

Investigation on Meaning of Dragon Motif Designed on Rugs in Aran and Armenia (South Caucasus)

Siamak Rahimi*, Meysam Sadeghpour & Asghar Panahzadeh

Department of Art, Payam noor University, 19395-4697 Tehran, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Lack of concept for images on rugs as well as handicrafts of people or nation among contemporary human being would not refer to the meaningless of such works but these are manifestation of mores & beliefs of people. Often ancientness of these symbolic images as well as occult meaning is available through discovering in initial stages of human life when human was ignorant of nature & origin of events happened to them & looked at images in such a manner that they are mysterious. In Aran region & Armenia had an ancient record on designing rugs with high quality and beautiful images. Motif of dragon becomes manifest even more prominent than other images. It draws discoverer's attention to reason for their existence. The present research is of the opinion of presentment of real meaning of dragon in fiction as well as beliefs of Aran (Albania) & Armenia.

KEY WORDS: Meaning, Motif of dragon, Aran (Albania), Armenia.

INTRODUCTION

In natural boundary of Asia and Europe, mountainous region of "Caucasus" (Encyclopedia Americana International Edition, 2006; The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005) with inactive volcanic peaks (Masaheb, 2002) is bounded on the east with the Caspian Sea, on the west with the Black Sea, on the north with Russia and on the south with Iran and Turkey (Moin, 1985; Dehkhoda, 1960; Masaheb, 2002) (Figure1). Diversity of the ethnic groups is salient and unique characteristics of the region (Masaheb, 2002; The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005), in a way that seventy races, nations and languages have been stated in the region in first centuries (AD). The name of "Mountain of Languages" has been called correctly for this region (Amir-Ahmadian, 2002).

The Greater Caucasus mountain ranges have created two distinct north and south regions (Amir-Ahmadian, 2002) which self-autonomous republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingush, North Ossetia, Kabard, Balkar, Karachay, Cherkessk, and Adige are located in its north part while republics of Azerbaijan (Aran or Albania), Armenia and Georgia are located in south part of the region (Amir-Ahmadian, 2002).

Due to its specific geographical and political conditions, this region was always important for its north, south and west



Figure1: Caucasus Geographical Map (Bennett, Book of Oriental Carpets and Rugs, 1972)

neighbors and many conflicts and wars have been occurred for obtaining this significant region. In the same direction, this region was considered as a part of Iran land and territory for long years which was then separated wholly from Iran in 1813 and 1828 following the treaties of Golestan and Turkamanchay and was joined and attached to Russia (Melik Hacoupian, 2005; Nourizadeh, 1997; Roshandel & Gholipour, 1998; Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996).

Ground cloth or mat is the most important handicraft of this region which is currently woven in the republics of Azerbaijan (Aran or Albania), Armenia and Dagestan (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2005).

Dragon can be duly enumerated as the most famous mat motif in this region which is shown off in specific manner majestically and is deep rooted in the culture and beliefs of people of this land and territory. Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan (Aran or Albania) can be called as the birthplace of this specific mat motif. However, these two regions in south Caucasus will be explained only.

After carrying out preliminary studies on Aran (Albania),

*Corresponding Author: Siamak Rahimi, Department of Art, Payam noor University, 19395-4697 Tehran, Iran.
Email : siamak_rahimi@yahoo.com

Armenia and handicrafts (mat) of these regions, this study analyzes meaning of dragons' motif in mats woven in this region and pays due attention to the causes of its existence in beliefs and credence.

METHODOLOGY

Since the present study deals with the etiquettes, rites, rituals, customs and beliefs of the people who have lived in previous periods, it is of "Historical Research" type in chronological terms but this study can be called as "descriptive research" type in objective perspective and due to the description and placement of data in tandem with each other and clarification of the ambiguous subject.

Of course, it should be explained that selection of the existing pictures is based on selective sampling.

Background of Research:

With due observance to the visual studies, references and statements of researchers, the authors of this study were noticed motif of dragons in south Caucasus region.

So, following causes of existence of this motif and its meaning, the resources written up to the present time in the field of mats was studied thoroughly but answering the question was still covered. On the other hand, deep rootedness of the motif was strictly followed up and searched in etiquettes, rites and beliefs of the people, folkloric literature and native legends and logical answer was obtained deservedly.

Hence, background of research in meaning of dragons' motif in mats belong to Aran and Armenia (south Caucasus) should be sought in books of folkloric literature of the people of that region. Of course, all references mentioned in this study have been put forward indirectly and titles of these books have been explained in detailed form and comprehensively in "List of Resources" and "Footnotes". So, stating them here is strictly avoided.

Aran (Albania) and Armenia in South Caucasus:

The Republic of Azerbaijan is located in east part of south Caucasus. Until June 1918, "Azerbaijan" was not called to this name (Reza, Azerbaijan and Aran (Albania of Caucasus), 1981). Rather, this land and territory was called "Albania" and/or "Aran" before the said date in many writings.

This name dates back to the 4th century (BC) (Behzadi, 2003; Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996; Reza, Aran from Ancient Periods up to Mongol Era, 2001). In writings of Armenian historians, the name of this region has been narrated as follows: "Aghvan" and "Alvan" (Reza, Azerbaijan and Aran (Albania of Caucasus), 1981), in the same direction, "Ran" and "Aran" is Persian form of the word "Alvan" (Markuart, 1994).

Residents of this region and other mountain dwellers of Caucasus, except Armenians, are of a single race named "Yafes"¹ according to the theory of "Nicolay Yakolovich mar" (Bartold, Status of Regions Around the Caspian Sea in History of Islam, 1996) and their language has been categorized at the group of Yafes languages (Reza, Azerbaijan and Aran (Albania of Caucasus), 1981).

The Muslim geographers like Estakhri and Ibn Haghul in 11th centuries and many others have stated language of this region as "Arani" (Markuart, 1994; Reza, Aran from Ancient Periods up to Mongol Era, 2001).

According to some evidences, the language of residents of the region has shown more tendencies to the Turkish language (Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996).

Until before 11th century, Turkish dialect or language was not common in Caucasus (Reza, Azerbaijan and Aran (Albania of Caucasus), 1981).

Albanians were first worshiping Elements of the Nature and were sacrificing with regard to these elements (Reza, Aran from Ancient Periods up to Mongol Era, 2001).

This procedure was continued until acceptance of the Christian Religion i.e. 4th century (AD) (Reza, Aran from Ancient Periods up to Mongol Era, 2001; Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996) and trend of acceptance of Islam by them starts as of 8th century (Reza, Aran from Ancient Periods up to Mongol Era, 2001).

But the Republic of Armenia, which is located at the central part of South Caucasus, is surrounded by the republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Iran and is considered as the most mountainous region of South Caucasus. The Republic of Armenia is called as "Inactive Volcanoes Land and Territory" (Amir-Ahmadian, 2002) and its name has been mentioned in Darius Inscription in Bisotun (521 BC) (Pasdermajian, 1990; Buzand, 2004) and "Musa Khorni"² attributes this name as "Aram" ruler of this land and territory (Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996).

With the studies made in this regard, Armenians were of Indo-European race and they have entered Urartu land and territory in 7th and 8th centuries (Roshandel & Gholipour, 1998) and mixed with the ethnic groups after entering the area (Pasdermajian, 1990) and language of this ethnic group has been categorized in group of Indo-European languages (Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996).

Like many races, Armenians started religiosity with belief to the forces of the nature (Pasdermajian, 1990) and then were influenced by the ancient Iranian religion and in some periods, Armenians were worshiping Iranian gods (Mousavi bojnourdi, 1996) and acceptance of Christianity by them was taken after from 288 to 301 (AD) (Pasdermajian, 1990) and

Arab invasion in 645 also could not change their religion into Islam and finally, they (Armenians) remained in Christian religion (Pasdermajian, 1990).

Mats Belong to Aran (Albania) and Armenia and Motif of Dragons

As it was mentioned in above, Aran (Albania) and Armenia are of the main centers for producing ground cloths (mats) in Caucasus.

In the same direction, central and half eastern part of South Caucasus i.e. Gharebagh³ and Shervan⁴ are of paramount importance in terms of producing mats (Schurman, 1968).

Generally, the two mentioned regions can be duly called as birthplace of motif of dragons.

Thanks to the samples obtained in this regard, the history of weaving mats in Caucasus dates back to 16th centuries (Azadi, Kerimov, & Zollinger, 2001).

But there are some evidences in this respect that history of weaving mats dates back to many years ago.

In his special presents for Ghadir Khan, Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznavi, during his reign in 997 – 1030, was sending Armenian woven carpets to Kashghar (Bartold, Iran Historical Geography, 1998) and also Latif Kerimov - renowned researcher of Republic of Azerbaijan - was considering carpets of Alaeddin Konya Mosque, belonging to 13th centuries, as Caucasian woven carpets (Eiland Jr & Eiland III, 1998).

The researchers working in this field place special emphasis on effectiveness of mats woven in this region from Iranian patterns and designs (Milanesi, 1999).

With the studies made in this regard, such impression has been continued from 10 to 13 & 16 to 19 centuries (Bennett, The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World, 1978) and weaving mat with inspiring Iranian design and pattern was more tangible and visible in Gharebagh region than any other regions (Dilley, 1956 ; Harris, 1977; Schurman, 1968; Eiland Jr & Eiland III, 1998).

Producing two types of mats with dragons and patterned designs was the outcome of the said issue (Milanesi, 1999).

Carpet, rug, Kilim, Jajim and Soumak⁵, and Sileh (Zile)⁶ and Varni (Varneh)⁷ are of the mats which are woven in the Caucasian region. The geometrical and angular designs are of salient characteristics of these mats (Eiland Jr & Eiland III, 1998).

The mats' weaving history with dragon motif in South Caucasus has been estimated before 16th century. In confirming this claim, the carpet with "Phoenix and Dragon" design (figure 2), which is now kept in Berlin Museum, is considered as Caucasian Carpet (Azadi, Kerimov, & Zollinger, 2001; Bennett, The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World, 1978).

The weaving of this motif has been common both among Armenians and people of Aran (Albania) (Train, 1997; Milanesi, 1999; Bennett, The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World, 1978).

Undoubtedly, the weaving with phoenix and dragon motif has had an ancient history in culture of residents of the region.

In Gharebagh, the city of Shusha (Shushi) (Ellis, 1976), in Shervan & the cities of Shemakha (Ellis, 1976) and Quba or Kuba (Dilley, 1956) are considered as the centers for weaving this specific motif.

As mentioned in above, Iranian patterns have played an outstanding role in formation of Caucasian designs especially with Dragon and Patterned motifs, based on which, Pot Designs (Dilley, 1956 ; Bennett, The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World, 1978; Ellis, 1976) have had the great impact in structure and animal design (run and take) in motifs (Ellis, 1976).



Figure 2: "Dragon and phoenix" Motif Carpet, Early 15th Century Attributed to Anatoly, Berlin Museum (Milanesi, 1999).

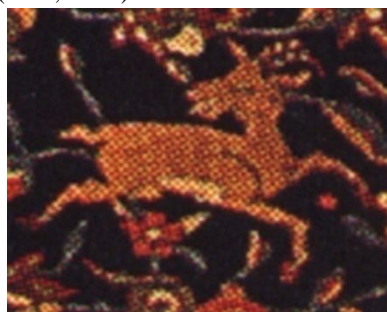


Figure 3: A Part of Sangeshko Carpet (With Animal-Design Carpet), Iran (Train, 1997) .



Figure 4: A Part of Dragon-Pattern Carpet, Gharebagh, 19th Century, Textiles Museum (Ellis, 1976).



Figure 6: A Part of Dragon-Pattern Carpet, Gharebagh, 19th Century, Textiles Museum (Ellis, 1976).



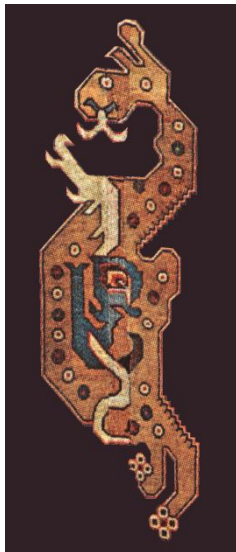
Figure 5: A Part of Sangeshko Carpet (Animal-Design Carpet), Iran (Train, 1997).



Figure 7: A Part of Sangeshko Carpet (Animal-Design Carpet), Iran (Train, 1997).



Figure 8: A Part of Dragon-Pattern Carpet, Gharebagh, 19th Century, Textiles Museum (Ellis, 1976).



Figures 9: Dragon Motif, a part of dragon carpet, Gharebagh, Shusha City, 18th Century, a Collection of Howard T (Ellis, 1976).



Figure 10: A Part of a Soumak with Dragon-Motif, Azerbaijan (Sabahi, 1999).

Of course, the carpet's dragon motif should be considered as Chinese dragon motif which has been manifested in a completely geometrical shape (Ellis, 1976) and similar to S and/or Z and speckles, moles or scales can be observed on their

bodies like Iranian samples. Generally, this imaginary creature has been manifested in different mats in specific shape and in compatible with its weaving structure. (Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11)

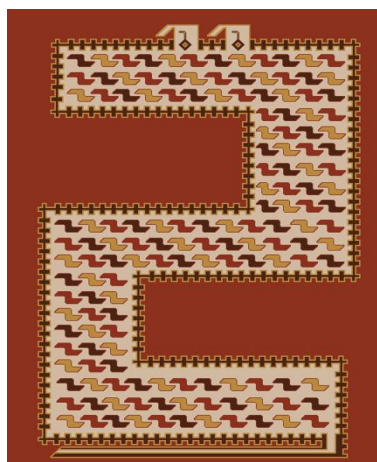


Figure 11: A Part of Sileh (Zile) with Dragon Motif, Azerbaijan (Sabahi, 1999).



Figure 12: Dragon Stone, Vishap. Portal of Sardorapat Museum (Petrosian)

Meaning of Dragon Motif in Armenia and Aran (Albania) Mats:

Even if we accept that the dragon motif is an imported element, acceptance of the following point, i.e. knowing presence of this motif as mere apparent transfer, is a bit difficult, because, repetition of a pattern and its continuation without any faith and cultural support seems impossible. Generally, hand woven crafts and mats, like other crafts, are manifestation of etiquette, rites, customs and belief of the people (Bennett, *The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World*, 1978).

Moreover, handicrafts and hand-woven mats are belief and religious art and address the people who consider it as mere decorative designs (Ford, 2007).

Whatever, which exists in this universe, enjoy two physical and spiritual aspects and/or form and meaning (Najm Razi, 1988).

In other words, each form has its inner and semantic aspect (Talaie Minaei, 2003), except what is evident and visible (Tabatabaei, 2004) and these two should not be deemed as separate from each other, because, each semantic does not appear in any case (Pazuki, 2009). What is necessary is the common aspect between them (Lafarge & Alendy, 1995).

The form seems necessary and is visible through the senses. Although the meaning does not seem necessary, it is visible and perceivable (Tabatabaei, 2004).

In the field of study, symbols and icons are merely the path for cognition and returning to the previous etiquettes, rites, rituals and beliefs, because, symbols imply something beyond its direct and apparent meaning (Hohnegerd, 1997).

Since symbols have direct relationship with the etiquettes, rituals, customs and tradition of people (Hall, 2004); they have mixed with their real life and transcendental affairs (Serlo, 2009).

Myths are one of the manifestations of real life of the people who have gripped with wishes and fears and should not be assumed that are devoid of truth (Nasiri, 1985). Myths are rooted profoundly in daily life of the communities and are considered as local manifestation of basic experiences of the human being (Daryabandari, 2000). Myths are unfulfilled wishes of the people which real history is its prevalent aspect (Sattari, 2000) and are partly metamorphosed and deformed (Nasiri, 1985). Many etiquettes, rituals, and traditions can be recognized in these legends (Northrop, 1995; Pieman, 1973).

Legends or myths are remnant of the early human being (Karimi, 2009), the period that human being had not obtained necessary and enough cognition to his or her environment and also had not grown up and developed logically (Kerape, 1998). So, special attention had been paid to the concept of nature and its consequences in the environment (Malinowski, 1998). To them, nature was source and origin of their inspiration and was trying to clarify natural incidents and events through legends (Kerape, 1998). That is why we can find out commonalities in their beliefs and myths among the people and nations which have wide cultural and communicative gaps (Daryabandari, 2000). This issue is formed from feeling of mitigation, humiliation, fear and confusion against surrounding events (Loffler Delashaw, *Codified Language of Myths*, 1985).

After getting awareness from pattern of symbol and legends in lives of people, especially in previous periods, it is time to study element of dragon as a symbol in Caucasian myths.

As a legendary creature, dragon is a winged reptile (Jobs, 1991: 149) and giant snake configuration (Rastegar Fasaei, 2000) with body coated with scale (Barfer, 2004), and fire goes out from its mouth (Jobs, 1991). The dragon has thunderous

voice (Barfer, 2004), and its body is mixed with different animals and creatures. The most wonderful characteristics of body organs of animals are attributed to the dragon with the aim of being showed terrible (Loffler Delashaw, *Codified Language of Fairy Stories*, 1987), and is found in culture of all people of New and Old world (Serlo, 2009).

In view of people of Aran (Albania), dragon is a speculator creature which stands against water and block water for reaching it to the people⁸ (Karimi, 2009; Nourizadeh, 1997).

To get rid of such situation, there is no choice but sacrificing girls with the aim of stirring its tail while eating little girl, based on which, water is allowed to reach the people of this land and territory (Behrangi, Talkhoun and some other tales, 1970; Behrangi & Dehghani, *Azerbaijan myths*, 1998; Barfer, 2004).

Similar to the abovementioned cases can be observed among Iranians as well⁹.

Suddenly, the champions like Vahagen¹⁰, Tiztan, Ebrahim and/or Malek Mohammad terminate problems created by dragons and get rid of people from famine and drought¹¹.

Unlike other Caucasian dragon killers, Vahagen was worshipped as a god (Nourizadeh, 1997) and his Temple was located in Ashishad (Khornatsi, 2001) and Odz¹² (snake) (Nourizadeh, 1997).

In Armenia, more evidences and relics are observed with regard to the presence of dragons in beliefs and credence in a way that rocks known as Vishap (dragon), measuring 3-6 meters in height, can be seen as of centuries Before the Christ, in source of rivers, lakes, and in mountainous regions which have been engraved with cow head in peak of the rocks. Preserving waters had been main task of these rocks (Petrosian). More interestingly, oxen or bull is manifestations of Vahagen (Bahram) (Amouzgar, 2001).

In 5th century (AD), "Yeznik Koghbatsi", one of the renowned Armenian authors, was considering cow as destroyers of the dragon (Nourizadeh, 1997).

According to the legends and existing works, paying due attention to the element of water and sanctifying it among Caucasians is crystal clear and vivid.

Of course, water is considered as a source of life in all human contemplation, based on which, life is impossible without water. Generally, water is of paramount importance for human beings. Water is manifestation and symbol of life and purity in all ideas (Cooper, 2000), while dragon is symbol of uncleanness, untidiness, evil and malicious animal (Chevalier & Gerbran, 1999), tyranny and oppression (Rastegar Fasaee, 2000) and worry and anxiety (Loffler Delashaw, *Codified Language of Fairy Stories*, 1987).

With due observance to the aforementioned remarks, status of dragon and its surrounding beliefs was explained to some extent but personality of the dragon has still been covered to anyone. According to the explanations made in this regard, dragon is attributed and characterized with the cases like: exit of fire out of its mouth, eruption of blood from eyes, darkening the sky with breath, awful and terrible roars, and devastating earthquakes. The said reports remind us of eruption of volcanic peaks which destroys homes and terminates the life in the universe (Jonaydi, 2006).

The most important point in this that Small and Large Masis Peaks¹³ are of special status among Armenians and is house of dragon which is due to their volcanic personality (Ananikiam).

As mentioned in previous, South Caucasus and especially Armenia has been dubbed as "Inactive Volcanoes' Land and Territory" and even, some remnants can be found which refer to the existence of human life and eruption of volcanoes (Amir-Ahmadian, 2002).

Such assumptions are observed among other nations and people. For example, Japanese liken active volcanoes to the dragon. In other words, active volcanoes are also likened to the Japanese dragon and consider dragon hidden in peaks as main reason of outbreak of earthquakes and eruption of volcano (Nahokou, 2006).

Since eruption of volcano will stop a day, occurrence of these events was pictured in minds of primitive people as championship victory over the dragon (Jonaydi, 2006).

Conclusion:

Aranian (Albanians) and Armenians had a long history in creating exquisite and beautiful mats in such a way that samples existing from 16th centuries, as inspired by the Iranian carpets, is a solid evidence of this claim. Here, the dragon motif, as originated from animal carpets' dragons, boasts more salient than other motifs.

Like other handicrafts, the mats' designs are not merely decorative designs, rather, their semantic support is hidden in etiquette, customs and beliefs of people and for achieving it, we have no choice except searching in folkloric and verbal literature of the people.

A glance at folkloric literature of Aran (Albania) and Armenia, we can find out dragon as an oppressive, tyrant, vicious and speculator creature which blocks water to people with creating a hurdle on the springs. As mentioned in above, sacrificing young girls is considered as the sole access way to catch partial amount of water. But eventually, champions like Vahagen (Bahram), Tiztan, Malek Mohammad and/or Ebrahim overcome the problems and terminated the life of dragon and bestowed life to the people.

From among dragon killers, Vahagen (Bahram) had been worshiped like a god among Armenians. As we know, ox is one of manifestations of Bahram (Vahagen) which stone handmade of this creature in origin of rivers preserve from water resources.

On the other hand, South Caucasus, which is dubbed to the "Land of Inactive Volcanoes", was home to the active volcanic peaks as if this idea had been formed in that period which was followed with eruption of lavas in its volcanic peaks, dreadful roars and destructive earthquakes. Presently, such contemplation is underway and small and large Masis peaks are considered abode and accommodation of dragons and undoubtedly it is related to the water myths as well.

¹ Yafes: Noah's second son who believes that the races that resided at coastal areas of Europe and Central Asian countries and also islands of Mediterranean Sea and then migrated to other lands and territories have been generated and originated by him as offspring (Moin, 1985).

² Musa Khorni: Armenian author who had lived in 4th century (AD) (Moin, 1985).

³ Gharebagh: a mountainous region which is located in South Caucasus and Shusha and/or Shushi is its capital. There are differences of opinion and conflict on its ownership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

⁴ Shervan: It is located in eastern part of South Caucasus and Shemakha or Shamakhi is its capital.

⁵ Sumak, Soumak or Summak: Is a hand woven without any tie which warp is wrapped round the woof (Bennett, *The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World*, 1978) and is considered as advanced and progressed type of simple Kilims (Harris, 1977). Sumak is mainly woven in east part of Caucasus (Tanavoli, 2002) and the geometrical designs of Sumak are inspired by the herbal designs of Iranian patterned carpets (Eiland Jr & Eiland III, 1998).

The distorted city of Shamakhi and/or Shemakha is known as its name (Bennett, *The Country Life Book of Rugs & Carpets of the World*, 1978; Dilley, 1956), which is inconsistent in terms of rhythm and is not accurate (Tanavoli, 2002).

⁶ Sileh, Sille or Sile: it is an untied hand woven (Harris, 1977) which includes a design with S and/or Z shape. These designs are repeated in the form of 4x4 and/or 5x5 at the background of the work (Eiland Jr & Eiland III, 1998). The origin of its name is not specified apparently as if it is the same Zilo which is called Sille in local dialect (Tanavoli, 2002).

⁷ Varni or Varneh: Similar to Sumak, Varni is an untied hand-woven carpet (Harris, 1977) which woof is wrapped around it and it is called as Half-Sumak (Tanavoli, 2002). This hand-woven carpet is called "Ghayeghi" (boat shape), among Shahsavani race while it is called as "Souzani" (needle), in east Iran (Tanavoli, 2002).

⁸ The main origin of stories and myths of Aran (Albania) is covered to authors due to the mix of name of Aran and Azerbaijan and suitable ground was not provided for differentiating them in this time period.

⁹ For further information, please refer to:

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¹⁰ Vahagen: Bahram (Arian, 1984).

¹¹ Behrangi, S. (1970). *Talkhoun and some other tales*. Tehran: Amirkabir Publications.

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¹² The city of Odz was called "Vishapakaghak", i.e. city of dragon (Nourizadeh, 1997).

¹³ Masis: Which is also called Ararat.

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