

MISATTRIBUTIONS OF ARMENIAN *MAFRASHES* AND THE MYTH OF THE SHAHSEVAN PILE RUG

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s a great many flat-weaves, *mafrashes* (bedding boxes), *khordjins* (saddlebags) and salt bags suddenly appeared on the rug market. Scholars and dealers were befuddled and sought a logical attribution. The Shahsevan, a collection of tribal groups of nomadic pastoralists in the region who regularly migrated to and from the Mughan plains and Ardabil, were thought to be the likely suspects. Armenians, a people with a long weaving history who also lived in the region, were ignored. Since Armenians were a settled people, rug scholars and dealers believed they did not weave or have a need for transportable flat-weaves. Flat-weaves and rugs having common motifs, the pile rugs were automatically attributed to the Shahsevan.

In this article I will demonstrate that many of the flat-weaves and pile rugs attributed to the Shahsevan were actually woven by Armenians.

"Shahsevan" means "those who love the shah" in Turkic. The Shasevans were a collection of tribal groups brought together in a confederacy sometime between the 16th and the 18th centuries. Most discussions of the term Shahsevan refer to its original meaning as extreme personal loyalty and religious devotion to the Safavid kings.¹ Until the early 20th century, the Shahsevan had a tribal and pastoral nomadic lifestyle, moving during summer 100–200 km. to the south on the Sabalan and nearby ranges, in the districts of Ardabil, Meshginshahr, and Sarab, and during the winter to the Mughan region. They were a minority in this area, but like the settled majority (whom the Shahsevan call "Tat"), they were Shia Muslims and spoke Azerbaijani.²

The **Mughan plain**, where they migrated to with their herds in winter, is an extremely fertile stretch of land, stretching presently from northwestern Iran to the southern part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. It is located on the bank of the Aras (Arax) River, extending to Iran. Just north of the Mughan plain are the Armenian historic provinces of Siunik and Artsakh.

¹ The Safavid dynasty ruled Iran between 1501 and 1736.

² Richard Tapper, "Shahsevan", <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shahsevan> 2010.



Mughan Plains and their location on the southern banks of the Araxes river

As a side note, up to the 7th-century, the Mughan Plains were part of greater Armenia and were called Paytarakan. Located on the right bank of the Arax River, the plain was separated from the Armenian provinces of Artsakh, Siunik and Utik to the north, although some authors argue that it included territory on the left bank of the Arax as well.³ It was separated from Aderbadagan, the northwestern province in the Sasanid Empire, and almost corresponded to present-day Iranian Azerbaijan. On its south were the Karadagh and Talysh mountains, and it bordered the Caspian Sea to the east.⁴ It is believed to have encompassed the greater part of the Mughan Plain and the Lenkoran Lowlands.⁵

THE SHAHSEVAN MISATTRIBUTION OF ARMENIAN *MAFRASHES*

First let us examine the *mafrashes* since they have design characteristics common to many pile rugs and have never been attributed to Armenians. *Mafrashes*, which are rectangular bedding bags, or “boxes”, used for storing and transporting bedding and other personal possessions, were often woven by the *soumak* or kilim technique.

In spite of the great importance experts paid to the *mafrashes*, certain stereotypes (that *mafrashes* were woven only by nomads and not by sedentary peoples) prevented the thorough clarification of their significance.

³ Babken Harutyunyan, "P'aytakaran". In Hambardzumyan, Viktor (ed.). (in Armenian). Vol. 12. Yerevan 1986, pp. 301–2.

⁴ Tadevos Hakobyan, Stepan Melik-Bakhshyan, Hovhannes Barseghyan, "P'aytakaran" (in Armenian). Vol. 5. Yerevan State University Press, Yerevan 2001, pp. 229–30.

⁵ Harutyunyan, pp. 301–2.

Generally, they were attributed only to nomadic tribes and their lifestyle. The fact that *mafrashes* were used by nomads due to their frequent movements led observers to conclude they were woven and used only by nomads.



