

# Tabrdouhte & Tabbnoute

INDIGO-DYED BERBER SHAWLS OF THE MIDDLE ATLAS GEBHART BLAZEK

*Tabrdouhte* and *tabbnoute* constitute a small group of flatwoven womens' shawls from the northeastern parts of the Middle Atlas region. They offer significant evidence of the extent to which the textile culture of Morocco's Berber tribes was influenced by the professional skills of itinerant Jewish dyers. The traditional 'secrets' of such dyers were largely lost to Morocco following the emigration of many Jewish families to the newly-founded state of Israel.

Along the arid eastern flank of the northern Middle Atlas Range live a series of Berber tribes whose women's flatwoven shawls – called *tabrdouhte* or *tabbnoute* in the regional Tamazirt dialect and *handira* in Arabic – display great similarities both in colouring and in their simple structure. However, the dominant colour in these textiles, variations of deep indigo blue, was created not by the Berber women themselves but by travelling Jewish

blue dyers who were based in settlements along the Moulouya Valley east of Berber territory. The high quality of this group of textiles is the result of a symbiosis of the weaving skills of the Berber women and the knowledge of these specialist dyers, while a marked decline in production – which occurred at different times in different regions – followed the departure from the area of the local blue dyers.

The importance of Jewish crafts-

1. Beni Ouarain (Ahel Telt/Ahel Taïda) woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, late 19th century. 0.87 x 2.25m (2'10" x 7'5"). Private collection

men and dyers in Morocco has been mentioned in the literature on several occasions over the past few years. In *From Sign to Image*,<sup>1</sup> Ali Amahan describes Jewish spice traders and dyers as being responsible for the decline of natural dye methods in Moroccan tribal carpets and textiles. While there is an element of truth in this, the situation, as always, is a great deal more complex. At the 1995 ICOC regional meeting in Marrakesh,



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Wilfried Stanzer made reference to the connection between superior quality Berber textile culture and the Jewish population in the district of the Ait Ouazguite, while at the same conference Ori Soltes discussed the influence of Jewish motifs on Moroccan textiles.<sup>2</sup>

Before the coming of synthetic dyes, home dyeing was the norm. Only the more complicated procedures such as indigo dyeing were left to professional dyers, who

2. Beni Ouarain (Beni Jelfidassen) woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, early 20th century. 0.80 x 2.10m. (2'7" x 6'11"). Galerie Konzett, Graz

expected to be paid accordingly. As the rural nomadic population generally could not afford to purchase their services on more than a very modest scale, in old pieces blue or dark green usually only appear as a secondary colour. For the dyers, in turn, this meant that such commissions brought relatively little income, and consequently Jewish dyers were also usually active as spice traders, travelling from *souk* (weekly market)

to *souk* and offering their dyeing services alongside their wares. A further consequence was that these traders introduced synthetic dyes into their stock, which being much more affordable sold extremely well. Yet we should not overlook the fact that the much more expensive indigo dyes were still available. In the case of Outad Oulad el Haj this was true until around 1967.

The true role of Jewish dyers was therefore thoroughly ambivalent: on the one hand they enabled the rapid spread of synthetic dyes through their well organised trade; on the other hand they must simultaneously be regarded as the last 'Keepers of the Holy Grail' with regard to high-quality natural dye-stuffs. We were able to document in the course of our fieldwork that in Taourirt in the lower Moulouya Valley, following the departure of Jewish dyers' families around 1950, at least ten Moroccan families attempted unsuccessfully to continue their activities. We were told that knowledge of the old dyeing methods, traditionally passed from one generation to the next, was generally lost with the emigration of the last Jewish dyer. Only in Missour did one old woman succeed in continuing the dye-work for some fifteen years until the late 1960s, having been initiated into the secrets of indigo dyeing by the former craftsman.

In view of this background, and independently of the fineness of the old pieces, blue-ground shawls or capes from the eastern Middle Atlas must be regarded as particularly significant purely on the basis of the







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expensive dyes used in their production. The main area of distribution of such textiles begins with three eastern tribes of the Beni Ouarain Confederation and extends as far as the Ahel Tsiouant, a small eastern neighbour of the Marmoucha. It is possible, however, that even the shawls of the Ait Haddidou and neighbouring groups

in the northeastern High Atlas share a common origin with this group of textiles, or were subject to some degree of influence from them during the course of their historical development. For many years the shawls of the Ahel Tsiouant were described incorrectly in the trade as 'Ait Haddidou'.

