel. (After T. Acar, 2021)



7 Hacı Bektaş and Hacı Tuğrul as birds. (Ülgen Family archive)

The Bektashi connection

Nomads and tekkes

During the later 15th century, the Bektashi Sufi order gained greater following across Anatolia, deeply influencing Turkmen tribes. Rural Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) served as spiritual centres for nomads, mediating between their everyday lives and higher metaphysical knowledge. Historical records show that Turkmen tribes such as the At Çeken cohabited with dervish communities, forming symbiotic relationships. For example, in 1518/19, the *tekke* of Sheikh Haji Ismail in Lârende housed both dervishes and nearby camping Turkmen At Çeken clans, illustrating the close bond between tribal and spiritual spheres.[6]

It is with greater certainty thus that At Çeken groups such as Turgut or Bayburt visited *tekkes*, especially that of Dediği Sultan by Konya/Ilgın, with whom they had close bonds. Upon entering this shrine, nomads would have been exposed to a bird-tree panel on its façade (5). Similar motifs are equally present at other Bektashi buildings, such as at the tomb of the Alawite Sheikh Karaca Ahmed by Uşak (6), suggesting a shared iconographic language across Sufi (architectural) and tribal (textile) contexts.

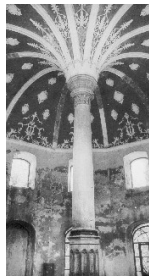


Photo: Prof. G. Akın

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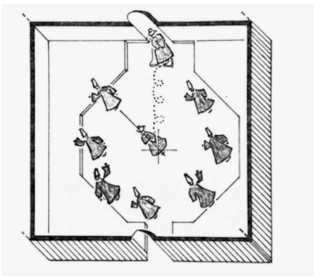

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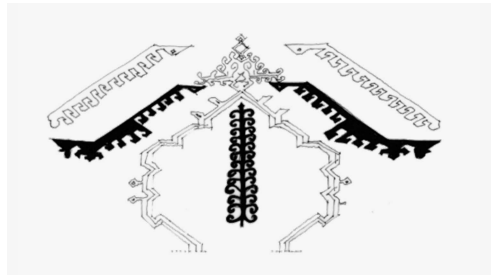

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8 Bektaşi world-tree. Merdivenköy *Tekke*

9 Sheikh as the pole. Mevlevi *semâ* finale. (After A. I. Doğan, 1977)

10 World tree Sufi(?) rug with birds and dragons. Central Anatolia, ca. 1475-1525. TIEM 395 (author's drawing)

Birds in Bektashi belief

Birds indeed occupy a special place in Bektashi mythology and ritual practice. Similar to bird metamorphoses of shamans, Sufi legends describe the ability of Bektashi saints to transform into birds, a concept known as *kuş donuna girmek* (entering the 'cloth' of a bird). For example, Hacı Bektâş-ı Velî is said to have arrived in Anatolia in the form of a pigeon, embodying spiritual purity and humility, while Hacı Tuğrul suspiciously transforms into a falcon (*tuğrıl*) to fight this newcomer dervish (7).[7]

Historical accounts further highlight such heterodox practices. The 17th century traveller Evliyâ Çelebi observed how at the Kaligra Sultan *tekke* sacrifices were made to eagles, believed to fulfill the wishes of devotees. Similarly, a *tekke* near the Kızılırmak River featured black birds (*kara kuş*) trained by a Bektashi



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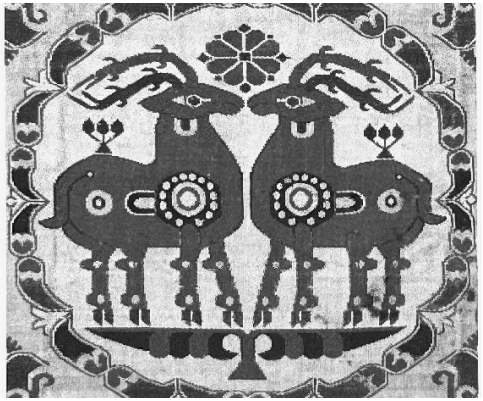

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Sheikh to hunt animals on command, including the yearly sacrifice of horses for eagles, illustrating the deep integration of birds into both spiritual and daily life.[8]

The world tree and cosmic order

The tree motif in the *Vakıflar Rug* also strongly resonates with the Bektashi perspective of the world tree (*dünya ağacı*), a cosmological symbol representing the axis mundi or the pole (*kutub*) around which the universe revolves (8). In Sufi ritual, this pole also symbolises the spiritual axis occupied exclusively by the Mevlevi Sheikh (9). The Bektashi ritual hall (*meydan*) of the Merdivenköy *tekke* and its central column visually embody this idea, linking heaven and earth into singular existence (*vahdet-i vücûd*).

In Turkic weaving tradition, the world tree is often depicted as part of rotating stars[9] or alongside birds, further reinforcing the cosmological significance of the rugs' motifs. In other cases dragons (*ejder*) join as symbols of the universe (*evren*). For instance, the contemporaneous *TIEM World Tree Rug* (10) features an elaborate central tree flanked by confronted birds, themselves crowned by elongated dual dragon-snakes. The dotted inner field of the rug additionally recalls a speckled animal hide of a Sufi. Such iconography visually integrates the spiritual, mythological, and cosmic dimensions central to both Bektashi and Turkmen traditions.

Symbolism in the Carpets

The Vakıflar Bird-Tree Rug

In addition to such cosmic connotations, the *Vakıflar Rug*'s complex bird-tree iconography blends Turkmen and Central Asian deer mythologies. Deer, like birds, hold significant symbolic weight in Turkmen Bektashi tradition. Hagiographies speak of Bektashi dervishes in the 'cloth' of deer as spiritual guides.[10] The legendary Geyikli Baba (the 'Deered Dervish') apparently lived among mountainous deer, while mendicant dervishes with deer had been eye-witnessed by Busbecq in 16th century Anatolia (14).

This duality is mirrored in Central Asian art, where deer are often depicted with bird-like features (11) or appear as confronted pairs (12), suggesting a syncretism of myths: The *Vakıflar Rug*'s motifs may have developed from ancient layers of deer and bird symbolisms of Central Asia, here echoed as tribal identity and cosmic order in an arguably Bektashi manner (13).

The Mevlânâ Forty Birds Rug

The *Mevlânâ Rug* on the other hand prominently features forty birds, a number remarkably rich in Bektashi symbolism. The number 40 (*kırk*) is central to Bektashi ritual and cosmology, representing the *kırklar cem'i* (assembly of the forty saints) and the forty spiritual obligations of the faith. At the shrine of Hacı Bektâş-ı Velî, devotees pass through the 'Gate of the Forty' to reach the central ritual 'Hall of the Forty', where the 'Forty-Branch Candelabra' (*kırkbudak şamdanı*) visibly unites the saints into a single source of light. The carpet's forty saddled birds likely allude to this assembly of saints, perhaps here in the cloth of birds, encapsulating Bektashi spiritual ideals in material form.

Conclusion

The *Vakıflar Bird-Tree Rug* and the *Mevlânâ Forty Birds Rug* may thus be regarded as cultural documents, weaving together the Turkmen nomadic heritage and the mystical world of Bektashi Sufism. Through their bird and world-tree motifs, these rugs express a complex visual language rooted in Turkic cosmology, spiritual transformation, and the intimate relationship between nomads and the rhythms of the ever-rotating sky.

The Turkmen weavers, likely women, drew inspiration from their natural surroundings, oral traditions, and interactions with Sufi dervishes. Their work reflects not only their own cultural legacy but also their role as custodians of a shared spiritual and artistic heritage – offering a window through these Karamânî rugs into the vibrant cultural tapestry at the close of 15th century Central Anatolia.[11]

Endnotes

1 Balkan, "Confronting Bird's", 2023 (Unpublished MA Thesis, LMU Munich)
2 Özkılınç et.al. (eds.), *387 numaralı Karaman ve Rûm defteri (937/ 1530) I*, 1997, p. 36
3 Taşğın, *Dediği Sultan ve Menakıbı*, 2013
4 Sümer, Oğuzlar, 1972, p. 207; *Clauson, An Etymological Dictionary*, 1972, p. 594
5 See Seljuk Mirror with haloed Prince and two ongun birds in Roxburgh (ed.), the Turks, 2005, cat. 72
6 Barkan, *Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri*, 1942, p. 333
7 Taşğın and Solmaz, *Hacı Bektaş ve Hacı Toğrul Karşılaşması*, 2012
8 Maden, *Çelebi'nin Seyahatnâmesinde Bektaşi Tekke ve Türbeleri*, 2013, pp. 100, 105
9 Swastika-shaped stars that recall the idea of the sky-wheel (çark-ı felek). See TIEM 357 or TIEM 406 Border
10 Ocak, *Bektaşi Menakıbnamelerinde*, 1983, pp. 155-56
11 Ottoman sources in 17th century still refer to carpets of the former Karamanid lands as kâlîçehâ-i karamânî

11 Deer with bird's beak. Pazyryk Tattoo, 4th century BC. (After Rudenko, 1970)

12 Confronted Deer. Khotan Silk detail, 7th/8th century. (Abegg-Stiftung. Inv. No. 4901)

13 Deer-birds? The Vakıflar Göl, 16th century. (Author's drawing)

14 Dervish & Deer. As seen in 16th century. (Busbecq, 1664)