Mafrashes from Yeghegnadzor and Tavush regions, Armenia, late-19th century
(Nooter, *Flat Woven rugs and Textiles from the Caucasus*, pp. 156, 174)

This conclusion, however, ignored several facts, including the following:

- a) Frequent movements were typical not only of nomadic tribes, but also of the settled Armenians, as Armenians engaged not only in agriculture, but in cattle breeding as well. This necessitated moving the cattle from winter to summer pastures as the nomadic tribes did.
- b) *Mafrashes* also served as *ojitnots* (from the word *ojit*, meaning "dowry") to hold the things/presents/gifts that were assembled before marriage. Parents would use the *mafrashes* to hold the things that were necessary for their daughters to live in a new house. These included woven objects such as clothing, sheets, dresses, stockings and saddlebags, as well as jewelry and household objects.
- c) In 2004, an important book was published by Robert H. Nooter entitled, *Flat Woven Rugs and Textiles from the Caucasus*, which destroyed many of these stereotypes. Nooter travelled throughout the Caucasus, did extensive field work in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia along with local experts, photographed, catalogued and bought *mafrashes* and other flat-weaves directly from the families of the weavers. He discovered that many *mafrashes* were woven by Armenians.⁶

Even 20 years after this book appeared, the misattribution of Armenian *mafrashes* persists.

Just to be clear, I am not suggesting the Shahsevan, Azeris or Kurds did not weave *mafrashes*. I am only pointing out that contrary to conventional wisdom, the settled Armenians wove their share of *mafrashes* but are never credited for

⁶ Robert H. Nooter, "Flat woven rugs and textiles from the Caucasus, Schiffer Publishing Ltd. Pgs. 169-70.

it. It is also interesting to note that the *mafrash* seems to be unique to the Caucasus and northwestern Iran. The Turkmen to the east of the Caspian Sea had no box-shaped transport bags.⁷

SHAHSEVAN MISATTRIBUTION OF ARMENIAN PILE RUGS

What I mentioned above is not all. Indeed, many Caucasian antique pile rugs from the 19th century and earlier attributed to the Shahsevan were actually woven by Armenians and other settled peoples. Contrary to popular belief, the Shahsevan did not weave pile rugs until well into the 20th century when they were forced by the Soviet authorities and Iran to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and start a sedentary life.⁸

Shahsevan weaving attribution is relatively new. It never even existed before the 1970s. The number of attributions to the Shahsevan since the 1970s is astounding considering that after the conquest of the Mughan plains by the Russians in 1822 and the signing of the Treaty of Turkmanchay (1828) Russia permitted Shahsevan nomads only limited access to their former pasturelands in Mughan. But they failed to observe the limitations, so Russia finally closed the Mughan frontier for the Shahsevan tribes in 1884.⁹ Therefore, in essence, the Shahsevans were no longer in the area where all these flat-weaves and rugs were supposed to have been woven.

Raoul Tschbull, a prominent rug collector and author of many books on antique Caucasian rugs, believes the Shahsevan attribution was the creation of authors Siawosch Azadi and, especially, Parviz Tanavoli, who had claimed it in his seminal book *Shahsavans: Iranian Rugs and Textiles*.

Anthropologist Richard Tapper was an authority on the Shahsevan. He lived with them in the 1960s and wrote several books. At a New England Rug Society (NERS) conference in 1999, invited by Tschbull, he confirmed that the Shahsevan did not weave pile rugs prior to the 20th century.

In a letter addressed to me, Tschbull wrote: "Richard Tapper, taught at Cambridge, did fieldwork with the Shahsevan in 1965-66, has published quite a bit. I knew Tapper quite well, got him to speak at the NERS. Azadi seized on the name by 1971, but thought Sarab rugs were woven by the Shahsavans. That's probably where all this "Shahsavans rugs" attributions came from. I spent part of two summers with Moghanlu semi-nomads. Some

⁷ Siawosch Azadi and Peter A. Andrews, "Mafrash", Dietrich Reimer Verlag / Weltkunst Verlag, 1985 ISBN 10: 3496010223 / ISBN 13: 9783496010227

⁸ Richard Tapper, "Raiding, Reaction and Rivalry: The Shāhsevan Tribes in the Constitutional Period," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 3(49):1986, pp. 508-531, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/617828>.

⁹ Tapper.

of my expurgated field notes are in my book *Qarajah to Quba*. I think virtually all pile weaving in East Azerbaijan was done by settled weavers. That doesn't sell. Dealers often don't know the truth anyway."¹⁰

A pertinent question is: why would nomads weave or use pile rugs, which were significantly heavier to transport and took longer to weave than flat-weaves? Here again Tschbull offers his opinion on a rug attributed to the Shahsevan in the influential Rug Blog Turkotek.

This idea that such rugs are Shahsevan is a chimera, a ghost, a romantic idea, flitting around to tease you. Pile weaving in large formats can be pretty easily attributed to sedentary weavers. If I'm the bearer of bad news, in that rustic pile rugs are not generally nomadic products. Don't slay the messenger. But do recognize that nomads aren't more artistic weavers than are villagers -- please.¹¹

Another argument that can be added to whatever has been said is that the loom width of the pile rugs had to be wide to enable the weaving of these larger pile rugs. But the problem is that nomads wouldn't stay in one place long enough to weave such large pile rugs. Nomads typically moved every 10-14 days to meet grazing needs.¹² Many large flat-weaves woven by nomads are made up of strips sewn together, which in turn, were woven on small horizontal looms. An additional argument has to do with the format. Among the Shahsevan the format for floor covering was apt to be square as they lived in circular nomadic felt tents they called *Alachigh*.¹³ The long and narrow format typified by a pile rug works well in a long, narrow village house. Not so much in a circular tent.

Jenny Housego also wrote about the Shahsevan and notes "*Pile weaving never seems to have featured to any large extent.*"¹⁴

Perhaps, most telling of all these arguments is a quote from Wendel Swan, who in 2007 wrote:

In recent years, many books, magazines, websites and exhibition catalogs have made specific attribution of pile rugs to the Shahsavan, perhaps only by default when no other label can be attached.¹⁵

¹⁰ Raoul Tschbull, personal communications, 06/29/2023.

¹¹ Turkotek 07-28-2001 at 09:23 a.m.

http://www.turkotek.com/salon_00068/s68t1.htm.

¹² Raoul E. Tschbull, "Qarajeh to Quba", 2019, Near Eastern Art Research Centre, p. 28.

¹³ <https://dandavisauthor.com/the-incredible-domed-tents-of-the-shahsavan/> .

¹⁴ Jenny Housego, *Tribal Rugs, An Introduction to the Weaving of the Tribes of Iran*, Scorpion Publications, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1978, p. 10.

¹⁵ Wendel R. Swan, "Characteristics of Antique Azerbaijani Shahsavan Pile Weaving," *Azerbaijani Carpet*, Roya Taghiyeva (ed.), 2007, pp. 62-77.

Even Tanavoli, one of the main advocates of Shahsevan attribution, wrote in his seminal book on the Shahsevan:

Today many Shahsevan tribes weave pile rugs, whereas no trace of pile rugs survives from the last century. (...) Despite all efforts to find pile weave from the nineteenth century, only one *chanteh*¹⁶ has been found so far.¹⁷

In line with this statement, all the old and antique pieces depicted in his book are flat-weaves (with the exception of the mentioned *chanteh*.)

But here is an interesting revelation about that *chanteh*! Isn't it curious that the only pile piece he can present in his book as 19th century is covered with crosses?



The only piled piece in Tanavoli's book from the 19th century. In my opinion it is Armenian

The cross-shaped star is a motif that has been used by the Shahsevan weavers in a variety of ways. It is of interest to find it on a Chanteh in plate 175, which is one of the few piled pieces in the book.¹⁸

Yes, "*it is of interest*" because it is likely that that specific *chanteh*, his only 'exhibit' of the 19th century, was woven by Armenians.

So why does this Shahsavan myth persist? One of the major reasons is that many of the current dealers began their careers in the late 20th century by travelling to the tribal regions of Iran and Turkey. An example is Bertram Frauenknecht, a well-known dealer who insists that the Shahsavan wove pile rugs because "he saw it with his own eyes".

It might be true, that he "saw it with his own eyes", but he saw it in the 1970s, not in the 1870s!! No one disputes that the Shahsevan wove pile rugs after they were forcibly settled in the 1930s.¹⁹

Another reason dealers pushed the notion of weavers being nomadic instead of settled people like the Armenians was simply because it made for a more

¹⁶ A *chanteh* is a small bag, pouch or satchel.