The *tabrdouhte* of the Ahel Telt

3. Above: Beni Ouarain (Beni Jelidassen) or Oulad Ali woman's cape (*tabbnoute*), Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, late 19th century. 0.80 x 2.15m. (2'7" x 7'1"). Galerie Konzett, Graz

and Ahel Taida (1), the two northeasternmost tribes of the Beni Ouarain Confederation, have long been the best-known type and have been published many times.<sup>3</sup> The proportion of blue in the textiles varies, depending on the extent to which the weaver's family was able to afford the services of a professional dyer. While *tabrdouhte* heavily



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decorated with design panels usually appear to have a dominant blue ground, the everyday shawls known as *tabbnoute*, which are decorated only with wavy white lines or simplified design variants, are dominated by dark brown, the natural colour of the undyed wool. The design canon used in the white bands of motifs on *tabrdouhte* varies only very slightly from piece to piece; the layout is symmetrical along a motif band, always the same, in the middle of the textile. In the regional Tamazirt dialect, *tirkaze* means 'pole' or 'pillar' – a term also used for the two central tent-poles – and it surely cannot be mere coincidence that this motif band, consisting of double cones and flat bridging elements, resembles a skeletal spinal column. When the shawl is worn, the motif lies exactly over the wearer's spine.

Whereas *tabrdouhte*, even old examples, use cotton (or in rare early examples linen) to achieve higher definition in the drawing of the pattern, in simpler versions wool spun by the weaver herself was most commonly used. It is noteworthy that the white threads, worked in a combination of weft wrapping and floating wefts, are taken to the back of the textile in loops, giving the design panels a cushion-like pile on the back. The fine yellow lines that demarcate the motif stripes are usually of silk in early examples. Older pieces produced before 1920 can achieve a fineness of up to 50 wefts per cm.

Directly south and east lies the territory of the Beni Jelidassen, a tribal group whose textile production was until recently almost unknown.<sup>4</sup> Here one type of shawl (2) is of particular interest, although several other forms woven by various sub-groups of the Beni Jelidassen are also known (3, 4). These blue-ground textiles – of which so far fewer than twenty pieces have come to light – are extremely finely woven (again, up to about 50 wefts/cm). Apart from the coloured stripes, the drawing is limited to nine or eleven very fine, design bands with floating wefts of highly spun white wool. Different gradations of the basic blue are skilfully interwoven at intervals into the overall visual composition.



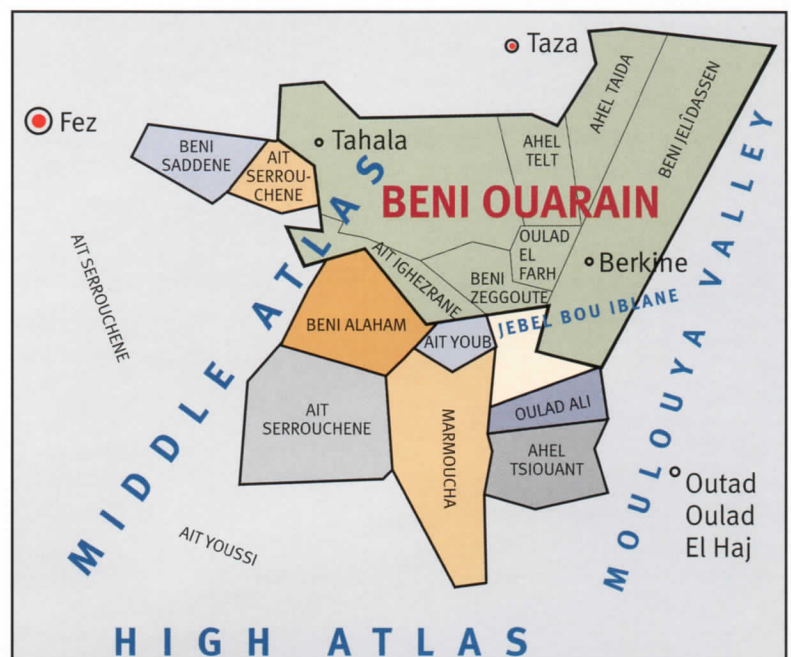
4. Facing page, below: Detail of a Beni Ouarain (Beni Jelidassen) woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*) fragment, Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, 19th century. 0.92 x 1.62m. Private collection

5. Above: Detail of an Oulad Ali woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, late 19th-early 20th century. 0.95 x 2.15m (3'1" x 7'1"). Galerie Konzett, Graz

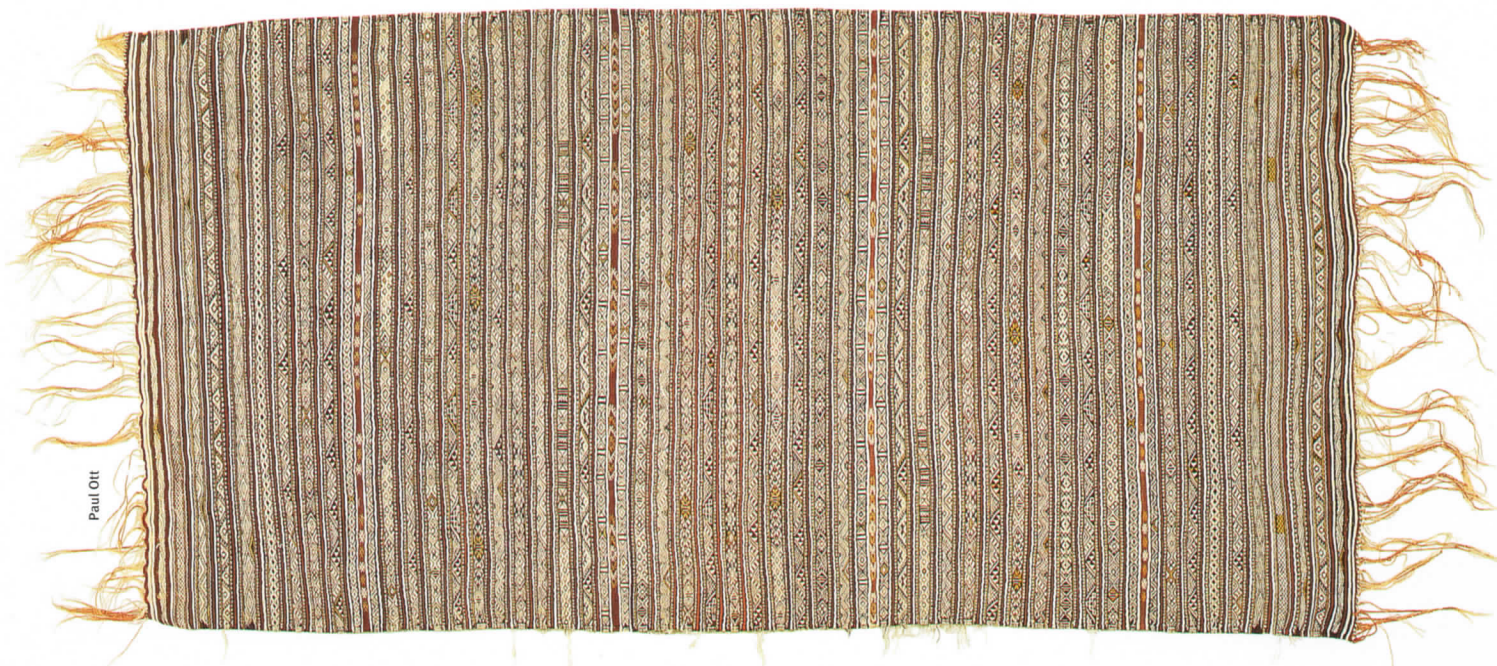
With very few exceptions the known examples of this type were produced before 1930.

The second textile type of the Beni Jelidassen (4) was only found in the villages around the Ait Abdellah and Beni Smint, south of the Jebel bou Iblane Range.<sup>5</sup> Here again blue is the characteristic colour, even if it is not as dominant

as in the above-mentioned groups. The design panels are reminiscent in their motifs and technique of those of the central tribes of the Beni Ouarain to the north and north-west. The pattern is generally produced with floating wefts, but individual stripes in a diagonal weft-wrapping technique, producing a three-dimensional effect, also occur







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in more elaborately worked pieces. The white motifs and parts of the basic weave are executed in cotton, although silk was also used for small design details or the occasional decorative knot.

The third shawl type known in the region of the Beni Jelîdassen (3) was also found among the Oulad Ali, their neighbours to the south. This tribe does not belong to the Beni Ouarain Confederation, nor is

it directly related to the Oulad Ali located in the central territory of the Beni Ouarain. The simple layout of stripes in red, violet, white and blue is reminiscent of shawl types of the Ait Haddidou, and particularly of the Beni Said who live in the Rif,<sup>6</sup> but should not be confused with them. Presumably these textiles were used among both the Beni Jelîdassen and the Oulad Ali as everyday wear in former times. Old

6. Beni Ouarain (Oulad el Farh) woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, northeastern Middle Atlas, late 19th century. 0.96 x 1.93m (3'2" x 6'4"). Private collection

pieces achieve the fineness of density of the blue-ground shawls of the Beni Jelîdassen; again, no more than some fifty examples of these textiles are known.

The blue-ground shawls of the Oulad Ali (5), with white sections executed without exception in cotton, form a geographical and creative bridge between the Beni Jelîdassen to the north and the Ahel Tsiouant to the south.



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The textiles of the Ahel Tsiouant (7, 8) played a key role in opening up this eastern sector of the Middle Atlas. Although an example of this group, correctly attributed, has been on display in the Musée des Ouadaïas in Rabat since the 1920s, such pieces only arrived on the market in more significant numbers at the end of 1994. As mentioned earlier, the shawls of the Ahel Tsiouant were initially attributed to the Ait Haddidou or even to the Beni Snassen, who live far to the east near Oujda.<sup>7</sup> Strong market demand soon led to increased attention being paid to these isolated regions of the eastern Middle Atlas so that relatively complete descriptions and attributions are possible today.

The special feature of the Ahel Tsiouant textiles within the blue-ground group is the midnight-blue pile on the back, as much as 7cm deep when the textile is new. Executed in the symmetric knot, this pile almost completely covers the red and yellow strips of colour between the individual rows of knots. Only when the textile – worn at warmer periods of the year with the pile facing outwards – encases the wearer's body cylindrically do the colour accents in the depths of the pile become visible. During the cold winter months, which the tribe used to spend in settlements at an altitude of around 1,800 metres, the shawls were worn with the warming pile on the inside.

The simple elegance of all these shawls, or capes, is based on a harmonious interplay between a delicate, unobtrusive pattern and the nuances of the colouring – deep blue tones contrasted with red and yellow stripes. This regionally specific weaving tradition developed exclusively in the catchment area of the blue dyers of the Moulouya Valley. The dyers relevant to the groups discussed here were settled in Missour, Outat Oulad el Haj, Mahirija, Debdou and Taourirt. Since their zone of activity was limited essentially to the regions mentioned, blue occurs relatively rarely in textiles produced by the tribes found west of the main chain of the Middle Atlas – the Ait Youssi, Ait Serrouchène, Beni Alaham,



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7. Facing page, below: Pile side of an Ahel Tsiouant woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, eastern Middle Atlas, ca. 1920. Ca. 1.20 x 2.10m (3'11" x 6'11"). Galerie Konzett, Graz

8. Above: Detail of the flatwoven side of an Ahel Tsiouant woman's cape (*tabrdouhte*), Morocco, eastern Middle Atlas, ca. 1930. Ca. 1.05 x 2.00 m (3'5" x 6'7"). Galerie Konzett, Graz

Marmoucha and the central tribes of the Beni Ouarain. An exception to this is the Oulad el Farh group, whose *tabrdouhte* (6) are among the finest known of the delicately patterned capes of the Beni Ouarain.<sup>8</sup> Old pieces in this group contain a blue that is almost black: only after intensive examination is it shown to be very high quality indigo. The Oulad el Farh ('sons of fortune') owned the best summer pastures on the northern slopes of the Jebel bou Iblane and were correspondingly wealthy, while their winter pastures in the region of the Beni Jelidassen also provided access to the markets in the lower reaches of the Moulouya Valley.

The knowledge we have so far is insufficient to permit any firm conclusion as to whether there is some kind of a connection or common origin between the shawls of the blue-ground group and those of the Ait Haddidou<sup>9</sup> and their neighbouring tribes. However, various structural details, and the

similarity of rituals associated with the weaving process strongly suggest a relationship.

The production of shawls of this type came to a sudden end with the waves of emigration of Jewish families to the newly founded state of Israel, first in the early 1950s, and then at the end of the 1960s following the Yom Kippur War.

The dependence of the Berber weavers of Morocco on highly skilled Jewish dyers is also reflected in the still largely unknown pile-weaving tradition on the eastern side of the Middle Atlas,<sup>10</sup> and in the technically advanced pile-weaving culture of the Beni Bou Yahi and neighbouring eastern Moroccan and Algerian Zenata Berber groups.<sup>11</sup>

Over and above their subtle beauty, therefore, the blue-ground shawls of the eastern Middle Atlas can be regarded as probably the most explicit textile documentary evidence for a past cultural co-existence in North Africa.

Notes see Appendix



## Pazyryk Felts

## NOTES

- 1 | M.P. Gryaznov, *Pervyi Pazyrykskii Kurgan* (The First Pazyryk Tomb), Leningrad 1950, p.22, pl.5.
- 2 | *2000 Years of Iranian Art*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC 1964-1965, cat.455.
- 3 | Ann Britt Tilia, *Studies and Restorations at Persepolis and Other Sites of Fars*, Ismeo-Rome 1972, p.190, fig.3: S.I. Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia: The Pazyryk Burials of Iron-Age Horsemen*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1970 (first published in Russian as *Kultura Naseleniya Gornogo Altaya v Skifskoe Vremya*, Moscow-Leningrad 1953, hereafter Rudenko 1953).
- 4 | S.I. Rudenko, *Pjaty Pazyrykskii Kurgan* (The Fifth Pazyryk Tomb), Moscow-Leningrad 1951.
- 5 | See L. Barkova, 'The Pazyryk – Fifty Years on', *HALI* 107, 1999, pp.64-69, 110.
- 6 | Rudenko 1953, p.LXXXI.
- 7 | It was no simple task to make a felt of 30m<sup>2</sup>. According to V.P. Kurylev of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St Petersburg, 20m<sup>2</sup> of felt tent covers uses the wool of 100 sheep.
- 8 | Rudenko 1953, p.322.
- 9 | *Ibid.*, p.107.
- 10 | Trousers of similar cut can be seen on figures of Scythian antiquities in S.I. Rudenko, 'Sibirskaya collectiya Petra I' (The Siberian Collection of Peter I), in *Arkheologia SSR. Svod arkheologicheskikh istochnikov*, Moscow-Leningrad 1962, pp.41ff.
- 11 | The kurgan contained some original clothes of the Pazyryk peoples: a shirt made of vegetable fibres, a similar felt jacket and the back of a short sable fur coat (Rudenko 1953, p.LXCII).
- 12 | See I.A. Grebnev & S.E. Vasilyev, 'Horses from the Monuments of the Pazyryk Culture of the Southern Altai', in N.V. Polosmak, *Stereogutshiye zoloto grify* (Searching for Gold Gryphons), Novosibirsk 1994, pp.106-111.
- 13 | S.I. Rudenko, *Kultura naseleniya Tsentralnogo Altaya v Skifskoye Vremya* (Culture of the Population of the Central Altai in Scythian times), Moscow & Leningrad 1960, p.67.
- 14 | The first complete skirt, red and white striped, was found in 1993 in the Ak-Alakha kurgan, Ukok Plateau, in the extreme south of the Altai Range.
- 15 | Of special note are women's fur coats found in the Pazyryk tombs. Kurgan 5 yielded a well-preserved sable coat, decorated with refined leather appliqué work (Rudenko 1953, fig.60).
- 16 | S.I. Rudenko, *Gornolaitakiye nakhodki i sify* (The Altai Finds and the Scythians), Moscow-Leningrad 1952, p.89.
- 17 | M.I. Rostovtsev, 'Predstavleniye o monarkhicheskoi vlasti v Skifii i na Bospore' (The idea of of royal power in Scythia and Bospore), *IAK* issue 49, St Petersburg 1913, p.140.
- 18 | A.I. Martynov, *O mirovozzrentcheskoi osnovnoy iskusstva skifo-sakskogo mira* (Skifosibirskii mir) (The ideological basis for the art of the Scythian-Sak/Scythian-Siberian world), Novosibirsk 1987, p.16.
- 19 | Elena Tsareva (hereafter ET) takes up the discussion: *The religious ideas and hence the images of the Pazyryk people were highly syncretic, combining shamanism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. Each had a different iconography, so we can trace their origin and try to combine it with our knowledge of Scythian mythology. For example, the basic iconographic elements (type of costumes, shape of throne, lotus motifs, etc.) of the large felt hanging show its affiliation to the Near Eastern canons of representation in the pre-Achaemenian period. Several important details of the deity do not correspond with the image of the Goddess of Life. The backward turned ear demonstrates the other worldly nature of the deity, implying that the scene takes place in the Other World. The deity's left hand is raised to a cheek, signifying listening, and in the language of magic gestures indicating a judge. The complex headgear does not look like an ordinary crown, and can be interpreted as either the double crown of Both Worlds, or an inverted 'toothed' crown, over a high black frame, usually a symbol of a deity of the Other World. As to the deity's gender, ancient peoples had special devices to indicate the gender of human beings. The deity here, though usually referred to as a goddess, does not show any feminine indicators. The clothes are not female, consisting of a long narrow robe and a shoulder veil with a decorated edge which is wrapped around the shoulders several times, falling at one end almost to the bottom of the robe. This type of robe is typical for the male agricultural population of the Fertile Crescent territories. The blossoming branch in the deity's hand, with its lilies (a flower and a bud), red poppies, and other blooms may represent the Avesta's 'Tree of All Seeds'. Alternatively the figure may be Gaoerna (Haoma), keeper of Zoroaster's soul (fravashi).*
- 20 | A. Akishev, *Iskusstvo i mifologiya sakov* (Art and Mythology of the Saks), Alma-Ata 1984, p.100.
- 21 | ET: Nomads are known for their careless treatment of textiles as regards repair and secondary use. A good example is the Iranian kilim found in Pazyryk kurgan 2, made of poorly assembled and roughly stitched fragments of a refined kilim. It is unlikely that the addition was made as a result of dimension errors, more likely it was a result of repeated alterations. But then there is the question of the origin of the hanging – local craftsmen would make a new carpet or hanging for their chief, rather than cutting up an old one, especially as in the process they ruined sacred mythological scenes and the balance of its

composition. The sphinx and phoenix may nevertheless have been added to augment the supernatural abilities of the hero. This would only have happened if the rider was identified as a Pazyryk chief, whom the sphinx and phoenix – his mythological ancestors – had to guide to the World of Dead. This fits in with the other worldly features of the deity figure described in note 19 above, thus confirming the funerary function of the hanging.

22 | ET: The hangings are undoubtedly funeral banners.

23 | L.K. Galanina, M.P. Gryaznov, Y.V. Domanski, G.I. Smirnova, *Skifskii Altai, Putevoditel po zalam Ermitazha* (Scythia and Altai, Guidebook to the Hermitage Galleries), Leningrad 1966, pp.99-100.

24 | Rudenko 1953, p.295.

25 | ET: Though similar in style, the large carpet and the sphinx and phoenix fragments are different in technical and artistic qualities: the fragments show a much higher level of execution, including the fine inlaid treatment of every detail of the bird and the sphinx. Both suggest Chinese influence in their iconography: see S.A. Yatsenko, *Zagadochniye monstry pazyryktsev i kitaiskaya mifologiya epokhi Chzhou* (Dzhestestvo i shamanizm v skifskuyu epokhu) (Mysterious monsters of the Pazyryk and Chinese mythology of the Zhou epoch/Priesthood and shamanism in the Scythian epoch), St Petersburg 1996, pp.154-159.

26 | S.I. Rudenko, *Drevneishie v mire khudozhestvennye kovry i tkani* (The world's oldest decorated textiles), Moscow 1968, p.68.

27 | In 1985 V.D. Kubarev excavated a series of tombs near the village of Karakol in the eastern Altai. People were buried in stone boxes and the stone walls were covered with drawings, 30-40cm high, in black and red paint. Among these are representations of the composite man-beast: V.D. Kubarev, *Drevniye rospisi Karakola* (Ancient wall-paintings of Karakol), Novosibirsk 1988, pp. 96-97.

28 | *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

29 | ET: Each shaman's cloak was made according to the directions of his spiritual protector, so each was individual. Wings (feathers) and tails (fringe) while usual, were not an obligatory part of the garment.

30 | M.A. Devlet, *Petroglify na dne Sayanskogo morya* (Rock engravings at the bottom of the Sayanskoye Sea), Moscow 1998, p.203.

31 | The appliqué is stitched with Z-spun sinew; the scales/feathers and other fine lines are in chain stitch (woollen threads) and wool cord, attached with sinew.

32 | The drawing, by E.S. Matveev, is not quite accurate, as it is a composite of both variants, using horn, tail and 13

plaques of the sphinx from the large hanging, and part of a tail and phoenix's head from the small fragment.

33 | ET: The 'horns' can also be interpreted as flying crests, or a crest and a comb.

34 | M.I. Artamonov, *Sokrovishcha sakov* (Treasures of the Saks), Moscow 1973, p.71.

35 | ET: Closest to Pazyryk, both in technique and artistic style, are the north Caucasian Kabardinian and Balkarian wall hangings, made of extremely fine and elastic felt panels, and decorated in a 'felt over felt' technique. Of special note are their frieze composition and the dominant use of mythological and clan-tribal symbols.

## Tabrdouhte &amp; Tabbnoute

## NOTES

- 1 | A. Amahan & A. Khatibi, *From Sign to Image: The Moroccan Carpet*, Casablanca 1994, p.28.
- 2 | Papers given at the ICOC regional meeting, Marrakesh 1995: W. Stanzer, 'External Influences on the textiles of the Ait Ouazouguite', and O.Z. Soltes, 'Symbols and Significances': see M. Messaoudi, W. Stanzer et al., *First Conference on Moroccan Carpets*, Casablanca 1997, pp. 79-81, and 94-97 respectively.
- 3 | P. Fiske et al., *From the Far West: Carpets and Textiles of Morocco*, Washington DC 1980, pp.126-127, pl.42; J.S. Hyde et al., *Windows on the Maghrib... Tribal and Urban Weavings of Morocco*, Knoxville & Washington DC 1991, p.28, pl.18b; W.R. Pickering et al., *Moroccan Carpets*, Chevy Chase 1994, p.110, pl.78.
- 4 | G. Blazek, 'White Giants', *HALI* 94, p.71; J. Besancenot, *Costumes du Maroc*, Paris 1940, pl.23, p.157.
- 5 | Pickering et al., op.cit., p.109, pl.77.
- 6 | R. Vossen, *Reisen zu Marokkos Töpfen*, Hamburg 1990, back cover and pl.V.
- 7 | K. Minges et al., *Berber*, Zurich 1995, p.71, pl.35. The attribution was corrected in the English translation of the Museum Bellerive catalogue text.
- 8 | Blazek, op.cit., p.74, pl.15; Minges et al., op.cit., p.70, pl.34; Pickering et al., op.cit., p.109, pl.76. The pieces illustrated are not from the Oulad el Farh, but can be compared with them.
- 9 | *Ibid.* p.71, pl.41; W. Stanzer, *Berber*, Graz 1991, p.54, pls.9, 10; Hyde et al., p.20, pl.10a; Fiske et al., p.140, pls.54, 55.
- 10 | Paper given at the 8th ICOC in Philadelphia, 1996: G. Blazek, 'Beni Jelidassen, Ait Youb, Zkara: Pilewoven Carpets of Zenata-Berber Tribes in the Northeastern Middle Atlas and East Morocco', in M.L. Eiland Jr & R. Pinner (eds), *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies V/1*, Danville 1999, pp.202-206.
- 11 | *HALI* 91, p.108, fig.2.