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The all-pervading harmony of beauty and utility

As is well known, carpet weaving is an integral part of the life of the Azerbaijani people. Since ancient times, carpets have been widely used in everyday life. As the saying goes, Azerbaijanis were born, lived, and died on carpets. This is no coincidence. Nature itself – geographical and climatic conditions, along with the semi-nomadic lifestyle of ancient Azerbaijanis – have determined the unquestionable dominance of this ancient craft in traditional Azerbaijani culture.

Twice a year, various tribes inhabiting the territory of Azerbaijan and engaged in cattle breeding moved to winter pastures in the plains (*gishlag*) or to summer pastures in the mountains (*yaylag*). Settling in a new place, they erected an *alachig* (or *alachug*), a local type of yurt used as traditional nomadic housing. The structure was covered with felt from above, while its interior was completely filled with carpets. The floor was first covered with mats (*cheten*, *khesir*) and various types of flat-woven carpets (*palas*, *kilim*, *zili*, *jejim*), and then with pile carpets, which were also used to cover the walls of the yurt.

“They sit on the floor, on carpets, with their legs tucked under them... There is no person, even among the simplest, who does not sit on a carpet...” — we read





Mafrash. Gazakh group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Shirvan group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Shirvan group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Gazakh group. Early 20th century.



Mafrash. Shirvan group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Baku group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Shirvan group. Early 20th century.



Mafrash. Garabagh group. Early 20th century.



Mafrash. Garabagh group. Late 19th century.



Mafrash. Ganja group. Early 20th century.



in the accounts of English travelers who visited Shirvan in the 16th century.

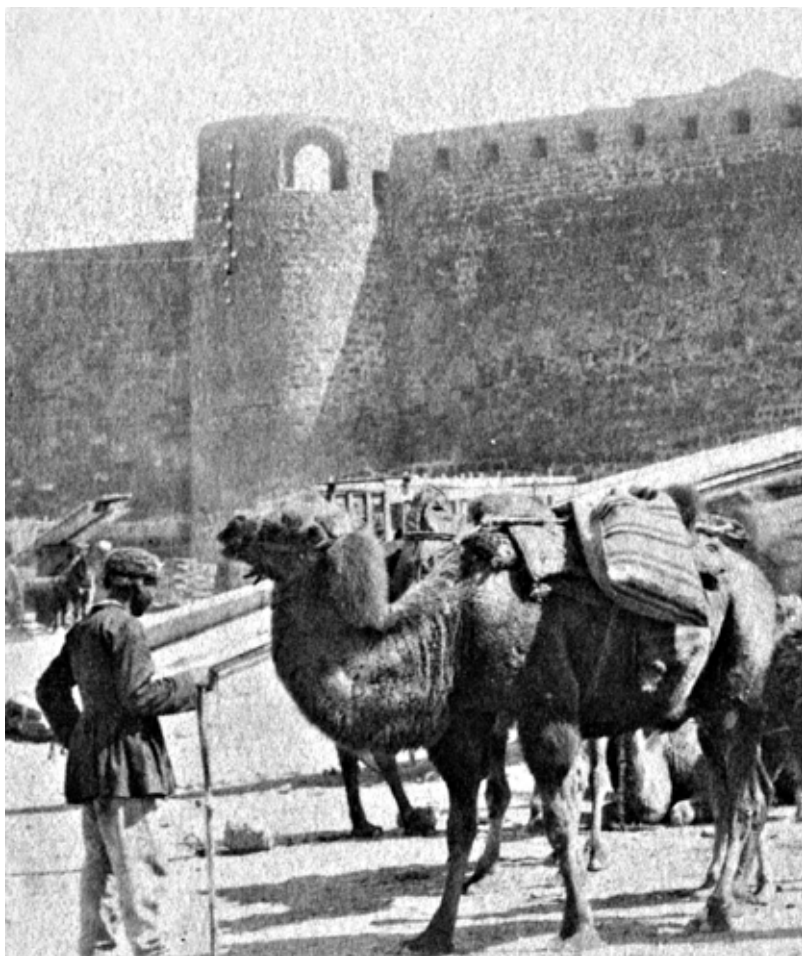
The structural elements of the *alachug* frame were decorated with multicolored cords with tassels. Various carpet bags were also hung on them: *duz torbasi* (salt bag), *gashig torbasi* (bag for wooden spoons), *guzgu torbasi* (mirror bag), *girkhlig torbasi* (bag for sheep-shearing scissors), and many others. All of this gave the interior a festive appearance. The overall ensemble was complemented by soft furnishings such as long carpet cushions (*bashalti*) and a carpet chest, *mafrash*, stuffed with wool.

If we turn to the collection of the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum, in addition to the aforementioned small forms of carpet art, we can see such items as *chuval* (sack), *heyba* (saddlebag), *khurjun* (bag), *chanta* (bag), *zorabs* (woolen socks), *chul* (horse cover), *dava bazayi* (camel decoration), and many others. These were not simply everyday items – they were objects of “primary necessity”. In traditional Azerbaijani culture, each item had a strictly defined function and therefore special value. Many of these items were included in a bride’s dowry, which a girl had to make with her own hands starting from around the age of ten. These items became family heirlooms passed down through the female line.

Among the essential items in the dowry, alongside carpets and *khurjuns*, were twelve *mafrashes*, which deserve special attention.

*“...Hundreds of camels move
From dawn until late.
In silk mafrashes are hidden
Treasures and riches.”*

— **Nizami Ganjavi, Khosrow and Shirin, 12th century**

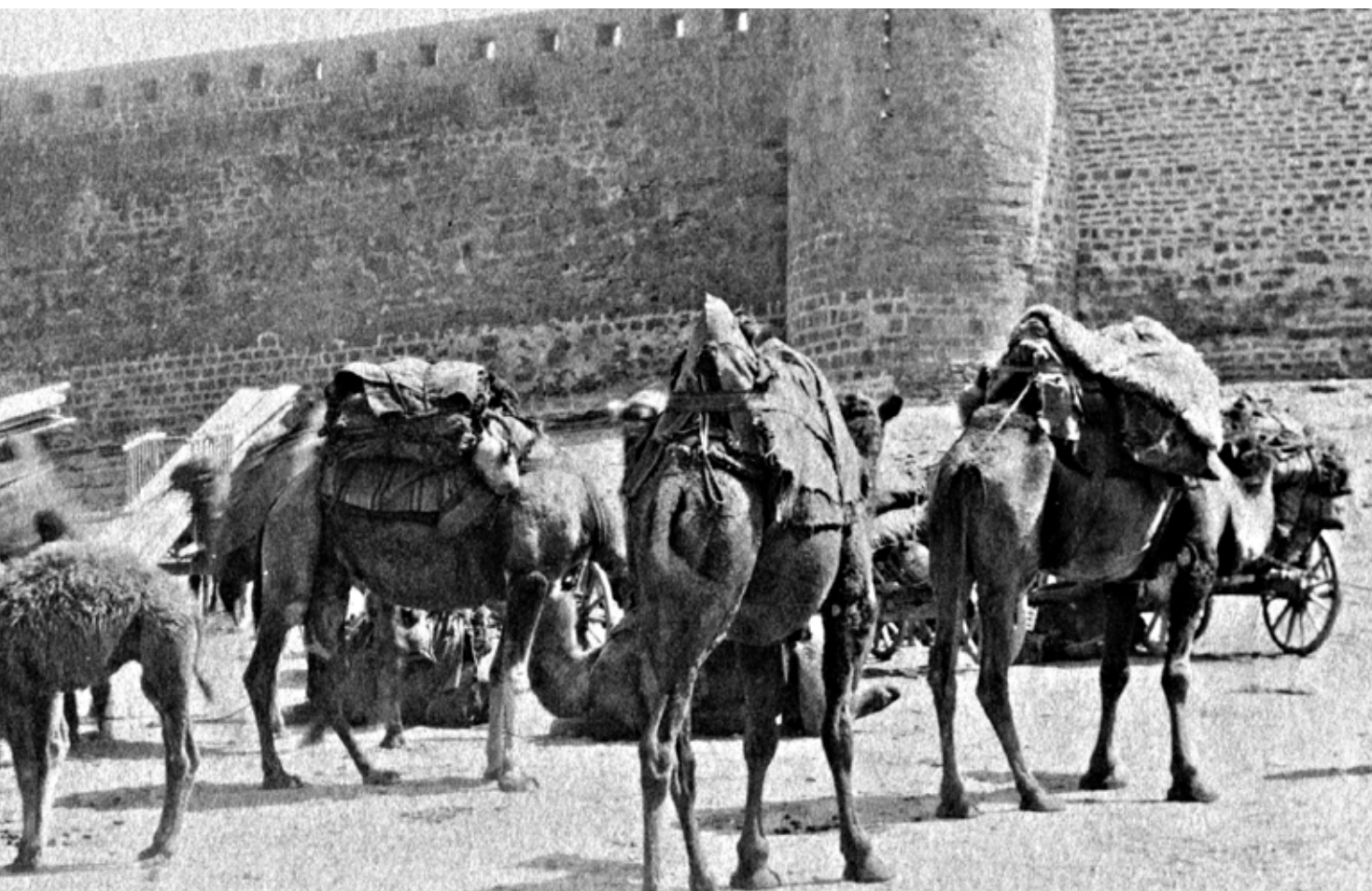


The word *mafrash* is of Arabic origin and has several meanings: “cradle,” “tablecloth,” “carpet.” In Turkic tradition, it refers to a kind of “carpet chest”, or a rectangular woven container used for storing and transporting bedding and clothing. On average, a *mafrash* measured about 1–1.2 meters in length, half a meter in width, and half a meter in depth. They were typically made using techniques such as *zili*, *kilim*, *sumakh*, or *palas*, and sometimes in pile weaving. This made them extremely durable. It is said that some *mafrashes* were so densely woven that even after 10 hours of heavy rain, they did not allow moisture inside.

In the past, for special occasions, *mafrashes* were woven from silk, as mentioned in classical medieval Azerbaijani literature.

The top of the *mafrash* was covered with *jejim*, and loops were sewn along

From the archive of ethnographer Hasan Guliyev. Nakhchivan, 1955



its upper edge. A rope was threaded through these loops to tie it shut. They were also equipped with two woolen or leather handles. The thoughtful design of the *mafrash* is evident in the fact that every detail, even the threads used to sew its parts, had a specific name.

In the nomadic life of herders, the *mafrash* was indispensable. During seasonal migrations from mountains to valleys in winter and back in spring, it was used to transport bulky items such as mattresses, blankets, and clothing. These loads were carried by the strongest animals, such as camels, horses, and mules, and *mafrashes* were always made in pairs to maintain balance. They were secured using a special girth called *orkan* (*örkan*), a woven strap 5–10 cm wide and 6–10 meters long, made from mixed sheep and goat wool. One end ended in a small square piece, while the other had a wooden cross or iron ring (*doğanaq*).

In addition to migration use, *mafrashes* were also used to transport a bride's dowry to the groom's home.

Like all carpet products, *mafrashes* were decorated with traditional ornaments that varied by region. Geo-

metric patterns often incorporated symbols of the four elements – sun, air, water, and earth – representing the eternal cycle of life. Stylized animals, birds, and plant motifs were also widely used.

The museum collection includes *mafrashes* from Gazakh, Garabagh, Ganja, Baku, and Shirvan regions. Reflecting the features of different carpet schools, their bright patterns and harmonious rhythm of lines and colors made them not only functional items but also decorative elements in both nomadic dwellings and settled homes. Often, a *mafrash* would feature a unique ornament used only in that particular piece. Sometimes, different techniques were combined in a single item, creating an effect similar to embroidery or inlay. Variations in thread thickness also contributed to a more pronounced and individual appearance of the patterns. The same motif could be arranged horizontally, vertically, or in a checkerboard pattern.

All of this, combined with a vast variety of traditional symbolic motifs in diverse colors and shades, resulted in items that transcended their practical function and became true works of art.



As noted earlier, carpets and carpet products, due to the conditions required for their creation, are primarily elements of nomadic culture. As one of the oldest crafts with practical value, they were widely produced and used by other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples across Central Eurasia (the so-called Great Steppe), Turkey, Iran, South Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and as far as Siberia and the Altai Mountains. Most of these regions belong to a unified Turkic world with shared sacred values and symbols.

In different regions, the *mafrash* is known by various names. Even within Azerbaijan, terms such as *farmash* (*fərməş*) and *mafraj* (*məfrəc*) are used. In Shirvan, for example, it is called *nerpaj* (*nərpac*), derived from the word *ner*, meaning a male camel.

The Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum holds more than 300 *mafrashes*. Created in the traditions of various regional schools, they are valuable not only as carriers of ethnic culture but also as objects reflecting the aesthetic and spiritual values of the Azerbaijani people. The museum also preserves a unique 19th century set consisting of two *mafrashes* and a *khurjun*, decorated with a unified ornament and color scheme.

All of this is of interest not only to the general public but also to researchers – ethnographers, historians, and

cultural scholars – both in Azerbaijan and beyond. Just as Azerbaijani carpets attract viewers worldwide, the rich and diverse collection of *mafrashes* will undoubtedly draw attention across Europe and Asia when presented in a broader cultural context.

From this perspective, traveling exhibitions showcasing the finest examples of *mafrashes* are highly important. This collection reflects both the unique culture of Azerbaijani nomadic tribes – their worldview and way of life – and its place within the broader Turkic cultural system.

It is also important to remember that carpets and carpet products are not a static tradition. They are a living craft, a way of life, and a system of values that remains relevant today. This art form can exist harmoniously both within traditional contexts and modern aesthetics. Built on natural laws and folk wisdom, tested over time, carpet ornaments can bring a sense of stability, order, and balance into modern interiors. In other words, even today, in an era of shifting values, carpets can offer a harmonious perception of the world – something essential to human existence. 🌟

Exhibits presented in the article are preserved at the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum.