



WHITE GIANTS

Carpets of the Beni Ouarain and Related Moroccan Nomadic Tribes

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The Beni Ouarain and some neighbouring Berber tribes in the northeastern Middle Atlas are the weavers of a distinctive type of large, archaic-looking, white-ground pile carpet. These 'white giants' represent a direct link to the earlier weaving traditions of the Zenata Berber, and in their turn have had a fundamental influence on the development of the textiles woven by Morocco's mountain nomads.

The Beni Ouarain are a confederation of seventeen Berber tribes,¹ whose ancestors may already have been settled in the most northeasterly part of the Middle Atlas by the 9th century AD. Some trace their origin to the area of southern Tunisia, others to the northernmost part of present-day Mauritania.² They speak a Berber language called Ruafa, also known as Zenatiya or Thazighth.³ Their present-day settlement area is bordered in the south and southeast by the Jebel Bou Iblane Range, and in the north by the Jebel Tazekka, Oued Inaouène and Oued Msoun; there is no such natural border in the west.⁴

The Beni Ouarain heartland has an annual rainfall similar to that of the Rif Mountains, which means that both migratory animal husbandry and settled agriculture are important. There have always been settlements built from stone and clay in the valleys, and the level of rainfall even allows for some unirrigated agriculture.⁵ However, the zone east of the Middle Atlas foothills is so arid that agriculture is possible only along the rivers, as in some areas of southern Morocco.

One part of each family used to cultivate fields in the valleys, while the others migrated with their flocks to the mountains in summer, descending in winter to the hill country around Tahala or the Guercif Plateau.⁶ Since the 1970s, however, the tribes have shown a strong tendency to settle. Cultivators have taken over the good lower grazing ground from the pastoralists, who have begun building permanent homes in the mountains up to a height of around 1,800 metres and are now planting winter cereals even at these heights. In these mountain regions one can nevertheless still find the ancient breed of small sheep whose excellent wool is responsible for the quality of Beni Ouarain rugs and textiles.

The Beni Ouarain pile-weaving tradition may date back as far as the tribe's arrival in their present settlement region around the turn of the last millennium. This suggestion is based on the need for these tribes to produce textiles for protection against winter cold in the highland areas. Until very recently, one group, the Beni bou Zart, continued to make loop-pile textiles called *bncghra* which are widely recognised as precursors of pile-woven rugs.⁷ The Beni Ouarain flatwoven textile tradition may be even older, since it is possible to establish a



1. Opposite: Zerarda tahlast, ca. 1930. 1.75 x 2.55m (5'9" x 8'4"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

2. Left: Beni Alaham tahlast (detail), ca. 1940-1950. 1.95 x 4.20m (6'5" x 13'9"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

clear design relationship with Tunisian textiles, pointing to a common source.

The carpets, known as *tihlasine* (sing. *tahlst*), are produced largely in the Atlas Mountains and the western regions; the tribes in the arid eastern sector only have a relatively small rug production of their own. As is true of most tribes in the Middle Atlas, the Beni Ouarain did not use carpets as floor covers, but rather as beds and bedding. This explains the loose structure of the rugs, which adjust to the shape of the body and offer effective protection against the cold.

Owing to their voluntary retreat into remote mountain regions, the Beni Ouarain tribes were not subject to urban Arab influences until well into the 20th century. It is therefore not surprising that formal similarities of design and palette are to be found not in the urban rugs of the Maghreb, but rather in rural ceramics, which have retained an archaic decorative system of black lines on a white base, as well as production methods unchanged since Neolithic times.

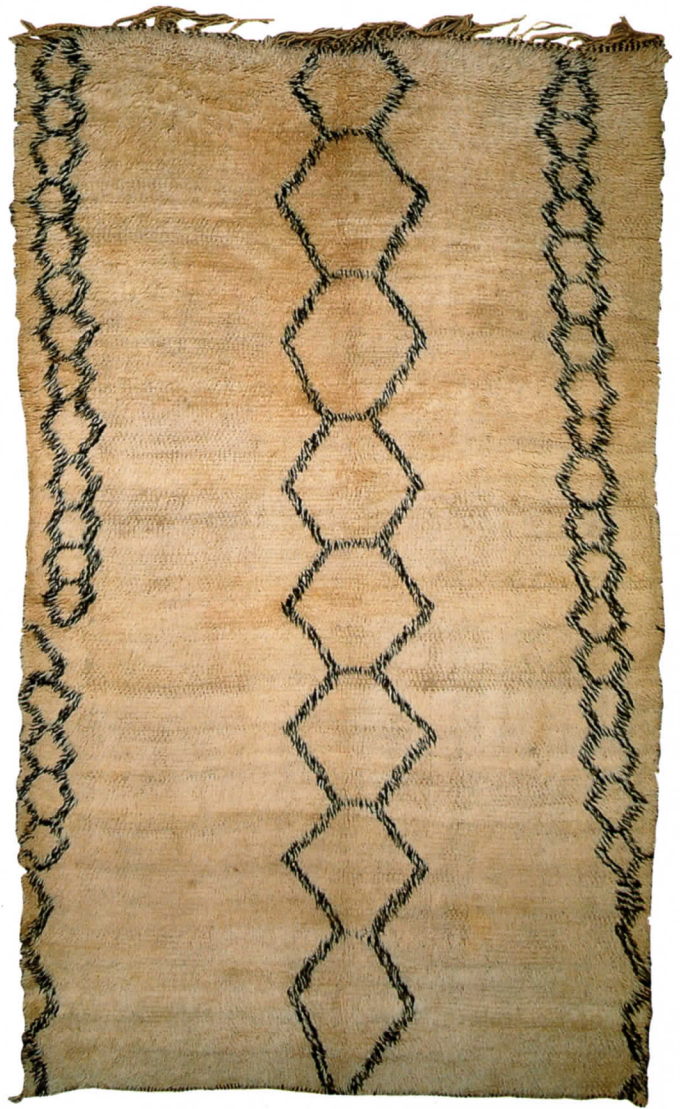
The classic Beni Ouarain carpet design has a network of diamonds made up of relatively fine black lines on a white ground. Borders are uncommon, and even the secondary guard design elements along the sides (2, 6, 12) appear to be the result of external influences.

Because the oldest documented rugs of the Beni Ouarain and of related tribes in the northeastern Middle Atlas have extremely rich designs, one may gain the impression that their creative culture has lost its vigour during the 20th century. The carpets in the

Musée Batha in Fez, those in the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris (MAAO), as well as those illustrated by Prosper Ricard and the oldest examples shown here (8, 9), support this impression. But in the course of my field trips I have managed to document a few older fragments with much simpler designs, which suggests the parallel production of both richly



3. Painted decoration on a house in the Ait Abd el Hamid region.



decorated and more austere rugs (1, 10). The survival of more of the richly designed pieces may be due to the fact that they were considered more precious, both in their place of origin and by museum curators, and have thus been treated with greater care.

The warp of Beni Ouarain carpets is always Z-spun white wool, as are the wefts, of which there are normally between four and fifteen shoots, but occasionally up to thirty. The pile yarn is Z2S with a pile height of up to 7cm. The Berber knot is the norm, but the Beni bou Zart, Ait Assou, Zerarda and Ait Ighezrane tribes in the west, as well as the Beni Jelidassen in the southeast, also use the symmetric knot or a mixture of both types.

The symmetric knot is tied over four, very rarely six, warps, the Berber knot over three warps, more rarely two or four. The

4. Above left: Oulad el Farh *tahlast*, ca. 1940. 2.20 x 3.55m (7'3" x 11'8"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

5. Below left: Beni Jelidassen nomadic family with their tent.

6. Above: Ait Assou *tahlast*, ca. 1960. 1.80 x 3.00m (5'11" x 9'10"). Private collection.

7. Below: A flock of the old Beni Ouarain breed of sheep grazing on the northern slopes of the Jebel bou Iblane Range.

8. Opposite: Ait Serrouchène *tahlast* (western area, south of Fez), ca.1920. 1.80 x 4.65m (5'11" x 15'3"). Private collection.



number of knots varies from 6-10/dm vertically and from 13-18/dm horizontally; if the Berber knot is tied over two warps, this figure is correspondingly higher. One also occasionally finds pieces throughout the tribal region where a symmetric knot, twisted 90°, is wrapped around three warp threads in a similar manner to the Berber knot.

Older pieces often have several rows of knots with black and white dots which protrude from the back of the rug in rows on the weft axis. They are particularly common in the short kilim ends. These pile elements on the back are also found running parallel to the sides in Beni Jelidassen and Oulad el Farh rugs, as well as among the neighbouring tribes to the south, the Ait Youb and Marmoucha.

Selvages are formed from two to four warp cords, Z2-10S, and normally just wrapped by the weft shoots, as the pile almost always continues to the edge of the rug. One finds rugs throughout the tribal region with a great variety of knot configurations on the back along the sides. These are rare to the west but particularly common among the Oulad el Farh.

An old and until recently unknown weaving tradition continues in the territory of the Beni Jelidassen, the southeasternmost tribe of the Beni Ouarain. They practice a semi-nomadic lifestyle that has been unchanged for centuries. They migrate from settlements in the eastern valleys of the north Middle Atlas to mountain pastures in the Jebel bou Iblane and Jebel bou Nsor regions and to the plains in the Moulouya Valley. There they have come into contact with the Marmoucha, whose weaving tradition is clearly reflected in the palette of Beni Jelidassen pile-woven cushions (14).

While their carpets show a clear relationship to those of the other Beni Ouarain tribes, a very different tradition in the shape of pile-woven cushions (known as *loussada* when made up as cushions and *frach* when opened out for use as a rug), closely related to the multicoloured carpets of the Marmoucha, survived until about the mid 20th century. There is also a connection with the Ait Youssi and the Beni Saddene, individual families of these tribes having moved to the Beni Jelidassen region in the second half of the 19th century.⁸

Ait Youssi influence is especially obvious in the choice of filler motifs within the diamonds, and in the yellow-orange secondary colour used in addition to the black and white design scheme. A particular feature of the Beni Jelidassen region is the use of goat hair, or a mixture of goat hair and wool, for the warps.

Rugs from the southeastern region of the Beni Ouarain that show Beni Saddene influence are extremely rare. A survey of Moroccan



museums and the rug literature reveals just one piece, published by Ricard in his *Corpus des tapis marocains*,⁹ where it was dated mid 19th century and attributed to the Marmoucha. While a similarity to Marmoucha work can certainly be seen in some of the powerful design and border elements of this example, the linear pattern and figural elements clearly speak the formal design language of the Beni Saddene.

The related piece shown here (9) was purchased in the Oulad el Farh region, which borders Beni Jelidassen territory. It was probably woven at the turn of the century. The loose structure and the Berber knot tied over three warps clearly indicate its Beni Ouarain origin, whereas the weft of mixed white and black-brown undyed wool is normally only found in Marmoucha rugs. The design of some of the filler motifs is reminiscent of early Ait Youssi weavings. The very rare figural depiction, especially that of the star garland surrounding the figures, and the division of the field into bands, show a strong Beni Saddene influence. Both the end section of the rug and the dark rows of design in the lower half of the carpet suggest an enlarged depiction of Beni Ouarain flatweave designs.

The repeated occurrence of the cross motif in Beni Jelidassen pile weavings is striking, but it remains impossible to explain its symbolic meaning. The motif is sometimes ritually painted in henna on the back of a completed textile when it is taken off the loom (13). Crosses are also painted on the interior walls of living rooms, suggesting a powerful talismanic significance.

The cultural and historical significance of Beni Jelidassen pilewoven cushions lies above all in the likelihood that they

belong to a tradition, continuing into the 20th century, closely related to that of the rugs which Ricard, in 1934, dated to the 19th century and attributed to the Marmoucha and (erroneously?) to the Beni M'Guild.¹⁰ Most such cushions look like fragments cut from the rugs published by Ricard. It is very surprising to see such a variety of colours used by a Beni Ouarain tribe; apart from the usual white and black, we find blue, dark red, green, orange and yellow as colours of completely equal weight. The flatweaves of this tribe have a similar polychrome palette, with a significantly high proportion of blue.

The cushions were woven in panels some 40cm wide and up to 180cm long. Warp and weft almost always consist of white Z-spun wool; goat hair is rarely used in the warp. The weft may be dyed in different colours, particularly in older pieces. The pile section may consist of Berber knots, or symmetric knots, or twisted sym-

metric knots. The pile does not always cover the entire surface, and the weft-faced weaving is decorated with individual pile motifs or linear compositions. Warp-faced flatwoven cushions are very rare.

The Ait Youb are settled between the tribal regions of the Beni Ouarain and the Marmoucha. Their rugs have been little discussed to date.¹¹ The structure shows a clear relationship with Beni Ouarain rugs, though in handle they seem more like those of the Marmoucha owing to the somewhat lower number of wefts. While the pile section consists almost exclusively of Berber knots tied over three warps, the sides almost always show symmetric knotting, with black pile threads alternately visible on the front and back of the rug. Ait Youb rugs are predominantly white-ground, with yellow, red, orange and black for secondary elements. They almost invariably have multi-coloured flatwoven ends, about 15cm deep, which always include a row of pattern in the weft-substitution technique on the back of the rug.

Black-ground rugs are very rare in the Middle Atlas region. Apart from a Marmoucha piece in the Musée Batha in Fez,¹² we know of only a few Zemmour and Ait Serrouchène examples. The existence of old black-brown shawls from the Beni bou Zart region, a type which for some fifty years has been woven with a white ground, as well as the use of undyed black yarn for the weft of old Marmoucha rugs, suggests that black-ground rugs were more common at one time than they later became, perhaps due to a higher proportion of black sheep in the flocks.

The overall impression given by the example shown (12) is typical of Ait Youb weavings, though the tribe tend to prefer a composition of concentric diamonds. A characteristic element is the line of sawtooth motifs with 'eyelashes' on both sides. The monumental impact of the dense design and the accompanying side elements are reminiscent of Marmoucha carpets.

Among the Beni bou Zart and the Zerarda in particular one can find rugs which abandon the classic diamond scheme for a minimalist design. Zerarda pieces are often noticeably smaller,



between 2.5 and 3 metres in length (1). It seems justifiable to talk of a separate Zerarda stylistic subgroup, which includes relatively rare pure white carpets. When woven from the excellent silky, shiny wool typical of early Beni Ouarain rugs, these pieces are remarkable for their calm elegance.

The Beni Alaham, who do not belong to the Beni Ouarain Confederation, are settled west of the Ait Ighezrane and the Zerarda. Ricard described their rugs,¹³ but they have been hardly mentioned in the literature since. Their white-ground rugs are most closely related to those of their eastern neighbours. Clear Beni Alaham characteristics are the S-spun warps and bold, striped kilim ends up to 20cm deep. Both Ricard's description and the pieces in the Musée Batha¹⁴ indicate that the Beni Alaham preferred smaller scale designs. The piece shown (2) was purchased in the Zerarda region, but the warp spin and the delicately structured centralised field design point to a strong Beni Alaham influence. While the relatively few known pieces of this tribe tend to be very similar, this rug is striking as a result of the weaver's decision to leaven the austere pattern by adding an element of restrained colour and a change in the rhythm of the design.

Another tribe who produced related white-ground rugs are the Ait Serrouchène. Their present-day settlement region is divided into three

sections: one to the west of the northwestern range of the Beni Ouarain; another to the southwest, between the Beni Alaham and the Ait Youssi; and a third north of the Ait Youssi, south of Fez.

Structurally, Ait Serrouchène rugs are broadly related to those of the Beni Ouarain, though the handle tends to be somewhat firmer. Like the Beni Ouarain, they also used the Berber knot over three warps; along the sides it is usual to find knots which protrude from the back of the rug.

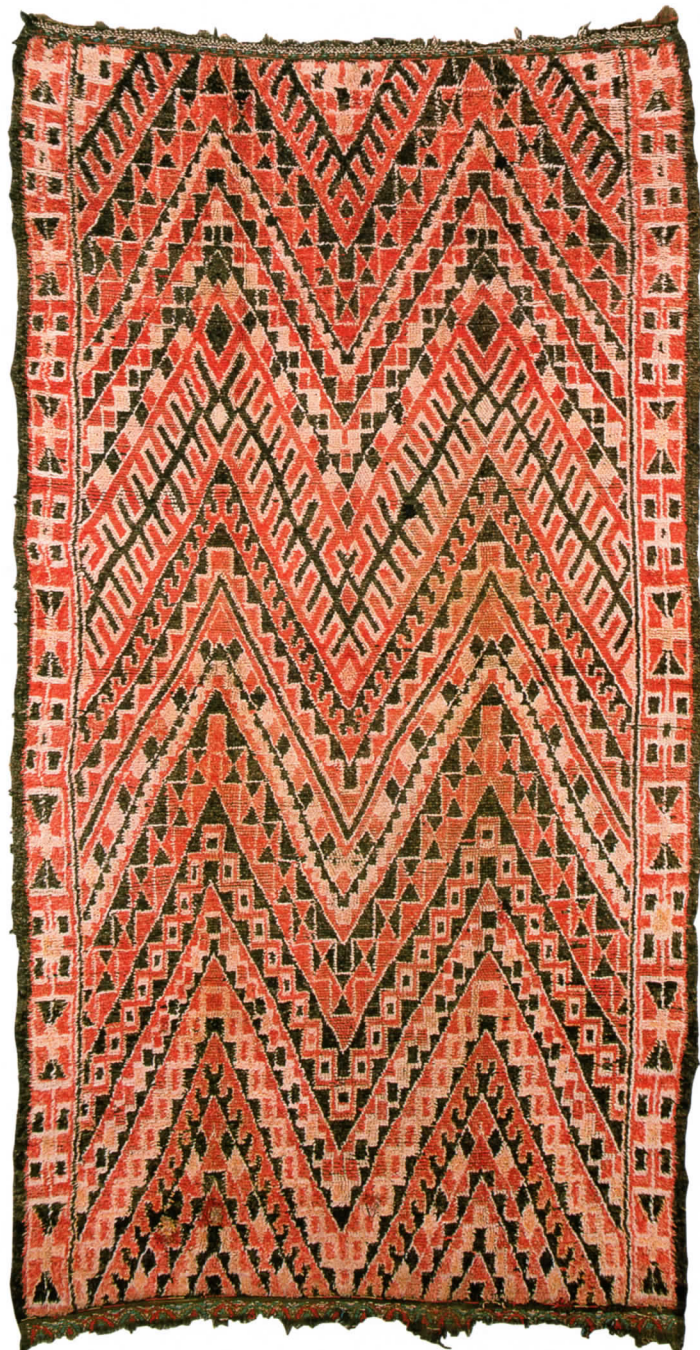
In general, the Ait Serrouchène tend to weave rugs with a lattice of diamonds and inner fields densely covered with filler motifs, similar to the Ait Youssi style.¹⁵ Secondary colours such as red, yellow, orange or even violet and blue are also used.



9. Opposite: Oulad el Farh *tahlast*, ca. 1900-1920. 2.10 x 4.10m (6'11" x 13'5"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

10. Above: Beni bou Zart/Ait Abd el Hamid *tahlast*, ca. 1930. 1.90 x 4.20m (6'3" x 13'9"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

11. Below: River valley in Ait Abd el Hamid territory.



12. Above: Ait Youb *tahlast*, ca. 1940-1950. 2.00 x 3.70m (6'7" x 12'2"). Private collection.

13. Beni Jelfidassen semi-nomads from the southeastern Beni Ouarain territory in the Middle Atlas use henna to daub apotropaic symbols such as crosses on the back of flatwoven covers (*sachou*) when they are taken from the loom.



One may occasionally find rugs that do not fit into any of the traditional design types, although some details may be indicative of one or another group. On the rug shown (8) the row of small, toothed-diamond elements and the density of the design are implicit pointers to the Ait Serrouchène, but it is equally possible that the Ait Assou or Beni bou Zart, two northwestern Beni Ouarain tribes, might have woven this piece. However, we know that it was sold by an Ait Serrouchène family, so its origin is not in question.

The creative boldness of this rug and the complex change in the graphic rhythm obviously prompted Moroccan dealers to photograph the piece before selling it, and to use it as a model for new commercial production. Today it is possible to find dozens of blue-ground copies of this piece in the carpet souk, woven on commission during the past few years in the Beni M'Guild region.

It might seem surprising that in addition to rugs which, in their archaic character, suggest the origins of the pile weaving tradition itself, the Beni Ouarain also produced sophisticated flatweaves. The structure of their pile rugs is based on function – the number of wefts and the high pile being essential for good insulation – and design possibilities are therefore limited. But by contrast, Beni Ouarain weavers were able to display all their technical skill in the making of women's flatwoven shawls, some of the finest and technically most demanding of Moroccan textiles. As none of the other tribes appear to have produced flatweaves of such complexity, it seems reasonable to assume that the Beni Ouarain played a central role in the textile development of the Middle Atlas nomads, and that their work may even be linked to a far more ancient tradition.

There are three distinct types of shawls or coats, whose names correspond to a particular technique and design density. The finest, known as *tabrdouhte*, are probably worn only on special occasions (15). They are like a pattern book, with up to seventy closely packed



decorative rows in a sophisticated weft-wrapping technique. Textiles with a similar structure but with rows of design in the weft-substitution technique are called *abrdouhe*. A version for everyday wear, similar in technique to the second type, but with a much coarser weave and fewer design elements, is known as *tabbnoute*. All have pile on the back to a greater or lesser degree. The design threads on the front are either carried in loops to produce a cushion-like pile, or are left hanging loose, up to 15cm long, producing a pelt-like surface.

Also woven across the entire region are the large bags called *sachou*, with design elements on the front. The rather rare blankets known as *hanbel* are identical to these bags and only differ from them in their greater length. *Smatt n'ouisse* (horse saddle-bags) are very rare. They are related to the saddle-bags common in the western Middle Atlas, but in palette they show similarities with Beni Ouarain *abrdouhe* shawls.

It is fair to say that the textile products of the Beni Ouarain remained untouched by foreign influences for a longer period than those of most other Moroccan tribes. To this day they are woven almost exclusively for the use of their largely self-sufficient households. But, like tribal peoples everywhere, the Beni Ouarain are the victims of rapid socio-cultural change, which has resulted in the decline or even extinction of individual forms of production. High quality flatweaves were being produced in the area until about the middle of the 20th century, but today production is highly commercialised and of much lesser quality, despite the fact that weaving remains family-based. Pile rugs are still made in relatively small numbers for domestic use, but during the past two or three decades wool quality has steadily deteriorated. The reasons for this can be found both in the switch to keeping sheep largely for their meat, and in the apparent lack of care taken in preparing the wool.

Understandably, traditional textile production has survived longer in the economically more backward regions, but today ersatz products such as acrylic blankets and foam mattresses have reached even the remotest areas by way of the *souks*. Thus this textile and pile-weaving tradition can only survive if there is an increased market interest, with all the well-known drawbacks in terms of quality that come with commercialisation. Notes see Appendix



14. Top: Beni Jelfidassen *frach* (opened-out pile-woven cushion), ca. 1950. 0.50 x 1.60m (1'8" x 5'3"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.

15. Right: Oulad Ali/Oulad bou Ali *tabrdouhte* (woman's flatwoven ceremonial shawl), ca. 1900–1920. 0.95 x 1.95m (3'1" x 6'5"). Galerie Konzett, Graz.