

THE ESIKQAS AS AN AESTHETIC AND DECORATIVE CARPET OF THE KARAKALPAKS: TYPOLOGY, ORNAMENTAL COMPOSITION, AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the esikqas, a distinctive pile-woven decorative textile used in the interior of the traditional Karakalpak yurt. Unlike utilitarian carpets intended for storage, bedding, or floor covering, the esikqas primarily performs an aesthetic and spatial function by decorating the area above the entrance. The research aims to clarify the functional status of the esikqas, distinguish it from the structurally similar qarshin, and systematize its major ornamental variants. The study is based on comparative visual analysis of museum specimens, field observations, ethnographic descriptions, and the classifications proposed by A. Allamuratov, T. A. Zhdanko, and David and Sue Richardson. The analysis identifies the rhombus—known in Karakalpak terminology as qıyıq or boğırsoq—as the principal compositional marker of the esikqas. Several major types are discussed, including the on eki múyizli, stepped, az múyiz, lightning-pattern, and qıyıq-pattern variants. Particular attention is given to inconsistencies in museum attribution and to the interaction of Karakalpak and Turkmen ornamental traditions. The findings suggest that the classification of pile-woven objects should be based not solely on their recorded practical use but also on dominant motifs, compositional structure, dimensions, and weaving tradition. The esikqas demonstrates the high level of artistic variation achieved by Karakalpak women weavers and represents an important element of the decorative system of the Karakalpak yurt.

Keywords: Karakalpak carpet weaving, esikqas, pile carpet, yurt interior, ornament, rhombus motif, qarshin, traditional textile, decorative art.

Introduction

Traditional Karakalpak textile culture developed in close connection with the spatial organization and everyday requirements of the qara úy, the Karakalpak yurt. Textiles were not merely household objects; they formed an integrated decorative system in which function, material, color, and ornament interacted. Pile-woven products included objects associated with storage, furnishing, and the visual articulation of the yurt interior. Within this system, the esikqas occupies a special position because its primary role is decorative rather than directly utilitarian.

The esikqas is a small rectangular pile-woven carpet placed above the entrance inside the yurt. Its location gives it a visually prominent role in the interior and distinguishes it from larger floor coverings or storage textiles. Ethnographic literature describes the esikqas as a decorative and constructive component of the Karakalpak yurt [1], while later studies emphasize that it is one of the most distinctive forms of Karakalpak pile weaving [2], [3]. At the same time, the formal similarity between the esikqas and the qarshin—a pile-faced storage bag—has caused attribution



problems in museum inventories and scholarly classifications.

The problem is therefore not limited to terminology. It concerns the principles by which traditional textiles should be identified: recorded use, object shape, weaving technique, dominant ornament, or overall composition. The source text and museum observations underlying this study indicate that some qarshin specimens were registered as esikqas and some esikqas specimens as qarshin. Such discrepancies require a comparative approach that considers both function and visual structure.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the aesthetic and decorative role of the Karakalpak esikqas, systematize its principal ornamental variants, clarify its differences from the qarshin, and assess possible interactions between Karakalpak and Turkmen carpet traditions. The study contributes to the classification of Karakalpak pile-woven textiles and to a broader understanding of ornament as a marker of object identity.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research employed a qualitative art-historical and ethnographic methodology. The empirical material consisted of esikqas specimens observed in museum collections and information collected from local informants. These materials were compared with published descriptions of Karakalpak ornamental art by T. A. Zhdanko [4], studies of Karakalpak applied art by A. Allamuratov [1], and the typological observations of David and Sue Richardson [2], [3].

Four analytical procedures were used. First, functional analysis was applied to determine the place of the esikqas within the yurt interior and to compare its role with that of other pile-woven objects. Second, formal-compositional analysis focused on the organization of the central field, borders, rows, medallions, and color contrasts. Third, motif analysis was used to identify recurring ornamental elements, including qıyıq or boğırsoq rhombs, qos múyız, jumalaq múyız, piskekshe, jargı tisi, and stepped motifs. Fourth, comparative analysis was used to examine similarities between Karakalpak esikqas patterns and selected Turkmen ornamental forms.

Because museum attribution may reflect the practical use reported by donors rather than the original typological identity of an object, inventory labels were treated critically. The principal classification criteria adopted in this study were: (1) dimensions and overall form; (2) position and intended function within the yurt; (3) dominant motif; (4) hierarchy of primary and secondary ornaments; and (5) compositional organization. This approach makes it possible to interpret ambiguous objects more consistently.

III. RESULTS

A. Functional and Aesthetic Status of the Esikqas

The analysis shows that the esikqas differs from most household textiles because it does not directly satisfy a basic everyday need such as storage, insulation, bedding, or floor covering. Its principal purpose is to enrich the visual environment of the yurt and provide aesthetic and emotional value. The textile is placed above the entrance, between structural elements and the felt covering, where it frames one of the most visible zones of the interior.

This location explains why the esikqas developed as a highly ornamented all-pile object. Allamuratov characterized it as a decorative-constructive component specific to Karakalpak culture [1]. Contemporary descriptions likewise identify the esikqas as a rectangular pile carpet



positioned above the yurt door [3]. Thus, its function is simultaneously spatial and decorative: it marks the entrance, completes the interior composition, and demonstrates the artistic skill of the weaver.

B. The Rhombus as the Principal Typological Motif

Museum observations and ethnographic data indicate that the rhombus is the most stable motif in esikqas composition. In Karakalpak ornamental terminology, related forms are referred to as qiyiq or boğırsoq. The rhombus may be enlarged into a central medallion, repeated in horizontal rows, divided into smaller geometric fields, or combined with horn-shaped motifs. Although other motifs vary considerably, the repeated structural role of the rhombus provides an important criterion for identifying the esikqas.

This observation is particularly important in distinguishing the esikqas from the qarshin. The two objects can be similar in rectangular form and pile technique. However, their dominant compositional logic differs. In the esikqas, the rhombic field or medallion generally organizes the entire decorative surface. When a motif characteristic of another textile appears, it may function only as a secondary element. Consequently, classification should consider the hierarchy of motifs rather than the mere presence of a particular ornament.

C. The on Eki Múyizli Type

One of the most widespread variants is the on eki múyizli esikqas. Its central composition is formed by dark gray or brown octagonal-rhombic units that may also be interpreted as qiyiq forms. White horn-like scrolls are clearly visible within the principal motif. The sides of the rhombus are framed by six toq múyiz elements and horizontal qos múyiz motifs. A smaller rhombus and a paired-horn motif may be placed inside the central field, while triangular side compartments contain contrasting horn and rhombic forms.

Richardson and Richardson divide the on eki múyizli group into two subtypes [2]. Both share a central horned rhombus, but they differ in secondary ornament. The first is associated with the jumalaq múyiz motif, whereas the second contains a stepped design referred to as teksheli nağis or qádemler. The borders are usually narrow. According to the Richardson typology, qos múyiz and piskekshe motifs constitute important components of the border system [2].

A terminological inconsistency emerges when the central motif is compared across classifications. Allamuratov identifies the inner horn form as qos múyiz, whereas the Richardsons describe a comparable form as jumalaq múyiz. Comparison with motifs documented by Zhdanko suggests that the presence of small rhombs beside the rounded horn form supports the identification of the motif as jumalaq múyiz [4]. This example demonstrates the need to compare motif names with the actual graphic structure of the ornament.

D. The Stepped Variant

The second subtype of the on eki múyizli composition replaces the rounded horn motif in the center of the rhombus with a stepped form. This pattern is described as tekshe, meaning a step or stepped structure, and can also be associated with the ayıl nağis designation. Allamuratov treated this composition as a separate variant, whereas the Richardson classification places it within the broader on eki múyizli group [1], [2].



The difference between these classifications is methodological. One system gives priority to the transformation of the central motif, while the other emphasizes the stability of the overall horned-rhombus composition. The museum specimens examined in the source material support the idea that the stepped design is closely related to the on eki múyizli type but forms a visually distinct subtype.

E. The Az Múyiz or T-Shaped Type

A third major type is characterized by T-shaped elements and is identified by the Richardsons as the az múyiz pattern [2]. The composition contains square or rhombic units arranged in three parallel rows and alternating with paired rectangular horn forms. Cross-shaped elements appear inside the rhombs and may be associated with the motif known as bóri kóz, or “wolf’s eye.” The spaces between the major motifs are divided into red and white squares arranged diagonally.

In some examples, the rhombic fields themselves are subdivided into squares. Narrow horizontal bands separating the rows are ornamented with piskekshe or jargı tisi motifs. The principal palette consists of brown, white, red, and pink, while green and other reddish-brown tones occur less frequently. The systematic alternation of rows and geometric units gives this type a strong rhythmic structure.

Another compositional feature is the combination of rhombic forms containing cross motifs with hexagonal medallions and T-shaped elements. The hexagonal medallion appears visually attached to a horizontal line, while adjacent rhombs may be rendered in brown or light red. The interconnection of motifs creates a complex but logically organized composition. This structural coherence supports Allamuratov’s observation that Karakalpak ornamental design is based on the meaningful combination of individual pattern units [1].

F. Problems of Attribution: Esikqas or Qarshin?

Some objects with the composition described above have been classified both as qarshin and as esikqas. This dual attribution can be explained partly by museum acquisition practices. An object may have been registered according to the function assigned to it by the person who donated or sold it to the museum. However, secondary use does not necessarily establish the original typological identity of the textile.

The results of the present analysis suggest that dominant ornament should be treated as a significant diagnostic criterion. If the rhombus forms the principal compositional center and other motifs are subordinated to it, the object is more consistent with the esikqas tradition. Conversely, motifs typical of qarshin compositions may appear in an esikqas as secondary decorative elements without changing the object’s primary identity. Therefore, a combined functional and compositional classification is more reliable than inventory terminology alone.

G. The “Lightning” Pattern Variant

Another esikqas variant is described by the Richardsons as a “lightning pattern” [2]. Allamuratov presents a detailed account of a related composition in which rhombic forms are divided into rectangular and triangular sections [1]. Color arrangements create diagonal, horizontal, and vertical effects. The border is relatively narrow and may contain repeated cross motifs along its length, while a red line separates the principal central field.



Red is the dominant color in the known variants. The main field is divided horizontally into four approximately equal bands. Each row contains elongated rectangular units covered by a light rhombic ground and separated by brown elements. Contrasting red and green sections produce a diagonal color movement. The corners of the rhombs are not uniformly white; after two vertical rows, yellow elements may form additional sequences. The resulting design is visually dynamic despite the strict geometric organization.

A second version of this type is distinguished by greater graphic clarity. It contains three forms of rhombic ornament. A white rhombus encloses a black rectangular element and a smaller brown qıyıq motif. Adjacent rhombs are placed diagonally. A second rhomb type uses a brown ground but preserves a similar internal arrangement, while the third consists of small brown rhombs outlined in black and positioned in selected horizontal rows. This variation demonstrates the capacity of Karakalpak weavers to transform a stable geometric framework through color and internal subdivision.

H. The Qıyıq Nağıs Type and Turkmen Parallels

The qıyıq nağıs esikqas is composed of rectangular units divided by diagonal lines. Each field contains paired forms interpreted as bird heads. The units are arranged in three or four parallel rows, with diagonal directions changing from one rectangle to another and from row to row. At first glance, the composition creates paired U-shaped angular forms facing in opposite directions and generating an X-shaped visual structure. Piskekshe and small rhombs appear as supplementary motifs.

A notable feature of this type is the use of saturated indigo in combination with dark brown. Only one comparable specimen was encountered during the museum survey described in the source material. Although its dimensions and overall shape correspond to the Karakalpak esikqas, several ornamental features recall Turkmen carpet designs. The most conspicuous are opposing white triangular elements in the central field.

Parallels may also be observed in the divided structure of the qıyıq motif. Certain Yomut saddlebag compositions employ rhombic gül forms whose outlines are interrupted or articulated by E-shaped lines. These similarities do not prove direct copying, but they indicate the possibility of ornamental exchange between neighboring weaving traditions. Central Asian textile cultures developed through long-term contact, trade, migration, and shared pastoral environments; therefore, hybrid or transitional compositions should be expected rather than treated as anomalies [5].

The specimen in question cannot be identified unequivocally as either a purely Karakalpak esikqas or a Turkmen carpet. Its dimensions, format, and presumed function correspond to the Karakalpak type, while several motifs evoke Turkmen ornamental vocabulary. It is therefore reasonable to interpret it as a composite or culturally interactive textile. Such an interpretation recognizes both the local object tradition and the broader regional circulation of ornamental ideas.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that the esikqas should be understood as a distinct category of Karakalpak decorative textile rather than as a reduced version of another pile-woven object. Its identity is produced by the interaction of placement, scale, pile technique, and ornamental hierarchy. The



position above the yurt entrance gives the object a specific architectural function, while the dominance of rhombic compositions provides a recurring visual marker.

The comparison of scholarly classifications reveals two persistent problems. The first is variation in motif terminology. A single graphic form may receive different names in the works of Allamuratov, Zhdanko, and the Richardsons. This may result from local naming practices, differences among informants, or the tendency of researchers to classify motifs by visual resemblance. For this reason, future cataloguing should record both the local term and a precise visual description of each motif.

The second problem is the attribution of museum objects according to secondary use. The formal similarity between the esikqas and qarshin makes such errors particularly likely. A textile's museum name may reflect how it was used immediately before acquisition rather than how it was originally conceived. The present study proposes that typological identification should be based on multiple criteria and should give special attention to the dominant compositional motif.

The study also shows that the esikqas tradition was not artistically static. Within a limited rectangular format, Karakalpak women weavers produced numerous variations by transforming the central rhomb, replacing horn motifs with stepped forms, reorganizing rows, changing the direction of diagonals, and modifying color contrasts. This combination of continuity and variation is one of the defining characteristics of traditional ornamental systems.

The possible Turkmen parallels observed in the qıyıq nağıs type are also significant. Karakalpak textiles belong to the wider artistic environment of Central Asia, and similarities with neighboring traditions should be studied through careful structural comparison. Shared motifs do not automatically indicate common ethnic ownership of an object. Instead, the complete textile—its form, dimensions, technique, function, palette, and motif hierarchy—must be evaluated.

V. CONCLUSION

The esikqas is one of the most distinctive aesthetic and decorative forms of Karakalpak pile carpet weaving. Unlike textiles designed primarily for practical household needs, it serves to visually articulate the entrance area of the qara úy and enrich the emotional and artistic atmosphere of the interior. Its position within the yurt confirms that traditional Karakalpak textile culture integrated decoration with architectural space.

The comparative analysis identified the rhombus, known as qıyıq or boǵırsoq, as the principal compositional marker of the esikqas. On this basis, several major variants can be distinguished: the on eki múyizli type, its stepped subtype, the az múyiz or T-shaped composition, the lightning-pattern variant, and the qıyıq nağıs type. Each preserves a recognizable structural framework while demonstrating substantial variation in internal motifs, row organization, and color.

The study further concludes that museum attribution based only on reported practical use can lead to confusion between the esikqas and qarshin. A more accurate classification requires the combined analysis of function, dimensions, technique, dominant ornament, and compositional hierarchy. Finally, the presence of motifs resembling Turkmen carpet ornament in certain specimens suggests cultural interaction and the possible formation of composite designs.

Although the number of Karakalpak pile-woven carpet types is relatively limited, their ornamental diversity is considerable. The numerous variants of a single object type testify to the technical knowledge, aesthetic judgment, and creative skill of Karakalpak women weavers. The



preservation and systematic documentation of esikqas specimens are therefore essential for the study of Karakalpak cultural heritage and the broader history of Central Asian textile art.

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