¹⁷ Parviz Tanavoli, *Shahsevan: Iranian Rugs and Textiles*, Rizzoli, USA, 1985, p. 63.

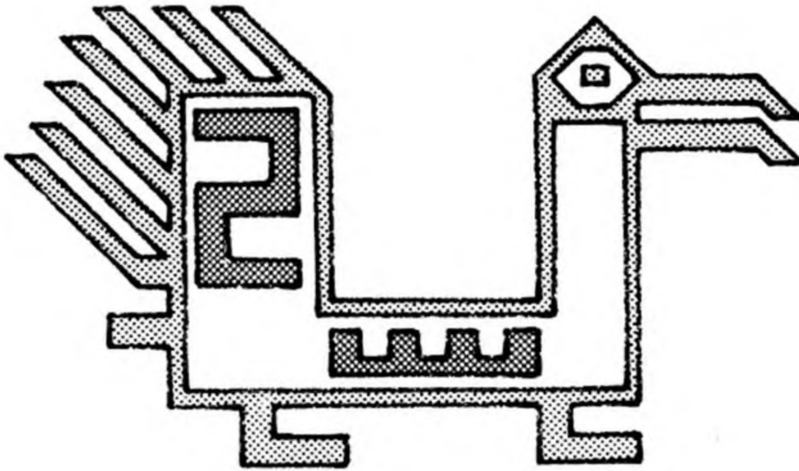
¹⁸ Tanavoli, p. 290.

¹⁹ <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mogan-parent-i-ii> .

compelling sales pitch. The romantic visions of nomads roaming the steppes with their family and animals in tow while their women created textiles between grazing areas was captivating. On the other hand, a woman from a settled culture weaving in her living room after feeding her family and putting her children to sleep just didn't have the same impact. These romantic perceptions about the weavers are part of what Edward Said called Orientalism—romantic clichés about Middle Eastern peoples.

A CLOSER LOOK AT SOME SHAHSAVAN PILE RUG MOTIFS

Now let us bust some myths. Let us examine three motifs which, when seen on a pile rug, are always attributed to the Shahsavan.



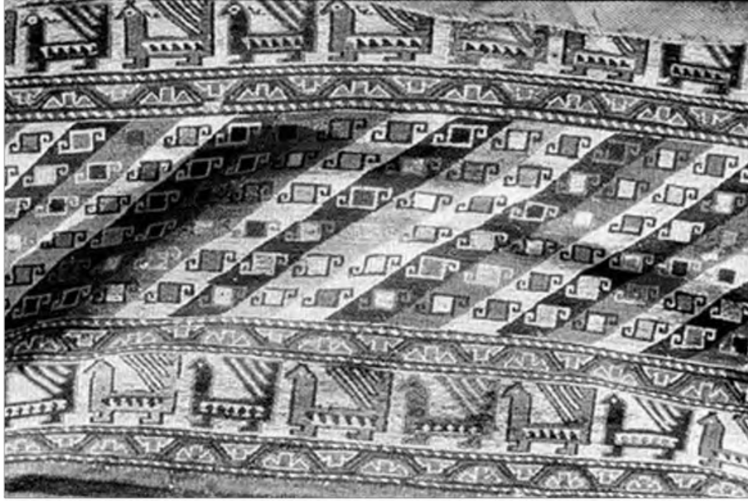
The "Marching Peacock" motif, Tanovali, p. 56

No. 1.- The "Marching Peacocks"

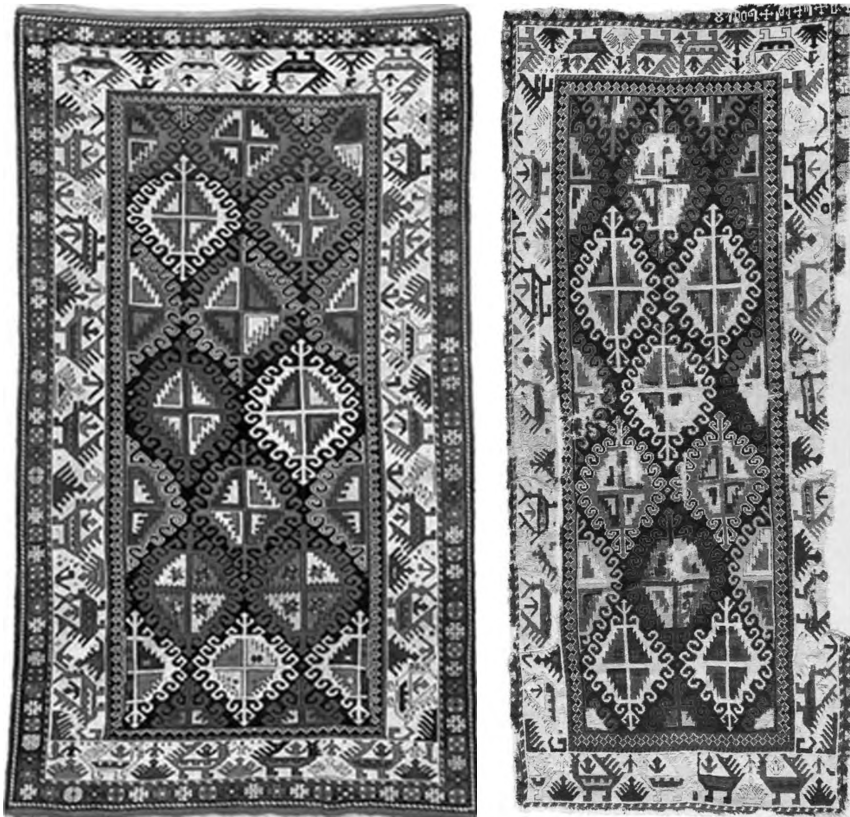
Pile rugs and flat-weaves with this motif are always attributed to the Shahsevan.

Below are two almost identical rugs with the "Marching Peacock" motif. The one on the left is attributed to the Shahsevan by auctioneer Rippon-Boswell. The one on the right is inscribed in Armenian with a date of 1800. It is at least 50 years older than the other.

Unless Tanavoli or others can show a flat-weave earlier than 1800 with the same "Marching Peacock" motif, we can safely say that both these rugs were woven by Armenians and the "Marching Peacock" motif should be attributed to Armenians. Of course, the motif also could have been used later by the Shahsevan and other groups.



Armenian *mafrash* with marching peacocks. Photographed by Vahram Tatikyan in the village of Tashtun, near Meghri, Zangezur region, Armenia (*Flat woven rugs and textiles from the Caucasus*, p. 171)



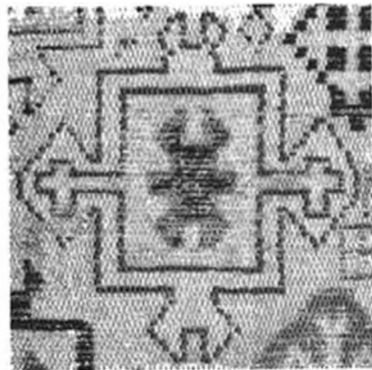
*The rug on the left was auctioned in November 2010 by Rippon-Boswell and attributed to the Shahsevan! “While the flatweaves made by the Shahsevan nomads have now been extensively documented in many publications, very little is known about the pile rugs knotted by these tribes. Judging by its palette and the distinctive drawing style of the designs, which occur in the flatweaves in very similar form ..., this rare carpet, with a repeat of hooked güls and a beautiful animal border, was probably woven by the Moghan Shahsevan. Well preserved, with original finishes all around” (John T. Wertime, *Sumak Bags of Northwest Persia & Transcaucasia*, London 1998, no. 60)*



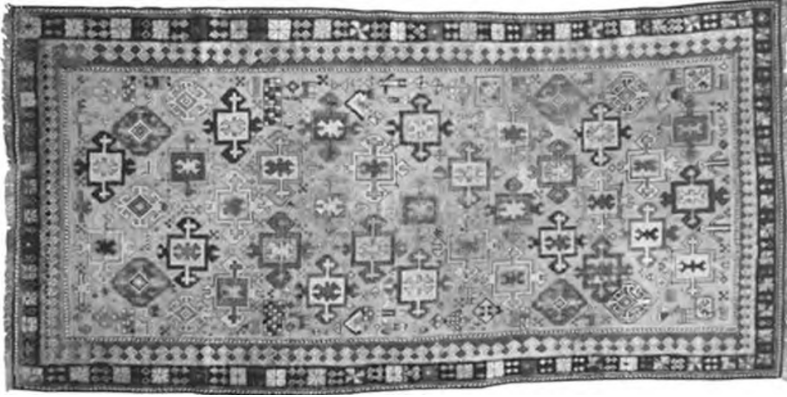
If it wasn't for the Armenian inscription this carpet would have been attributed to the Shahsevan because of the Peacocks. Many Armenian weavings, especially bags and kilims, are misattributed to the Shahsevan. Provenance Ex-Jim Burns.

No. 2.- The “Cruciform Group”

Here is another motif which whenever seen on a rug or flatweave is automatically attributed to the Shahsevan. Wendel Swan in his article titled “Characteristic of Azerbaijani Shaksavan Pile Weaving” identifies the motif which he described as part of the “Cruciform group”. It should be noted that this article was included in a book published by the Ministry of Culture & Tourism of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Azerbaijani Carpet & Applied Art State Museum* named after Latif Kerimov.²⁰



²⁰ Swan, pp. 62-77.



The so-called Shahsevan “cruciform group” of a *mafrash* and a pile rug
(*Characteristics of Antique Azerbaijani Shahsevan Pile Weaving*, p. 71)

Swan writes: “(Top left) *This is one of several known Shahsavan sumak mafrash panels from Hashtrud that feature a distinctive cruciform element. Top right; A closeup of the back of yellow ground pile rug (bottom) using the traditional Shahsevan cruciform elements, but curiously oriented, as they would be on the horizontal of a mafrash panel. (Bottom) Is the yellow ground rug itself. This relatively small rug is clearly from the 19th Century, possibly mid-century.*”²¹

Let us see what is “distinctive” in this cruciform motif. Where did it come from? What does it represent?

The motif is an Armenian Reliquary Cross with Relics of Saint John the Baptist made in Cilicia, Adana, 14th century.

Neither Swan nor Tanavoli would know this because they have never bothered to explore Armenian art.

No. 3.- The “Egg Palmette” 18th Century Rugs

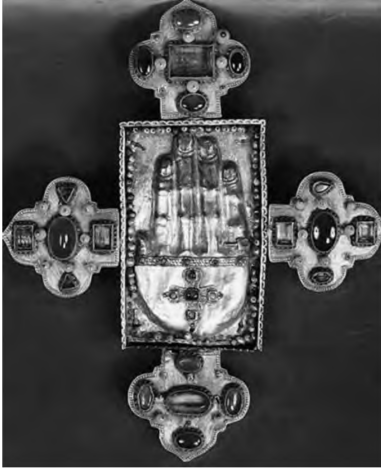
Swan’s most baseless and unfounded Shahsaven attribution by far is the so called “Egg palmette” rug, which he claims is from the 19th or late 18th century.²²

Swan writes: “*The “Egg Palmette” carpet is among the oldest pile rugs woven by the Shahsavan, probably dating from the early 19th Century and possibly from the 18th Century. The scale of the drawing and its proportions resemble many of the classical Caucasian carpets of the 17th and 18th Centuries. As with the Baltimore carpet from the 18th Century, it was undoubtedly woven for someone of great wealth or influence.*”²³

²¹ Ibid.

²² Swan, pp. 62-77.

²³ Ibid.



How could nomads weave such a large and sophisticated rug on a small horizontal loom while moving around from place to place? It defies credulity. Just as important, where does the motif come from? What does it represent?

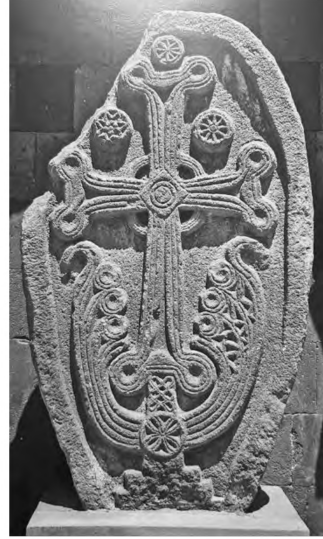
Armenian Reliquary cross with relics of Saint John the Baptist made in Cilicia, Adan, 14th century



On the left: the so-called 19th century "Egg palmette" carpet, purportedly woven by the Shahsevan; on the right: "Opposing Serpents" motif on the Gohar rug 1700 AD with an Armenian inscription. Note the similarity



Armenian 18th century Kuba. Same opposing serpents' motif as the Gohar rug



Early Christian Armenian monument in Gogaran, Armenia and a 13th century Khachkar

Anyone familiar with Armenian medieval art will know that the so-called “Egg palmette” motif is a later version of the “opposing serpents” motifs which Armenians have used in their art since the pagan era and which was later on adopted by Christianity. The serpents/birds are back-to-back, protecting from outside forces what is placed between them—a tree of life or a cross. One can see the motif on both the famous Gohar rug inscribed in Armenian and dated 1700 AD as well as on later Armenian rugs.

There are a great many ancient precedents for this opposing serpents motif abundantly spread across ancient Armenian art as well as medieval statues, khachkars, manuscripts and, later on, rugs.

CONCLUSION

The Shahsevan attribution of Caucasian flat-weaves and pile rugs only began in the late 1970s as a large number of *mafrashes*, *khorjins* and salt bags suddenly appeared on the market. Dealers sought a group to whom they could conveniently attribute them all. Armenians, also in the region, were never considered a possible source because it was believed settled people did not weave or have a use for such transportable weavings. Since flat-weaves and pile rugs shared common motifs, Armenians were excluded as the likely source for pile rugs as well. Therefore, the Shahsevan, a nomadic pastoralist group, were determined to be the weavers for both!!

In this paper I have demonstrated that the Armenians wove their share of transportable Caucasian flat-weaves and likely the majority of pile rugs. I have also demonstrated through historical sources and the first-hand experience of anthropologist Richard Tapper and tribal weaving experts that the Shahsevan never wove pile rugs. Yet both these myths persist today. Rug scholars and dealers have never considered the Armenians as a source for these flat-weaves and pile rugs because they are generally unfamiliar with the culture and art of the Armenians.

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Յօդուածագիրը, ինչպէս իր նախորդ յօդուածին մէջ («Յամեցող սխալապատումներ 20րդ դարու արեւմտեան գորգագիտութեան մէջ», ՀՀՀ, ԽԳ(2):2023, էջ 439-48), այստեղ եւս կը ներկայացնէ արեւմտեան գորգագիտութեան մէջ տեղ գտած այլ յատկանշական սխալ մը՝ Շահսեան յորջորջուած գորգերու եւ նախշատեսակներու մասին:

Հիմնուելով ամուր փաստերու եւ վկայութիւններու վրայ, հեղինակը կը վիճարկէ Փարուէզ Թանաւոյի փաստարկները, որով վերջինս 18-19րդ դարուն հիաւում կարգ մը գորգեր «Շահսեան» կը համարէ: Թաւաքճեան կը հաւաստէ, թէ գորգ կրնայ հիւսովի միայն նստակեաց ժողովուրդներու կողմէ, մինչ թափառական ցեղախումբեր կարճատեւ կը մնան որեւէ տարածքի վրայ, իսկ Շահսեան ցեղախումբին բռնի նստակեացութիւն պարտադրուած է 1930ականներուն: Միաժամանակ, յօդուածագիրը 19րդ դարու հայկական գորգեր օրինակ բերելով ասպարէզ կը կարդայ Թանաւոյի, որ ի յայտ բերէ գէթ մէկ հատիկ օրինակ՝ Շահսեաններուն հիւսած 19րդ դարու այս գորգերէն:

Այդուհանդերձ, հեղինակը կը բացատրէ նաեւ այս յորջորջումին տարածումին շուկայական պատճառը, ընդգծելով որ գնորդին կամ հաւաքորդին համար անելի գրաւիչ կը հնչէ ունենալ գորգը ցեղախումբի մը, որուն կիները լեռնային արօտավայրերուն վրայ գորգ կը հիւսեն քիչ ատենով նստակեաց ըլլալով հանդերձ....: